Towards a Progressive Critique of Rap Music

Tareeq Jalloh

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**Abstract**

This thesis is a philosophical investigation of critiques underpinning the criminalisation and condemnation of rap music. Through this philosophical evaluation, I argue that there are severe limitations to existing critiques, and they are often underpinned by various injustices. My analysis examines critiques which claim that rap music has a problematic connection to violence. This alleged connection to violence is being used as a basis for the censorship and restrictions of predominantly young black males. The thesis also explores a feminist critique of rap music, which sees self-sexualising black women rappers as reinforcing racist stereotypes. Through this exploration, I will show that philosophy offers a fruitful toolkit for scrutinising popular and pervasive criticisms of rap in ways that advance the public and academic debates about rap music. This work is timely; black art is being scrutinised in unparalleled ways. This thesis is a philosophical starting point for pushing back against this scrutiny.

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# **Introduction**

This thesis is about rap music and the ways in which it is critiqued. Rap music is often the subject of public debate about links to violence, perpetuating oppression and policies and practices that criminalise it. My project is innovative in bringing frameworks from analytical philosophy to these prominent public debates. In this thesis, I develop a (non-exhaustive) taxonomy of the prominent lines of critique that underpin rap’s criminalisation and condemnation. I explore three critiques that see rap music as connected to violence in problematic ways, with an additional chapter exploring a feminist critique of rap music. I contribute to these debates by showing how philosophical frameworks can advance debates about rap music’s criminalisation and condemnation. The conclusion of my thesis is that careful philosophical evaluation can show the limitations of these critiques, and reveal some of the injustices that underpin them.

There has been important academic work elucidating how rap music is targeted by the state (Rose, 2008; Owusu-Bempah, 2022; Fatsis, 2019; Ilan, 2020; Nielson & Dennis, 2019). Philosophy, however, has remained largely silent about the criminalisation and condemnation of rap music. Whilst there are numerous works about the philosophy of rap –including two philosophical books about hip hop and philosophy (Shelby & Darby, 2005; Bailey, 2014)— and numerous works in black aesthetics (Taylor, 2016; White, 2011; Salaam, 1995; Shusterman, 1991) there has not been much extensive philosophical engagement with whether there is any merit in the critiques advanced against rap music. This is unlike other media, such as pornography, which has an extensive philosophical literature investigating what might be wrong with pornography. This includes thorough philosophical analyses that dives deep into critiques of pornography, such as the critique that pornography causes violence against women or silences women. The lack of philosophical engagement is a shame because, as my thesis identifies, philosophy gives us fruitful frameworks and tools to evaluate these critiques against rap music. Crucially, philosophy has an important seat at this table.

My project addresses the gap between critiques of rap and philosophy. In a nutshell, it provides a philosophical assessment of the extent to which critiques of rap music are problematic. I want to know whether these critiques are fair. Many detailed argumentative steps are needed to establish a fair critique of rap. For instance, we need to identify what might really be problematic with hip hop, whether there is any mileage in critiques and how to frame critiques to avoid perpetuating oppression. A fair critique of rap must also be responsive to rap as an artform.[[1]](#footnote-1) I want to use philosophical methods and frameworks to bring out the complexities and nuances critics must be mindful of. In some cases, the philosophical analysis shows that critiques themselves are unfair; in other cases, the philosophical analysis teases out the complexities critics must be mindful of.

This work is timely because black folks, particularly young black men, are being censored and having their freedoms restricted in novel ways based on the critiques I investigate in this thesis. An investigation into the critiques informing young black males criminalisation is therefore important to determine whether there exists any grounds for this treatment or whether critics are being unjust or racially misandrist (Curry, 2017). Besides its criminalisation, rap music is often condemned for its role in perpetuating oppression. This thesis weighs in on these claims by providing new insights that progressive critics must be mindful of when looking to critique rap music.

The main contribution I make is to show that we can make progress with debates about the criminalisation and condemnation of rap music by using philosophical frameworks to evaluate and critique concerns about rap music. More specifically, I have three distinctive contributions to these debates. First, I show that critics often lack a proper understanding of the conventions involved in rap; rap is characterised by ritual and expression and should be appreciated aesthetically. Second, I argue that these critiques are underpinned by various epistemic and discursive injustices, due to a number of identity prejudicial or oppressive distortions of the music and lyrics and wilful failure to appreciate those words and images within an aesthetic context. Third, I argue that rappers are caught up in oppressive double binds, where their actions are scrutinised however they act. With these three contributions in mind, I either diagnose the critique as unfair or I propose ways to articulate a progressive critique. This involves being sensitive to the conflicting norms that are applied to rappers, their distinctive modes of communication and expression, and being aware of the social meanings ascribed to critiques when they are targeted selectively towards rap music. An adequate sensitivity to these is a necessary starting point for evaluations of rap, especially in the context of restricting rappers' freedoms.

**A Very Brief History of Critiques of Black Music**

Black art has a long history of being blamed for societal ills. For instance, jazz was referred to as “the devil’s music” in the early 1900s (laura, 2015). It was said to threaten traditional ways of life and cause deviancy and immorality (laura, 2015). Black jazz musicians were often targeted by the police and white mobs (Bernard, 2020). As black resistance movements arose in the mid-to-late 1900s, new genres such as rock and roll, soul, funk, ska, punk, afrobeats and reggae would reflect the anti-establishment sentiment. For instance, these genres would elucidate black diasporic struggle, documenting how black people have been wronged and resisted oppression. This was, of course, not well-received by law enforcement, who would often target popular artists of this time in horrendous ways. In 1974, for instance, Reggae musician Dennis Bovell was falsely imprisoned after being accused of stirring trouble between police and the audience (Bernard, 2020).

It is against this backdrop that hip hop emerges. Hip Hop is an art form originating from predominantly African Americans, Latino Americans and Caribbean migrants in the south Bronx of New York, typically comprising of five elements: deejaying or rapping, graffiti or painting, dancing, fashion and knowledge (broadly construed) (Tate, 2021). Rap music is one of the musical components of hip hop. Hip hop’s emergence reflects the negative effects of economic collapse; African-Americans, Puerto Ricans and Caribbean immigrants populated neighbourhoods that experienced significantly worsening socio-economic conditions (Collective, 2024). As poverty, gang violence and crime rose, African-American, Latin-American and Caribbean youth, fuelled by a lack of economic opportunity, turned to creative expression as a way to voice their sentiments of anger, hardship and abandonment (Collective, 2024; Bailey, 2016). For instance, “the emerging hip hop movement transformed despair and racial barriers into numerous creative outlets. It also became an outlet to deal with violence” (Collective, 2024). Many of rap’s pioneers had proximity to organisations, such as the Black Panther Party,  with common goals of resisting police violence and curbing violence. Pioneers of hip hop, such as Afrika Bambaataa negotiated peace treaties with rival gangs. Street violence and gang turf wars were to be “ameliorated by reimagining anger through dance” (Bailey, 2016, p.30). Like its predecessors, rap music has been the subject of debate and criminalisation, but there is a sense in which public debates, condemnation, and criminalisation of rap are more severe, and this is seen very clearly in the treatment of drill music in the UK.

Originating in the early 2010s in Chicago’s South Side area, drill music is one of many subgenres of hip hop (Masterclass, 2021). Inspired by Chicago drill, various countries have developed their own distinctive versions. A  popular version is UK drill, which emerged from the council estates of south London, coming to prominence in the mid-to-late 2010s. While UK drill shares many similarities with Chicago drill, it also draws inspiration from earlier British genres such as grime –a style of UK hip hop originating in the council estates of East London known for its dark and energetic sound. These influences have added a distinctiveness to UK drill. Like Chicago drill, the lyrics—words making up the song—of UK drill are often a violent and cold engagement with life in deprived areas. This involves ‘taunting rivals in vividly shocking terms, describing the harm that awaits them, and keeping a tally of “scoreboards” as a sign of collective’s transgressive capital’ (Fatsis, 2019, p. 1302). Today, drill rap music is being criminalised in ways and with force that we have not seen before. For instance, it is increasingly used as evidence in criminal trials and drill artists are being censored and restricted in novel ways. Drill lyrics are being used as bad character evidence and evidence of gang violence. There have been many high-profile drillers (drill artists) whose lyrics have been used in these ways, such as Unknown T (Rymajdo, 2020), Loski (Owusu-Bempah, 2022) and other popular rappers such as Young Thug (Young, 2022). Drill artists are also being censored and restricted in novel ways. High-profile drillers such as Digga D, AM and Skengdo and Chinx OS have restricted freedom of speech since they have to check their lyrics in with the police or risk their music being taken down from online streaming services. Others are having their freedom to move and associate with their life-long friends restricted, as well as not being able to wear clothing or present themselves in ways they would like to (Allen, 2021). Not all critics of rap music agree that it should be criminalised, but many see the content of rap as condemnable. For instance, they argue that rap’s content contributes to injustice in unique ways, particularly in its capacity to demean women (Rose, 2008).

With this in mind, my thesis investigates the following critiques.

**Chapter 1 – Does Rap Cause Violence (Causal Claim)?**The causal claim asserts that there is a causal relationship between drill rap and the incidence of violence, such that drill causes youth violence. Drill rappers are having their freedoms restricted based on instances of the causal claim. This chapter argues against censoring drill on the assumption that it causes violence for three reasons. First, even according to the most charitable rendition of the causal claim, there is insufficient evidence to support it. Second, there is no reason to support censorship-oriented approaches to violence reduction over community-building approaches. Third, critics should be worried about the racist public meaning of advancing the causal claim and the censorship-oriented approaches to drill.

**Chapter 2 – Does Rap Evidence Violence (Evidencing Claim) – Part 1?**

Drill music is being critically scrutinised based on the view that rap music provides autobiographical evidence of rappers' violent criminality (the evidencing claim). In this chapter, I argue that this critical scrutiny constitutes four kinds of epistemic injustice. This chapter will lay the foundations for work in chapter 3, where I evaluate which framework is most helpful for engaging with critiques of drill music, and for providing strategies for remedying these epistemic injustices. This chapter incorporates material and discussion from my 2022 –*Does the Critical Scrutiny of Drill Constitute an Epistemic Injustice?*– and 2024– *Understanding Epistemic Injustice as Contributory Injustice*– papers.

**Chapter 3 – Does Rap Evidence Violence (Evidencing Violence) – Part 2?**

This chapter develops the work of chapter 2, by taking up objections  to the claim that the scrutiny of drill constitutes forms  of epistemic injustice.. I show how each kind of epistemic injustice can respond to the objection that rap music evidences violence. I also evaluate the limitations of the different frameworks, and consider their resources for recommending remedial steps to how drill is treated in the criminal justice system. I argue that a focus on contributory injustice is particularly fruitful for avoiding critiques advanced against identity-prejudice-based epistemic injustices. This chapter incorporates material and discussion from my 2022 –*Does the Critical Scrutiny of Drill Constitute an Epistemic Injustice?*– and 2024– *Understanding Epistemic Injustice as Contributory Injustice*– papers.

**Chapter 4 – Does Rap Incite Violence (Incitement Claim)?**

Drill rappers videos are being taken down from YouTube at the Metropolitan Police’s request. The Met claim that the content of these music videos contains lyrics that taunt rival gangs with the intention of inciting a response. This chapter offers a framework for evaluating whether an instance of violent taunts in drill constitutes a speech act of incitement. I argue that the police must meet the explanatory and justificatory burden of showing that the speech act of incitement (rather than something else) has been performed, and it may often be very challenging to meet that burden. Moreover -drawing on the notion of discursive injustice introduced in chapter 2-  I argue that where the burden is not met, police interventions and restrictions constitute a form of silencing and are unjust. This chapter incorporates material and discussion from a paper that has a revise and resubmit decision at a journal.

**Chapter 5 – Prospects for a Progressive Critique: The Challenge of Oppressive Double Binds**

Whilst most of the thesis has focused in drill, this chapter takes up another prominent line of critique of rap. Moreover, whereas most of the drillers being criminalised are young black men, this critique targets black women rappers. This line of critique requires a quite different frame of analysis. Self-sexualising black women rappers have been criticised as being agents in their oppression through perpetuating problematic stereotypes. However, another evaluative response to self-sexualising rap lauds it for its empowering effects. This chapter, I introduce a framework for understanding these competing responses to self-sexualising rap by using Sukaina Hirji's (2021) analysis of oppressive double binds. This framework helps us to understand the dialectical stalemates that emerge in evaluating black women rappers' self-sexualisation by offering a new understanding of the complexities involved when female rappers engage in self-sexualisation. Consequently, we will be better informed about how to construct any progressive critiques of self-sexualising rap. This chapter incorporates material and discussion from a paper that has a revise and resubmit decision at a journal.

Overall, this thesis provides the first sustained philosophical analysis of rap music and responses to it. In particular, it makes the contributions of showing how philosophical frameworks can add to debates about rap’s criminalisation. As we will see, this provides useful tools for engaging in further questions about rap that are beyond the scope of this thesis, such as “does rap music glorify violence?”; “Is rap music radical?”, and “does rap music hurt black people?”

## **Rap’s Alleged Problematic Connection to Violence**

The critique that rap is problematically connected to violence goes as far back as the 1980s. Hip-hop artists such as Public Enemy – who sought to call upon blacks to fight against racism “by any means necessary” – were considered politically radical advocates of violence (Rose, 2008). The police watched Public Enemy, and their raps contributed to the creation of a study of rap music and its possible effects on national security (Parks & Rudy Cooper, 2022). Another hip-hop group that was seen as encouraging violence was Run-DMC. They were blamed for violence that occurred in the towns they visited on tour in 1986 (Carson, 2022). The rise of “gangsta rap” in Los Angeles during the 1980s formed another base for the critique concerning rap’s apparent problematic connection to violence. Niggaz With Attitude – NWA — for instance, were an LA rap group that “found significant commercial success through a gang-oriented repertoire of stories related especially to anti-police sentiment” (Rose, 2008, p. 34). For instance, their hit song “Fuck Tha Police” was often cited amid growing fears that rappers’ aggressive lyrics encouraged violent behaviour in young listeners and stirred up anti-police sentiment. American politician and civil rights activist C. Delores Tucker also criticised gangsta rap for its “perverted form which has been encouraged by those who have always used the entertainment industry to exploit and project the negative stereotypical images to demean and depict African Americans as subhuman” (Tucker quoted in George, 1998, p.189).

The critique that rap is connected to violence in problematic ways is still prevalent today. Andrew Tate – an American-British personality who has been de-platformed for his misogynistic views — appeared on Piers Morgan's show "Uncensored" arguing that he is not the worst influence on the youth since you have "you have drill artists singing about stabbing people to death in the middle of a knife crime epidemic" (Tate, 2022). A day after the May 24, 2022, Uvalde mass shooting, US rep Ronny Jackson blamed the violence on violent rap music and video games. He asserted, "kids are exposed to all kinds of horrible stuff nowadays. I think about the horrible stuff that they hear when they listen to rap music, the video games they watch … with all this horrible violence" (Jackson, as cited in Carson, 2022). Even more recently, Kanye West (Ye) claimed that he is envious of Jewish people because they do not "shoot each other in the streets and then rap about it" (Ye, 2022). On November 1 2022, Takeoff, a member of the world-renowned rap trio “Migos,” was killed by stray bullets after an argument emerged reportedly over a dice game. The immediate reaction was in line with critiques stressing the problem of violence in hip-hop. Critics looked to pathologise rap in response to Takeoff’s death, arguing that there is something in particular about rap culture/black culture that is killing so many black men. This indictment of rap was seen clearly in famous actor Lakeith Stanfield's Instagram message, where he claimed, "if you are for gangsta rap, you can't also be for Black” (Stanfield, 2022). He asserted, “We must stop holding self-destructive shit up and embrace things that build us a whole so that we can lead the world in the direction of prosperity by example” (Stanfield, 2022).

One of the latest subgenres of rap to be targeted by the critique that rap is connected to violence in problematic ways is drill rap music (as seen in Tate's comments). The critique that rap is connected to violence in problematic ways has not only led to the censorship of many rap artists, but in some cases, it has also led to lyrics and videos being used as evidence in criminal courts (as discussed in chapters 2 and 3). For instance, in the UK, there has been a surge in the number of criminal trials using rap/drill lyrics and videos as evidence.

When critics look to critique rap for its problematic link to violence, critiques are sometimes framed as “hip hop causes violence” (Rose, 2008). However, I do not think this framing does a good job of bringing out all the ways rap music is said to be problematically connected to violence. The critique that hip-hop causes violence (the causal claim, discussed in this chapter) is just one way hip hop has been critiqued for its alleged link to violence. For instance, when Run-DMC was blamed for violence in the towns they visited on tour, underpinning this critique is the notion that there is a causal link between their raps and violent actions. Another separate but related way rap is said to be problematically connected to violence is that it evidences violence (the evidencing claim -which I discuss in chapters 2 and 3). The thought is that rappers are evidencing their crimes in their raps. Whilst rap evidencing violent actions might cause future violence, this is not inevitable, so the causal claim is different from the evidencing claim. Evidencing violence more than often requires that a violent act has already taken place. When rap is said to cause violence, critics seem to mean that violence will happen due to listening to or watching rap music.

A third way rap has been criticised for its connection to violence is that it is said to incite violence (discussed in chapter 4). Inciting violence does not require violence to occur, so it is different from the causal claim.[[2]](#footnote-2) This claim has been advanced by the Metropolitan police in attempt to get drill rappers music taken down from streaming services and restrict their freedoms with criminal behaviour orders. The Met are concerned with how violent taunts from drillers that refer to specific names and areas of their rivals are intended to incite a response.

A final way rap has been criticised for its connection to serious violence is that it glorifies violence (glorification claim). Glorification of violence does not necessarily result in violence, so this critique also differs from the causal claim. Moreover, glorification does not entail that the violence being glorified is evidence of the rapper’s crimes, so the glorification critique is different to the evidencing claim. The glorification of violence in rap is often thought of as bad in the context of the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, or other harms –unrelated to physical violence— to black people in particular. The glorification claim can be seen in Tucker’s stance against gangsta rap, since Tucker thinks rap exploits and projects negative stereotypical images. Moreover, the glorification claim is seen in Lakeith Stanfield's assertion, since he claims rap music’s glorification of violence is self-destructive and moving black people away from “prosperity.” In this thesis, I will not explore the glorification claim, but I will set it aside for future research.

**Chapter 1 – The Causal Claim**

This chapter investigates the causal claim. As we have seen, rap music has been accused of causing violence for a long time, but today, drillers are having their freedoms restricted based on instances of the causal claim. For instance, police are removing drill videos from social media and streaming platforms, and drillers are being restricted from making music and associating with people via criminal behaviour orders based on the assumption that drill music causes serious violence (Hall et al., 2022).

In this chapter, I argue against censoring drill on the assumption that it causes violence for three reasons. First, even according to the most charitable rendition of the causal claim, there is insufficient evidence to support it. Second, there is no reason to support censorship-oriented approaches to violence reduction over community-building approaches. Third, critics should be worried about the racist public meaning of advancing the causal claim and the censorship-oriented approaches to drill. The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 1 motivates the need for an investigation of the causal claim. Section 2 uses a framework found in the feminist literature on pornography to characterise a sensible articulation of the causal claim (Eaton, 2007), and shows that the current evidence claiming to support the view that rap causes violence is unlike the evidence necessary to support this view. Section 3 argues that restricting drillers on the basis of the causal claim is unjustified. Section 4 argues that critics advancing the causal claim should be worried about its racist public meaning.

**Section 1 – Motivating the Need for an Investigation of the Causal Claim**

In 2018, violent crime (including knife crime) in England and Wales rose significantly (BBC, 2019). This was followed by a media panic, which often blamed drill rap for this rise. This incentivised the head of the Metropolitan Police –Cressida Dick— to petition YouTube to remove drill content from YouTube, with around 30 videos removed and some drill artists blocked from uploading (Lynes et al., 2020). The policy of removing YouTube videos has continued to this day, with at least 879 drill music removals at the request of the Metropolitan Police (the Met) made between 2018 and 2022 (Oversight Board, 2022). One of the Met’s justifications for this practice of removal is that it removes content which covers “information on gang violence and murders” which “could lead to further retaliatory violence” (Oversight Board, 2022). They are concerned with how drill lyrics and videos, describing stabbings and taunting rivals can “raise the risk of [gang] violence” (Trendell, 2018). In a freedom of information request asking the Met to provide details about flagging to social media and music streaming companies drill videos for removal, the Met claimed that “The MPS (the Met) ask social media platforms to take robust and rapid approach to removing content which is flagged as being harmful i.e. likely to provoke/ **cause** real-life violence” (Police, 2023). The worry that drill music causes violence is also reflected in a response from a spokesperson of the Home Office, who responded to concerns about the censorship of drill music by claiming, “We are committed to protecting freedom of expression but are clear **causing** or inciting serious violence and other serious crimes is not acceptable” (Kanengoni, 2023).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Academics have questioned the implications of such policies. Klienberg and McFarlane assert, "The current policy of removing drill music videos from social media platforms such as YouTube remains controversial because it risks conflating the co-occurrence of drill rap and violence with a causal chain of the two” (Klienberg and McFarlane, 2020). Lynes et al. argue that “To a popular readership, all of this seem[s] to lend credence to the suggestion that drill music was causing violence or at least that certain drill music artists used the music genre to incite violent crime” (Lynes et al., 2020, p.1).

In order to establish whether restrictions based on the claim that rap music causes violence are justified, critics have at least two tasks. First, they must provide evidence that rap music causes violence –call this the evidentiary burden. Second, they must show that restricting rappers’ freedoms is justified on the basis of this evidence –call this the justificatory burden. Next, I explore both burdens, arguing that the evidentiary and justificatory burdens have not been met.

**Section 2 – The Evidentiary Burden**

When investigating the causal claim, it may seem all that is needed to decide whether rap causes violence is empirical data, and philosophical enquiry would be useless in our endeavours. However, to avoid imprecision and to ensure I am being the most charitable to those advancing the causal claim, I think frameworks specifying the precise terms in which the critique is framed –"cause" and "violence'— requires clarification. This is because it might be unclear what kind of violence critics are talking about. Moreover, we need to make precise the kind of causal relationship critics are looking to prove.

Other forms of media have also been accused of causing violence. A popular media form that is often criticised for its alleged connection to violent harm is pornography. Pornography has been criticised on many fronts, and the critique that pornography causes harm –violent and otherwise—is known as the "harm hypothesis." This is a position taken by many antipornography feminists (Eaton, 2007). There is an extensive literature on the proposed harms of pornography, and within this literature, we find frameworks that make sense of what "cause" and "harm" mean. I find the framework of Anne Eaton useful (Eaton, 2007). Eaton critiques the conception of "cause" and "harm" typically employed in pornography debates. I will set out Eaton’s claims and show their relevance to debates about rap causing violence.

Eaton theorises cause in a non-deterministic way. She draws from methods used in epidemiology – our current best science of causes – to present a probabilistic account of causation[[4]](#footnote-4). The process by which pornography may shape attitudes and may lead to behaviour can be specified by drawing an analogy with smoking (Eaton, 2007). Smoking does not cause cancer in a deterministic sense: many smokers do not develop lung cancer. So, smoking is neither necessary nor sufficient to develop lung cancer. Still, medical experts and the general public accept as true the claim that “smoking causes cancer” since it increases the likelihood of developing cancer. This is a probabilistic notion of causation, but it is still enough to vindicate the claim that smoking causes cancer. More specifically, according to this notion of causation:

X is a cause of y if and only if (i) x occurs earlier than y and (ii) the probability of the occurrence of y is greater, given the occurrence of x, than the probability of the occurrence of y given not-x (Eaton 2007, 696).[[5]](#footnote-5)

If pornography increases the probability of, say, sexualised violence against women, then we would have vindicated a relationship between pornography and harm to women (Eaton, 2007).

With this notion of causation in mind, Eaton makes suggestions of what a sensible rendition of the harm hypothesis might involve.

1. Because the causal relation between pornography and its purported harms is probabilistic, exposure to pornography is neither necessary nor sufficient for its putative harms, like sexual assault, but raises the chances of sexual assault depending on context (its relationship to other factors, see P2).
2. She advises that proponents of the harm hypothesis should emphasise that violence against women is the cumulative effect of several factors in a complex causal mechanism, and inegalitarian pornography is just one of these factors.
3. Eaton advises that antipornography feminists specify the type of pornography that is the target of their critique, which is inegalitarian pornography and not other types of pornography which may be liberatory.
4. She also emphasises that inegalitarian pornography's role in sexism should be considered as a feedback loop: inegalitarian pornography results from gender inequality and also facilitates this inequality.
5. An improved harm hypothesis should articulate a "careful and nuanced delineation of pornography's alleged harms, recognising a wide range of potential injuries that differ in terms of character and severity" (Eaton, 2007, p. 714).
6. A sensible rendition of the harm hypothesis should be cautious and not necessarily in favour of state regulation, since this rendition is sensitive to the entire range of pornography’s alleged harms when proposing measures of prevention and redress.

With this notion of causation in mind, I construct a sensible rendition of the claim about rap causing violence would do the following things:

1. It would take on a probabilistic notion of cause; rap music raises that chances of retaliatory gang violence depending on the context (because it depends on its relationship to other factors, see R2). That is, rap music can be said to cause violent attitudes or behaviours if and only if the probability of offline retaliatory violence in gang-associated youth is greater given the consumption of violent-antagonising rap music than the probability of exhibiting violent attitudes and behaviour if violent rap music was not consumed.
2. A sensible rendition of the causal claim about rap would emphasise that the violent effects of rap music are a cumulative effect of several factors in a complex causal mechanism. For instance, youth violence is not only a result of drill rap, but also the result of factors such as poverty, inequality, lack of opportunity/funding, lack of access to a good education, drug and alcohol abuse, adverse childhood experiences and poor mental health (Klienerg and McFarlane, 2020; Haylock et al., 2020; Williams and Squires, 2021). This is consistent with Eaton's epidemiological approach.
3. The causal claim about rap should be seen as pertaining to rap with antagonising messages towards rival gangs. The police are primarily worried about drill rap. Drill rap is a subgenre of rap –heavily influenced by gangsta rap—which often references specific incidents of violence in taunting ways. The police are not worried about rap music that depicts violence or music that just has violent themes, but rather they are worried about how drill rap glorifies violence and antagonises rivals in ways that might cause gang members who are taunted to commit acts of retaliatory violence. It should not be a critique of rap as a genre since there is a lot of non-violent rap, and there is no reason to think that non-violent rap would cause violent behaviour/attitudes.
4. If there is a causal connection it will be implicated in complex feedback loops: violent rap is the result of violence in communities and nations more broadly, but it also facilitates violence in nations and communities more broadly.
5. A sensible rendition makes clear exactly the violent harms and effects critics are worried about. When law enforcement blames drill rap for violence, they are not worried about how rap might raise the probability of violence in the general population, but rather about retaliatory violence in gang-associated individuals. The Met are worried about how antagonisms in drill rap music are raising the probability of offline retaliatory violence in those who are taunted, which they think in turn leads to rising knife crime and youth violence (see section 1).
6. A sensible rendition of the claim about rap causing violence is cautious and not necessarily in favour of state intervention, since it is sensitive to the many other purported harms when coming up with preventative measures.

### **2.1 – What Must be Done for the Causal Claim to be Upheld?**

How might we verify the claims that pornography causes harm, or rap causes violence, in the senses specified above? I think there are important recommendations in Eaton's framework, which can illuminate how antirap critics might verify this sensible rendition of the causal claim. Eaton suggests antipornography feminists would do well to verify the harm hypothesis by employing epidemiological methods (Eaton, 2007). Epidemiologists use clinical trials to establish associations between an action and a disease – i.e. smoking and cancer. However, and unlike studies in pornography, the investigation does not stop there. An association does not tell us a) whether the association between smoking and cancer is special (more significant than other causes), or b) the direction of causality –perhaps lung cancer creates urges to smoke, nor c) whether lung cancer and smoking are symptoms of a common cause (Eaton, 2007, p. 704). To verify an association found in clinical trials, epidemiologists "compare disease rates among large groups with differing levels of exposure to the suspected cause" (Eaton, 2007, p. 704). In attempting to prove a connection between smoking and lung cancer, ecological studies are employed to investigate incidence of exposure to smoking and prevalence of lung cancer. For instance, studies comparing the United States, Japan, Norway, Poland and France found that as smoking increases, lung cancer also increases. This was a crucial first step in establishing a positive association between smoking and lung cancer.

To my knowledge, there have not been ecological studies of this kind investigating the causal claim about rap music. For instance, I have been unable to find studies which look to find increased reports in violent crime and increased violent rap consumption, specifically studies which look to find increased reports of retaliatory violence in gang members and increased consumption of rap music, including specific taunts and threats. Even if there were ecological studies that demonstrated a correlation between incidence of exposure to antagonising drill rap and prevalence of retaliatory gang violence, there would need to be a significant number of careful and coherent ecological studies to demonstrate a positive relationship between antagonising drill rap and offline retaliatory violence. Moreover, even if rap critics produce a coherent body of studies demonstrating a positive association between drill rap and offline retaliatory gang violence, this does not establish causation; it would only provide data for groups but, importantly, does not give us exposure data for individuals within populations. With regards to smoking, for instance, these ecological studies do not tell us whether the individuals who developed lung cancer are the same individuals that smoked. To establish a positive correlation, we also need exposure and outcome data for individuals in a population.

To remedy this missing data, epidemiologists often turn to studies of individual characteristics –case-control and cohort studies—in search of data about individual populations. For instance, regarding smoking and cancer, a case-control study compares the smoking histories of two groups: one with lung cancer and one without lung cancer. Cohort studies compare smokers with nonsmokers, determining the rate of lung cancer in each group (Eaton, 2007).

Again, to my knowledge, no studies looking to establish the causal claim about rap, have employed case-control and cohort studies. For instance, I have been unable to find studies that have compared the rap consumption histories of violent criminals (including violent gang members) with non-violent criminals, or those not known to have committed any crimes. Nor has my research uncovered any studies comparing the frequency of violent crimes committed by gang-associated offenders who listen to violent antagonising rap music with those who do not listen to violent antagonising rap.

Crucially, even if we suppose through ecological, case-control and cohort studies that a meaningful correlation between drill and violence can be demonstrated, we still need to do more to establish a causal relation.

Epidemiologists standardly appeal to six criteria to determine whether a correlation is causal (with respect to a disease).

1. Temporality: the suspected causal factor must precede the onset of the disease, and the interval between exposure to the causal factor and disease must be considered.
2. Strength/Replication: Firmer causal relationships are provided by stronger correlations. Further, findings should replicate.
3. Quantal-dose relationship: increasing duration, total exposure, intensity and level of suspected causal factor leads to progressive increase in the risk of disease.
4. Plausibility: the correlation should fit within our current state of knowledge.
5. Consideration of alternative explanations: have investigators considered alternative explanations?
6. Cessation data: “if a factor is a cause of a disease, the risk of the disease should decline upon reduction or elimination of exposure to the factor” (Eaton, 2007, pp. 709-710).

What do these six criteria look like regarding rap? First, consuming rap must precede the violent effects, as the first condition of the sensible rendition of the causal claim makes clear. This would mean that a video taunting another gang would have been released before the alleged offline retaliatory response. Second, studies investigating the correlation between rap music and violent behaviours/attitudes in gang-associated youth must provide strong correlations that replicate. Third, increasing the duration, total exposure, intensity and level of violent taunts, threats and antagonisms increases the likelihood of violent attitudes and behaviours in gang-associated youth. Fourth, should a correlation between violent rap music and violent effects be found, this should be explainable by our best theories and hypotheses. Fifth, investigators must take alternative causes of violent effects into account. For instance, have investigators looked at causes other than drill rap as explanations for violent attitudes and behaviours (such as a location being revealed in music videos (Stuart, 2020))? Finally, if rap music is a causal factor of violent effects, the risk of violent effects should decrease with the decrease in the consumption of rap. For instance, if rap music is a causal factor of offline retaliatory violence, the risk of offline retaliatory violence should decrease with the decrease in gang-associated youth’s consumption of rap. Eaton admits that antipornography feminists are far from providing evidence of the harm hypothesis which meets these criteria (Eaton, 2007). Similarly, as I show in the next subsection, the evidence claiming to support the causal claim about rap has yet to meet these criteria.

### **2.2 – Existing Empirical Literature**

What empirical literature could the police point to in order to show that drill rap music causes violent attitudes and behaviours? I think there are at least two sets of literature the police might employ for evidence of the causal claim. One set of studies could look at how rap produces copy-cat violence by looking at the general effects of rap music on general audiences (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2010). The second set of studies could look at how adherence to the "Code of the Street" causes retaliatory violence in gang-associated youth (Anderson, 1999; Stuart, 2020, 2022). I think the first set of studies are unhelpful for two reasons. First, as the sensible rendition of the causal claim highlights, the types of violence the police are concerned with is offline retaliatory violence, where drill music constitutes a form of "coded communication" between gangs, and antagonisms raise the probability of retaliatory offline violence. They are not concerned with how listening to rap music with violent themes and messages might precipitate copy-cat crime. That is, these studies are too general –focusing on general audiences, instead of the specific producers and listeners that are targeted for interventions by the police. The police are concerned with whether antagonisms in rap music cause offline retaliatory gang violence. We cannot know whether antagonisms in drill raise the probability of retaliatory violence in gang-associated youth based on studies looking at the general effects of rap. Second, even if the case can be made that these studies can tell us something about offline retaliatory violence, these sorts of studies looking at how rap produces copy-cat violence are deficient and far from conclusive (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2010).

For example, the most rigorous analysis of the literature on rap music's alleged violent effects found that many of the studies on rap's effects are nonempirical (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2010). Many authors theorise about rap music's effects on one's identity, political inclinations, attitudes and behaviours; moreover, authors base writings on anecdotal evidence and selective quotations (Oliver, 2006 as cited in Kubrin and Weitzer, 2010). Few authors, however, base their claims about rap on data/observations. Kubrin and Weitzer identify some writings on rap as quasiempirical. These cases differ from the above case insofar as there is (some) data to support the points of the authors, but the methodological shortcomings of studies limit the ability to draw conclusions from them (Forman, 2002). Kubrin and Weitzer identify additional weaknesses with the quasiempirical literature, such as small sample sizes in surveys and studies; selective use of examples – in the form of rap lyrics, videos, writings – to “prove” a point; and even when studies have a good sample size and regression analyses are involved, they still suffer from methodological weaknesses and lack external validity (Miranda & Claes, 2004; Barangon & Hall, 1995). Kubrin and Weitzer identify some studies that use empirical data to back up their conclusions (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2010). However, these studies are hard to come by and often conclude that the relationship between rap and violent behaviours and attitudes is complex rather than concluding that listening to rap promotes violence (Mahiri & Conner, 2003, as cited in Kubrin & Weitzer, 2010). Mahiri and Conner’s study, for instance, revealed that youths who listen to rap had more progressive values than the values represented in the rap discourse to which they are exposed (Mahiri & Conner, 2003, as cited in Kubrin & Weitzer, 2010). They also found that some youths had cogent critiques of negative characterisations of men and women in rap, particularly representations of men as “gangstas” and women as “hoes” (Mahiri & Conner, 2003, as cited in Kubrin & Weitzer, 2010). Their study challenges “the simple connections that the dominant public discourse and media so often draw between rap music and pervasive negative influences on black youth” (Mahiri and Conner, 2003, p.135, as cited in Kubrin and Weitzer, 2010).

There have been experimental and ethnographic studies into the effects of rap music, but these also have significant limitations. Barangon and Hall (1995, as cited in Kubrin and Weitzer, 2010), for instance, attempted to measure the behavioural effects of subjects exposed to misogynistic rap. They found that subjects exposed to misogynistic rap songs were more likely than controls to show a female confederate a film vignette depicting an assault or rape of a woman (doing so was interpreted by the researchers as an aggressive act). First, findings of attitudinal and behavioural change in lab settings might suffer from demand effects –“Subjects believing that the experimenter condones what is presented” – or findings might be the result of immediate stimuli in the context of the lab, and these attitudinal, behavioural effects are thus short-lived (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2010, p. 134). In both cases, the findings lack external validity and may be "artefacts of the experiment" (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2010, p. 134). None of the experimental studies in the previous paragraph attempt to measure any lasting behavioural/attitudinal effects. Experimental studies like Barangon and Hall’s, must be satisfied with acts like showing a female confederate a film vignette depicting an assault or rape of a woman for ethical reasons, but it is dubious whether such artificial conditions reveal anything about the kind of real-world conduct rap music is criticised for. Many of the studies seem to be worried about how rap might lead to violent attitudes, but this tells us nothing about how consuming rap might translate into the types of harms the police are worried about. If drill rap music has a tendency to make violence attractive to its consumers, this will not necessarily translate into the violence –youth crime, gang murders and knife crime—that the police are concerned with. This is because the alleged cultivation of violent attitudes might be counterbalanced by the consumers’ other attitudes. As Eaton claims with regards to pornography,

If pornography has a tendency to make coercive sex attractive to its audience, as some studies show, this will not necessarily translate into conduct, since the effect might be counterbalanced or outweighed by the consumer’s other attitudes and commitments, thereby inhibiting the expression of any such desire (Eaton, 2007, p.708).

For instance, if taunting a rival by dissing their dead friends on a song causes a rival to have violent attitudes, whether this manifests in the rival stabbing the taunter will involve the balance of other commitments, such as a commitment to his family, career, and social/emotional wellbeing. These commitments will be weighed against the alleged violent attitudes you get from hearing a song with pursuing acts that might lead to your death or land you in prison. Therefore, these other considerations might inhibit the behaviours the police seem concerned with.

In the real world, there are often multiple influences on a person’s behaviour and attitudes, but in a laboratory setting, exposure to violent messages are decontextualised and unreflective of the numerous influences affecting behaviour/attitudes. We might think that a natural experiment would do better by considering a subject's real-world experience. However, “even natural experiments in the real world –either comparing different contexts cross-sectionally or longitudinal changes in, say, violent programming –have not demonstrated a link between media violence and aggressive behaviour of children or adults” (Felson, 1996, as cited in Kubrin and Weitzer, 2010). Aside from experimental studies, some ethnographic studies investigate the real-world effects of rap. These studies include those exploring how youths actively decode rap’s messages. They look to explore the link between rap and listeners’ perceptions. These types of studies are very scarce in the rap literature (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2010). An example of this kind of ethnographic study is found in Mahiri and Conner's 2003 study (mentioned earlier), which found that youths interpreted rap in various ways and critically engaged with the genre.

Recent studies have found that exposure to violently-themed music does not cause real-world violence through increasing violent behaviours and attitudes (Merz et al, 2021). Others have found that violent themes in music can give fans a range of positive psychological functions (Olson et al, 2022). Moreover, in the specific case of UK drill, Klienberg and McFarlane (2020) found that when compared to three kinds of London-based police-recorded crime data, no evidence of a relationship between drill music and offline violence could be found. They assert that policies, such as the removal of videos, should consult whether there is really any evidence of a connection between violent drill and offline violence so as to not be damaging.

### **2.3 – Adherence to the “Code of the Street” and Retaliatory Violence**

One way it has been argued that drill rap music raises the probability of retaliatory gang violence is by appealing to the literature supporting the view that gang-associated youth use social media to taunt rivals and trade insults in ways that cause offline gang retaliation (Stuart, 2020b). By using the “code of the street” as theory, researchers claim that insults occurring in online spaces raise the probability of offline retaliatory violence. The basic premise of “the code,” as developed by Elijah Anderson (1999) is that gang-associated youth adhere to a street code which revolves around the display of a predisposition to violence and is capable of retaliatory violence. For instance, if someone wrongs you, you must bring them down for what they did to you, and also challenge others so that your reputation is bolstered. According to Anderson this code emerged out of extreme structural disadvantage: poverty, unemployment, racism, treatment by and lack of faith in the police and judicial system. This structural disadvantage led urban males to rely on violence to achieve status in their community. Those who adhere to the code are socialised to have a disposition for aggression and violence to defend one's reputation.

As a result of growing fears over digitally mediated gang violence, researchers have written exploratory articles about how gang-associated youth transfer the code of the street directly to social media. Stuart argues that the existing scholarship is based in a theory of parallelism, where online activity mirrors offline activity since the “same gang violence mechanisms on the urban street unfold online” (Patton et al., 2017, p.1012, as cited in Stuart, 2020b, p 193). Crucially, by framing social media as a reflection and analogue for violent conflicts, the parallelism thesis predicts that social media necessarily increases both the intensity and frequency of offline retaliatory violence. For instance, scholars maintain that drill rap music videos posted on social media sites such as YouTube can raise the probability of offline gang violence, consistent with the code of the street. Irwin-Rodgers, Densley and Pinkney, for instance, assert that “Intentionally or not, such videos ‘flame wars’ by challenging the status and reputation of particular gang members, and consistent with the ‘code of the street’ subsequently provoking some form of retaliation (Irwin-Rodgers et al, 2018, p.5). Scott et al. write, "using social media through rap music and videos is tied to increased physical conflicts and violence, as they can intimidate and threaten gangs to retaliate against each other” (Scott et al., 2023, p.9).

However, these articles based on the parallelism thesis profoundly overestimate the causal relationship between social media content and offline retaliatory gang violence. As Stuart writes, “Even a cursory review of recent crime statistics reveals that violent crime in urban areas has decreased to historic lows in the same years that gang-associated youth have increased their use of social media” (Stuart, 2020b, p.193). Assuming a sort of parallelism, or direct, positive or causal relationship between social media use and physical retaliation, overlooks important opportunities for youth to de-escalate or avoid offline gang violence. Moreover, arguing that online interactions mirror offline interactions neglects how offline conflicts are transformed by social media and not merely amplified. While gangs indeed challenge rivals online, these challenges are characterised "by distinct rules, conventions, and consequences that afford new and different kinds of outcomes while constructing previous ones" (Stuart, 2020b, p.193). Crucially, insults uttered online in drill music videos carry different meanings and demand different responses than if they were merely uttered in the street.

Moreover, many of the studies upon which researchers claim that social media increases the probability of gang violence are methodologically limited. As Stuart claims, "Previous studies rely primarily on self-report surveys and/or content analyses of disembodied social media posts several years after their creation, often asking people other than gang-associated youth to interpret the meanings and motivations of a given piece of social media content" (Stuart, 2020b, p.193). For instance, in a 2017 report, Irwin-Rodgers and Pinkney warn that music videos could raise the probability of offline violence based on discussion from participants, including a focus group of young people and a group discussion involving a police officer (Irwin-Rodgers & Pinkney, 2017). When an interviewer asked, "So what things happened after this music video was uploaded?" participants of the focus group of young people responded that “shootings and stabbings” occur after rap videos taunting and threatening rivals are uploaded (Irwin-Rodgers & Pinkney, 2017, p. 20). Another responded that “it caused more stabbings for a time” (Irwin-Rodgers & Pinkney, 2017, p. 20). This report relied primarily on interpretations of non-gang-associated youth to decode what results after drill music is uploaded to social media[[6]](#footnote-6). In another study, Patton et al. (2017) examine the Twitter communications of a sole Twitter member by using inductive textual analysis. They conclude that the same gang violence mechanisms occurring on the urban street unfold online. Their findings suggest that because gang-involved persons adhere to the code of the street, opportunities for violence are created via online behaviour (Patton et al., 2017). However, this study suffers from the limitations outlined by Stuart. For instance, it draws primarily on non-gang involved parties to interpret the meanings of online content.

A growing number of studies have provided evidence contradicting the parallelism thesis (Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018; Stuart, 2020a; McCuddy & Esbensen, 2020). These studies demonstrate that social media does not independently raise the probability of offline gang violence and even provides gang-associated youth with new ways of preventing, avoiding and lowering the risk of violence. Acknowledging deficiencies in studies supporting the parallelism thesis, Stuart conducted ethnographic research, including direct and real-time observations alongside producers of gang-related online content and participants in gang conflicts. He asserts that "lacking access to such on-the-ground, real-time data, existing studies are unable to determine the relationship between a given piece of social media content and the physical violence that may or may not result" (Stuart, 2020b, p. 193).

Stuart’s research considers how gang-associated youth exploit context collapse –“the process by which private and otherwise compromising pieces of information 'leak out' onto the public stage, desegregate audiences, and jeopardise desired performances (Stuart, 2020b, p. 195)— to gain various reputational capital in gang conflicts. Stuart's ethnographic research into Southside Chicago's urban youth saw him develop a relationship with gang-associated youth particularly a gang-faction named CBE –Corner Boys Entertainment[1]. Over a two-year span, Stuart spent almost every day with young men of CBE, who had relatively large social media followings and released drill music. During Stuart’s time with the members of CBE they spent “hours watching music videos, discussing gang rivalries, shooting dice, and generally hanging out until late evening, sometimes past sunrise (Stuart, 2020a, p. ix)” As a result, Stuart was immersed in their world.

His work as director of an after-school youth violence prevention programme essentially allowed him to gain access to gang-associated youth and their families. He recruited 60 young men, 29 of them being members of CBE and 31 others coming from allied gang factions[[7]](#footnote-7). He obtained formal consent to shadow participants throughout their daily activities, spending 20-50 hours a week directly observing participants and taking fieldnotes. After leaving the field, Stuart would expand his notes, supplementing his observations with interviews on audio recorders. He used the method of sequential interviewing—treating each interview as a case in their own right, with each interview generating expectations about what one might reasonably see in the next interview and refining sampling and hypotheses with each interview, whilst using future interviews to pursue salient issues that might not have been anticipated (Stuart, 2020a). Sequential interviewing allowed Stuart to better capture the variation in strategies youth develop to challenge rivals’ online personas and analyse when these strategies raised the probability of offline retaliation.

Stuart enlisted participants to review each day’s social media activity with him. This included reviewing their posts and uploads and debrief sessions which focused attention on providing key data, prompts and discussions for materials, as well as asking “participants about the origins, aims meanings, and consequences of particular online antagonisms” (Stuart, 2020a, p. 196). This meant Stuart could follow feuds as they developed in real time from online to offline spaces. He found that gang-associated individuals engage in “online antagonisms as part of an innovative and intentional effort to build violent reputations without the necessity of behaving violently offline” (Stuart 2020a and 2020b, as cited in Stuart and Moore, 2022 p. 310-311). Stuart calls upon researchers to do better by way of providing evidence of the role that online antagonisms play on offline retaliatory behaviour. He writes that it is "incumbent upon researchers to increase the rigor of empirical evidence and claims," since "there exist no systematic data or definitive analyses to determine the precise causal relationship between social media and offline violence" (Stuart, 2022, p.311). As we have seen, the existing evidence is riddled with problems. The evidence in favour of the view that rap causes offline retaliatory violence looks nothing like the studies needed to show a causal relationship between drill rap music and the violence the Met are concerned with. If through case-control studies, cohort studies and ecologic studies a meaningful relationship between rap music and violent attitudes and behaviours can be found, proponents of the causal claim would do well to adopt the six criteria (C1-C6) to show that rap music causes these violent effects. The evidence in this section seems to be insufficient to provide support for the claims and criteria R1-R6.

**Section 3 – The Justificatory Burden**

I have spent some time on what a causal claim might look like, and the insufficiency of existing evidence to establish any such causal connection. Thus, the evidential burden, of showing that rap causes violence, is far from being met. I now more briefly turn to the justificatory burden, and two further problems with discourse about the relationship between rap and violence: the claim that censorship is a legitimate intervention (this section), and the racist meaning of focusing on drill (section 4). According to the sensible rendition of the causal claim, to the extent there is an empirical relationship between rap and violence (as yet unsubstantiated), it will be a complex picture, in which drill music is just one causal factor amongst many. For instance, were a plausible causal picture to emerge, it would be one in which rap alongside poverty, inequality, substance abuse, and lack of opportunities, among other factors, are all a part of this mutually reinforcing complex causal picture that leads to violent attitudes and behaviours in the form of youth gang violence and knife crime. Further, according to criterion six of the sensible rendition of the causal claim, there should be caution about state intervention, since a sensible rendition is sensitive to many other purported harms when coming up with preventative measures. So, we might think that in order to intervene –censoring and restricting rappers’ freedoms– we would need to establish a robust causal relationship between rap music and knife crime, in the sense specified last section. However, it also seems that once we do the work in establishing a plausible causal claim, we get more of a picture of the other factors that cause youth crime.

Many have advocated for a public health approach to serious violence, including gang violence and knife crime (Williams & Squires, 2021, p. 325). A public health approach "suggests policy makers should search for a 'cure' by using scientific evidence to identify what causes violence" and develop/test interventions (Brown, 2019). This approach is beneficial insofar as it shifts the emphasis away from police enforcement-led interventions, which often worsen the problem (Williams & Squires, 2021). For instance, in the specific case of censoring and restricting drillers, artistsare often barred from the various financial, emotional and social benefits their music brings them. It is thus counterproductive from a crime-reduction perspective. A public health approach promises a science-based (epidemiological) understanding of violence, whilst establishing more evidence-based, progressive and sustainable solutions. It is thus wholly consistent with the sensible rendition of the causal model I have outlined in section 2. The UK have already claimed great success for such an approach to reducing gang violence in Glasgow/Strathclyde. For instance, operation Reclaim – which focused on reopening sports and recreational areas to provide safe and supervised educational, recreational and diversionary activities – combined with Operation Phoenix, which brought together teenagers to participate in sports and recreation activities and foster relationships with the police, have been successful interventions is Scotland. Over the course of these operations, gang violence was recorded as having diminished between 70 and 40 per cent (Williams & Squires, 2021, p. 328). Before a public health approach was taken to violence in Strathclyde, it had one of the highest rates of knife crime in the world.

Whilst there has been great success in taking a public health-based approach to gang violence and knife crime in Glasgow, in places like London, the public health approach is seriously lacking. Williams and Squires outline that this is due to disregarding research and evidence-based principles that are supposed to underline a public health approach. Documents surrounding the approach to serious youth violence allude "to a public health based strategy, but it is not yet a public health based strategy,” since “the Government’s rhetoric on public health has not yet been reflected in its actions” (Home Affairs Select Committee Deliberations, as cited in Williams and Squires, 2021, p.333). Instead, the World Health Organisation noted that strategies to reduce violence in places like London are not based in research but primarily consist of police-led interventionist approaches. This is reflected in censorious interventions targeting drill. Instead of doing the work to show that drill does cause violence in the sense specified above, the police are assuming there exists a causal connection and basing interventions on this assumption.

It is not just that violence prevention strategies be informed by research and evidence, but they must also be “community informed” (Abt, 2019, p.9). Even if an evidence-based approach shows us that drill music is a casual contributor to serious violence, we might still question whether censorship is justified given the constraint that interventions must be consistent with what those within the community see as causing violence and should uplift a community by taking a community-building approach over police-led interventionist approaches. Censoring and restricting drillers' freedoms requires considerable resources in the form of policing, surveillance and court proceedings. This takes resources away from community-building approaches which we know to be effective (see above), such as opportunities for recreation and clubs for the youth. Drillers are aware of the actual causes of serious violence. As drill artist Abra Cadabra argues,

Targeting musicians is a distraction… The cuts that affect schools, youth clubs, social housing, benefits, are making life harder for the average person living on or below the poverty line in this city. There are people doing mad tings [committing acts of violence] not because they want to, but because the situation has forced them to (Cadabra, as cited in Beaumont-Thompson, 2018).

It seems that overpolicing drill music provides an easy way for law enforcement to be seen doing something about urban violence, but they are reluctant to engage with what drillers and those who work closely with drillers view as effective strategies for youth prevention. So, not only is the overpolicing of drill music not based in evidence about the relationship between drill music and offline retaliatory violence, but the police are also ignoring the drill community’s advocacy for community-building approaches.

Crucially, the police are unable to justify censorship-oriented approaches to drill. The restrictions placed on drill are neither informed by evidence nor informed by the drill community. It seems highly prejudicial that law enforcement would zoom in on music censorship as an intervention, as opposed to, say, tackling poverty, increasing opportunities for those in high-risk areas, and dedicating money to activities for the youth, such as youth clubs. Moreover, this justificatory burden becomes even more untenable when we think about the racist social meaning of such interventions. I turn to this next.

## **Section 4 – The Racist Public Meaning of the Causal Claim**

The causal claim lacks robust empirical support, yet it is a prevalent critique of rap music. Since the causal claim is empirically unsubstantiated, and robust empirical evidence supporting it is required, we might be left questioning why it is made so often. Some argue that attitudes about and critiques of rap music acts as an example of anti-black attitudes without mentioning race (Dunbar, 2016, 2019; Khan, 2022; Kubrin and Nelson, 2014), and there is a growing empirical literature suggesting a prevalence of antirap attitudes (Dunbar et al., 2016, 2019, 2021). While other forms of media have been criticised for their alleged connection to violent attitudes and behaviours, rap music is still viewed as uniquely dangerous. A 1993 study by Binder, for instance, found that even though heavy metal and rap music contain similar themes of violence and defiance of authority, the media is more likely to characterise rap music as inspiring youth to commit crime (Binder 1993, as cited in Dunbar, 2019).

Some scholars, artists and political activists have criticised these responses to rap as a form of anti-black racism. They argue that attitudes about rap music, specifically about the criminality of rap, provide an important example of anti-black attitudes that can be expressed without mentioning race. For instance, the prohibition of selling rap albums, or the cancellation of shows, have been motivated by the unsubstantiated claim that rap music will lead to violence. This is seen in the obscenity trials of 2 Live Crew, who were censored in these ways because of the alleged violence it could cause to women (Khan 2022)[[8]](#footnote-8). However, we might question whether scholars highlighting rap's violent effects are really just worried about the violence of black men “who already loom as a threatening stereotype in the minds of society” (Nielson 2012, as cited in Dunbar, 2018).

Empirical studies researching how fears about rap music may reflect anti-black attitudes include studies demonstrating that rap fans are often associated with negative behaviours (Fried, 2003; Dunbar, 2016, 2021). They also include studies finding participants make worse character judgements when they learn that a defendant wrote rap lyrics (Fischoff, 1999; Dunbar, 2019). Studies have also found that when participants are not presented with information about the songwriter's race, findings show that participants use the lyrics' genre to infer a songwriter's race, resulting in racially biased judgements (Dunbar, 2021). Moreover, studies have found that rap acts as a legitimating pattern where attitudes and perceptions towards rap music reinforce stereotypes, suggesting blacks are to blame for their lower social status (Reyna et al., 2009). These studies suggest both the prevalence of antirap attitudes and give us reason to think these antirap attitudes are really just anti-black attitudes. I am not advancing here a claim about what **causes** antirap critiques, however. Any such claim would have to meet the rigorous empirical standards I set out in section 1. However, leaving open what might cause such critiques for further investigation, I instead argue that such critiques have a racist social meaning.

The social meaning of something does not depend on the intention of the speaker or even the presence of an attitude that might be expressed (Archer & Matheson, 2019). We can make sense of this when we look at the different meanings an expression can convey. When critics claim that rap causes violence, it seems the speaker intends to convey that rap has a part to play in violent attitudes and behaviours, and perhaps that we should do something about rap –whether it be social condemnation or censorship or something else; this is the intended meaning of the expression. Condemnation of rap can also happen through attitudinal meaning. Attitudinal meaning “is the meaning that a speaker’s attitudes, such as her values and care, communicates” (Archer & Matheson, 2019, p. 6). Say John were to convey antirap attitudes in the form of the causal claim about rap music, even if John did not intend for his expression to express racist values, it might be that his expression is based in racist values nonetheless. A person’s condemnatory attack of rap might express anti-black attitudes of theirs without them intending to. This is how attitudinal meaning comes apart from intended meaning.

Even in the absence of problematic anti-black attitudes, critiques of rap as causing violence might entrench anti-blackness when we explore the “public meaning” of an expression. The public meaning “is the meaning that others can justifiably attribute to our acts given the context in which we perform them” (Archer & Matheson, 2019, p. 6). This meaning comes apart from the intended and attitudinal meaning. For instance, Archer and Matheson give the following example. Say a man was to interrupt a woman in an important business meeting. In a business culture that is patriarchal, it seems reasonable to understand this interruption as expressing sexism, denigration of women, whatever we think the attitudes and intentions of the person are. Crucially, the interruption can have a sexist public meaning even if it lacks an intentional and attitudinal meaning that is sexist.

There is a rich literature in philosophy highlighting the importance of social/public meaning in a range of contexts (I use the two terms interchangeably here). For example, Charles Mills, in assessing arguments in favour of black men's duty to marry black women, concludes that even if black men know that their marriage to a white women is a) not motivated by racism, and b) they know that it is not motivated by racism, there is always the fact that regardless of his motivations, black people will perceive him as marrying out of racial self-hatred and reinforcing white supremacy (Mills, 1994). In other words, he writes that such interracial unions with white women might send the message that "black women just ain’t good enough” (Mills, 1994, p. 149). Here, it seems Mills acknowledges that despite such a union not being motivated or caused by racist beliefs or attitudes about white women's beauty, there still might be a racist public meaning that is communicated by such a union. Similarly, Robin Zheng argues that when we focus on the effects of racial fetish in a racially stratified world, rather than whether racial fetish is caused by negative racial stereotypes, racial fetishes can be objectionable (Zheng, 2016). Zheng asserts that racial fetishes, such as “yellow fever” –a preference for Asian women— can have a racist public meaning even if not caused by racist attitudes. She writes that “racial fetishes in a racially stratified society express racially stereotypical social meanings even if not caused by them and even if individuals with the preference do not endorse them” (Zheng, 2016, p. 411).

Similarly, in a racist world, advancing critiques against rap that sensationalise rap music or single it out as a serious cause for concern in the cultivation of violent attitudes and behaviours might have a racist public meaning even when critics do not have racist intentional or attitudinal meanings. For instance, as I have shown, the most sensible rendition of the causal claim about rap music holds rap as one of many causes of violent attitudes and behaviours, so why are critics framing the causal claim in ways that would lead one to think rap plays a more significant role than any other factors in this complex causal mechanism? Given the hyperscrutiny of black art forms, even before rap, as contributing to perverted behaviour and attitudes (Rose 2008), and other racism informing the background context in which these critiques are being advanced, such condemnation of rap contributes to a culture of legitimation against black cultural expression by reinforcing the message of its dangerousness. These concerns provide additional reasons against advancing the causal claim. The social meaning of the causal critique can perpetuate racist dynamics.

When rap music is positioned as a cause of urban violence, this positions young black men as a threat to society and the "civic mainstream" (Lynes et al., 2020, p. 1202). The racist public meaning of the causal claim fuels the assumption that young black men are more likely to be criminals, and thus provides a rationale for the state to sustain racialised forms of policing and legitimise draconian police powers (Fatsis, 2019). Framing rap music as a cause of violence in places like London validates the overpolicing of already marginalised communities. For instance, as a way of tackling violent youth crime, the police use techniques such as “stop and search,” which has been shown to be ineffective in crime reduction, but they also use these techniques so that young black males are subjected to higher rates than others (Fatsis, 2019). This disproportionality in the overpolicing of young black males extends to the removal of their art from streaming services and gang injunctions that restrict them in insidious ways. As we have seen, there is a justificatory burden to show that censorship (rather than other interventions) is the most effective, and this burden has not yet been met. In that context, there is also a social meaning attached to censorship approaches: that it is legitimate to surveil black youth, even when there is no evidence to suggest such surveillance is effective or fair.

The point of this section is to provide additional weighty reasons against advancing the causal critique – in addition to the concern that there is no reason, based in empirical concerns, for them. Even if there were such evidence, given the potential for racist social meaning, great care would be needed over making the claim. Moreover, using that claim to inform censoring interventions, especially if other interventions, such as tackling inequality and improving opportunities for the youth are available, perpetuates damaging social meanings.

In conclusion, I have argued that there are multiple reasons against making the causal claim: first, given the complicated empirical evidence and the standards of empirical evidence required to establish a causal connection between rap music and offline retaliatory violence, there is insufficient evidence to support the causal claim. Second, the censorship-oriented approaches to tackling youth crime that law enforcement have taken is as yet unjustified, and potentially damaging because it risks not tackling the actual causes of violence. Thirdly, both the causal claim, and the interventionist-censorship approaches in response are particularly problematic given their damaging social meanings. Given what is at stake, we need to do better, both in establishing the causes of violence and in formulating responses to address it. In the next couple of chapters, we explore another critique underpinning rap music’s criminalisation – the evidencing claim.

**Chapter 2 – The Evidencing Claim: Part 1**

A common response to the claim that rap causes violence is that rap is not a cause but a reflection of the violence occurring in the "streets." Rappers are merely "keeping it real" in documenting the violence they see within their communities (Rose, 2008). Whilst this is a popular response to folks who wish to see rap as having a problematic role in the perpetuation of violence in black communities, this response has been taken to extremes. Some critics of rap are less concerned with the alleged violent attitudes and behaviours rap can supposedly cause and more concerned with how rappers who keep it real in their raps are evidencing violence (evidencing claim).

The evidencing claim is not just the belief of a few anti-rap critics, but it forms the very premise upon which the state scrutinises rap music, through over-policing and the use of rap music as evidence in criminal courts. One of the latest subgenres of rap to be targeted by the critique that rap is connected to violence in problematic ways is drill rap music. Drill music originated in Chicago, coming to prominence in the early 2010s, but has since become global. A popular feature underpinning global drill music is its violent lyrics. In 2022, New York mayor Eric Adams asserted drill rap is "alarming" and that "We pulled Trump of Twitter … yet we are allowing music displaying guns and violence" (Adams, as cited in Carson, 2022). He claimed he would try to get the videos banned from social media. It is not just the US that is taking censorious measures against drill. In the UK, several drill artists have been subject to censorship in the form of criminal behaviour orders (CBOs) preventing them from entering certain areas, associating with certain people, performing certain songs, using social media to share certain things and, sometimes, releasing music without police having editorial insight (Owusu-Bempah, 2020).

The critique that rap is connected to violence in problematic ways has not only led to the censorship of many rap artists, but in some cases, it has also led to lyrics and videos being used as evidence in criminal courts. For instance, in the UK, there has been a surge in the number of criminal trials using rap/drill lyrics and videos as evidence. The evidence, however, is not being treated as evidence about the actual crime, but rather as bad character evidence: evidence of a propensity to violent and reprehensible behaviour (Owusu-Bempah, 2020). Erik Nielson identifies at least three other ways in which lyrics are being used as evidence in criminal courts (Nielson, 2019). First, lyrics are treated as rhymed confessions of a previous act. Second, lyrics are treated as evidence of the defendant's knowledge, intent, motive or identity with respect to the crime. Finally, a growing trend in which rap lyrics are being used as evidence is that they are being treated as future-directed true threats, "which involves a statement that would be reasonably interpreted as imminent, causing fear, and threatening harm" (Dunbar and Kubrin, 2016, p.289).

Although the use of rap as evidence in courtrooms has been occurring since the 1990s, there has been recent sustained attention to this practice (Nielson, 2019). I suspect the rise in popularity of drill music has played a role in this increased attention. Moreover, the incarceration of two of rap's biggest stars – Young Thug and Gunna – has also increased the attention being paid to rap as evidence. Both Young Thug and Gunna were arrested on May 11 2022, on charges including taking part in criminal street gang activity; they were two of 28 people charged with this indictment. The indictment centres around "Young Slime Life" (YSL) record label, founded by Young Thug. Authorities are claiming YSL is a criminal street gang. Young Thug and Gunna are having their lyrics used as evidence during the prosecution. Fanni Willis –Fulton County's District Attorney –has defended this practice claiming, "if you decide to admit your crimes over a beat, I'm gonna use it" (Willis, as cited in Young, 2022) (Guy, 2022). Fanni Willis' claim is a clear case of how the state is taking rap lyrics as autobiographical.

In what follows, I evaluate the evidencing claim, namely: the claim that rap music provides autobiographical evidence of rappers' violent criminality. I argue that the critical scrutiny of rap music based on the evidencing claim constitutes four different kinds of epistemic injustice. Much of my analysis centres on drill rap, however, as seen above, while drill rap is one of the latest subgenres of rap to be hyper-scrutinised, the scrutiny predicated on the evidencing claim extends to the broader genre of rap. This work will lay the foundations for the work in chapter 3, where I evaluate which framework is most helpful for engaging with critiques of drill music, and for providing strategies for remedying these epistemic injustices. Section 1 outlines how rap music is being critically scrutinised. Section 2 argues that this critical scrutiny constitutes four types of epistemic injustice: testimonial, contributory, pre-emptive testimonial and poetic injustice.

## **Section 1 – How is Rap Being Critically Scrutinised**

Rap as Evidence

Abenaa Owusu-Bempah's analysis of 38 appeal cases –reported between 2005 and 2021— accessed through legal databases tells us some ways in which rap is being used as evidence in UK criminal courts (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). Owusu-Bempah takes the case law to indicate that the defendants in these cases were almost exclusively black males in London accused of serious crimes (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 431).

**1.1 — Rap as a Link to Joint Enterprise**

One way in which rap is being used as evidence is in its link to "joint enterprise:" enabling "individuals to be convicted of crimes without committing the criminal act, or even being at the scene of the crime" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 433). Around half of the cases Owusu-Bempah analysed concerned offences of joint enterprise, in which rap lyrics and videos were used in some cases "to help show a criminal association between defendants and/or to establish a shared intention to commit a crime" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 433). For instance, in one case –R v Lewis— seven appellants were accused of being part of a 42-person group involved in a violent incident, including shooting at the police and setting fire to a pub. Five of the appellants featured in music videos, and some of these videos featured the appellants together. These music videos were used as evidence at their trials for offences such as riot and possession of a firearm with intent to endanger life (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 433). Owusu-Bempah highlights that the videos were used "to reference guns, gangs and/or gang signage, demonstrating association, gang association, pro-firearm and anti-police tendencies" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 433). They were not used as evidence about the offences but to show appellants were present in the area where the offences were carried out "with the common purpose of carrying out unlawful acts" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 433). In other words, to show that the appellants were "in it together regardless of whether they personally engaged in acts of violence or carried a gun" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 433). This case is indicative of several others, where lyrics and videos are being used to help show that defendants have a reason or willingness to be involved in joint association by way of association with a gang (Owusu-Bempah, 2022).

Critiques of joint enterprise doctrine are sometimes based on the broadness with which it is applied. For instance, joint enterprise casts a net that is too wide by applying to individuals whose association or involvement with a crime is "far removed from the core liability" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 433). This creates a risk of wrongful convictions and sentences that are unfair. Moreover, joint enterprise cases are disproportionately applied to black people. Owusu-Bempah details research by Clarke and Williams, who found that rap lyrics and videos "formed a resource for building criminalised associations against negatively racialised groups and individuals" (Clarke and Williams, 2020, p.126 as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2023, p. 433). Black people's overrepresentation in joint enterprise has the potential to reproduce narratives of the "violent black offender" (Clarke and Williams 2020, p. 120, as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2023, p.433) whilst also being predicated on racist narratives towards black people. This is seen in how prosecution strategies rely on criminalising "gang" narratives that are "deeply dependent on a range of reproductive racialised constructs of the Black Criminal" (Clarke and Williams 2020, p. 120, as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2023, p.433). That is, prosecutors are relying on racist stereotypes as "racialised signifiers" to help build gang narratives and joint enterprise cases (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 434).

Owusu-Bempah's analysis found that 23 cases were said to be gang-related, where lyrics and videos were mostly being "used as evidence of gang membership, association or affiliation, which was then used to link the defendant to a joint enterprise and/or as evidence to prove issues in the case, such as the motive for a crime" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 434). Gang involvement was sometimes disputed by the defendant. For instance, in R v Awoyemi [2016], a trial for attempted murder and possessing a firearm with intent to endanger life, three appellants, unsuccessfully challenged the use of handwritten lyrics and the appearance in a video as evidence (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). Lyrics were adduced because it was said to relate to "violence, drugs, guns, using guns to get drugs and the DAG gang" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 434). The video was used to show that two appellants made "threatening gestures with their fingers to indicate guns" and rapped about shooting and the DAG gang: "don't fuck with my family. Why? Cos I'll be eager to let slug fly" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 434). These lyrics and videos were used to establish gang association and, in turn, motive and association with violence, even though there was little to support the view that offences were gang-related (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p.434). For instance, no evidence of hostility between the two involved rival gangs was identified by the prosecution, and the victim's identity was unknown. Owusu-Bempah asserts that "without a link between the crimes and gangs, it is unclear how lyrics about a gang actually furthered the prosecution case" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 434, drawing on the work of McKeown 2017).

Moreover, defendants need not write or perform violent lyrics; their mere appearance or participation in a video is enough for the video to be deemed relevant to their case (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). For instance, standing next to gang-identified members or taking on minor roles by making a gun gesture using his hands or getting shouted out is enough for videos to be deemed relevant. Further, a video or lyrics can be considered relevant even if the age of the material (and hence its temporal proximity to the alleged crime) is questionable. In one case, an appellant appeared in a rap video two years before an alleged gang-related murder, and the video's age was said not to diminish its impact/value (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 437).

The term “gang” is used in a vague and racisalised way, similar to how the concept of joint enterprise has been used (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 634). Black people are overrepresented on gang databases, including the "Gangs Violence Matrix" created by the Metropolitan Police following 2011's civil unrest (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). Owusu-Bempah notes that there were over 3000 people on the matrix in 2017, many of whom were at low risk of offending with no record of involvement in serious crime. Despite figures indicating that blacks were responsible for 27% of serious youth violence in London, 78% of those on the matrix were black (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). She notes that these figures are unsurprising given that many of the indicators used by the Met to identify "gang members" reflect elements of youth culture, such as participation in rap (Owusu-Bempah, 2022).

The courts have justified the use of rap to prove gang membership on the grounds that since gangs are unlikely to give out "membership cards" proving membership to a gang, proof of membership will involve the prosecution putting forward evidence from which gang membership is implied and can be reasonably inferred. Moreover, Owusu-Bempah asserts that applying the term "gang" to black boys and men evokes and perpetuates stereotypical images of criminality (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). So when a young black male is charged with a gang-related offence, they fit the stock image of a gang member, and prosecution becomes plausible. This is especially the case where there are multiple defendants and "Rap can be then used to amplify these images of Black criminality, to further link Black men and boys to crime, and, in joint enterprise cases, to establish common purposes or shared intentions" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 435).

**1.2 — Rap as Bad-Character Evidence**

Rap lyrics and videos are mostly adduced at trial as evidence of bad character. Bad character evidence is defined as

"'evidence of, or a disposition towards, misconduct' other than evidence which 'has to do with the alleged facts of the offence with which the defendant is charged' or 'is evidence of misconduct in connection with the investigation or prosecution of that offence' "(Owusu-Bempah 2022, citing section 98 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, p. 437).

"Evidence of misconduct" can be related to the alleged facts of the offence that the defendant is being charged with, e.g., preparatory acts or evidence of a motive (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). For instance, in cases where music videos do not include details about the actual offence, but it is said to link the appellant to a gang, and gang rivalry is said to be the motive for the killing. Consequently, the video is said to be related to the alleged facts of the killing. Evidence of a defendant's misconduct might not relate to the facts of the offence being charged. However, it will still be admissible if it falls within at least one of the seven gateways to admission of bad character evidence (set out in section 101(1) (a) – (g) of the Criminal Justice Act, as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2022). Rap was often admitted through gateway d, "under which bad character evidence is admissible if it is 'relevant to an important matter in issue between the defendant and the prosecution'" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p.438). Owusu-Bempah asserts that this "important matter in issue" "was most commonly: intention; motive; or a defence, such as innocent presence at the scene of the crime" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 438). Moreover, rap was also admitted through gateway d as a propensity towards violence or familiarity with weapons" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 438).

Bad character evidence is "evidence of, or of a disposition towards misconduct, and evidence of misconduct is described in section 112 of the Criminal Justice Act as "the commission of an offence or other reprehensible behaviour" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 438). Reprehensible behaviour here is given its ordinary meaning with added elements of culpability/blameworthiness. The cases do not specify which aspects of the definition of reprehensible behaviour applied to rap, but Owusu-Bempah asserts that it is likely lyrics are being used to show a "violent disposition towards" committing crime" and this is the case even where lyrics include no specific threats to a person or persons" (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 438).

A recent example of a UK trial involving lyrics from a high-profile artist is that of East-London driller "Unknown T." There was no substantial evidence against Unknown T, yet he was still charged with participation in a murder following a fatal stabbing at a 2018 New Year's Eve house party. In an unusual turn of events, the trial judge dismissed the use of rap evidence as weak and prejudicial, and he was later acquitted (Rymajdo, 2020). Nonetheless, the prosecution's attempt to use participation in drill as evidence of bad character illustrates the trend that Owusu-Bempah identifies.

Owusu-Bempah asserts that the use of rap as evidence of motive, intention and common purpose, especially in joint enterprise cases, is racist. It is used almost exclusively against young black males accused of serious offences where prosecutors draw from rap videos and lyrics to highlight a defendant's dangerous character and, in doing so, reflects stereotypical narratives about black male criminality. Furthermore, rap lyrics are being taken literally and prosecutors and adjudicators are conflating their rap personas with actual persons sitting on a dock. For instance, the literal interpretations presented by the police and prosecutions relies on the thought that rap is evidencing violence. However, these interpretations are often incorrect and prejudiced by "intense crime fighting motivations and institutional racism which might discourage more circumspect readings" of rap (Ilan 2020, p. 1003).

**1.3 —The Overpolicing of Rap**

It is not just that rap is being used as evidence in criminal courts, rappers are also being subjected to various censorious measures. In 2005, the Met launched a risk assessment Form 696, which was allegedly triggered by two shootings that happened near garage music events (Reisner & Rymajdo, 2022). The form was key in suppressing the growth of grime music –a subgenre of rap originating in East London— in London. Form 696 resulted in targeting black artists and shutting down venues where the main audiences were black (Reisner & Rymajdo, 2022). The form required that details about the promoters, artists, music style, crowd ethnicity and DJs be declared. It was met with scrutiny due to its racist tone, resulting in a revised version. However, this version is still targeted at grime artists, where audiences are predominantly black. Brar asserts: "what Form 696 did so effectively was to step into a wider circuit of racialised policing which, for a number of years, has cultivated a pernicious relationship to Black music in London, and by extension to impinge on the ability of Black populations in the city to move freely without the threat of state duress" (Brar 2021, p. 120, as cited in Reisner and Rymajdo 2022, p.483).

As UK road-rap –a subgenre of rap that emerged from the poorest pockets of London in the mid-2000s, when grime music was falling out of favour (Bennison, 2020) – became popular in the late 2000s and early 2010s, censorship practices became tighter. For instance, UK road-rap legend Giggs had his tour cancelled after police advised promoters that there would be potential risks if the tour went ahead. Giggs found himself under surveillance from Operation Trident, "a police initiative set up in 1998 to tackle gun crime within Black communities in London" (Reisner & Rymajdo, 2022, p. 483). John Street draws on Paul Chevigny's work to explore the politics of how regulatory judgements are made on who has the "right" to perform. The police could not legally enforce a cancellation of Giggs' performance, but by advising venues of the risk of having the tour go ahead, "they exercised a de facto ban" (Street 2012, p. 580, as cited in Resiner and Rymajdo 2022, p. 484).

The latest subgenre of rap to be targeted by the Met is drill. Following a series of violent crimes linked to drill music in 2018 (Pinkney Robinson Edward, as cited in Fatsis 1303, 2019), several criminal justice responses were launched by the Met "with the aim of taking action against gang-related videos, the consolidation of a serious violence strategy (HM Government, 2018), and intention to pursue 'drillers' as terror suspects" (Fatsis, 2019, p. 1303). This has resulted in the removal of thousands of YouTube videos (Waterson, 2018) and numerous Criminal Behaviour Orders (CBOs), preventing "suspects from associating with certain people, entering designated areas, wearing hoods, or using social media and unregistered mobile phones'" among other restrictions (Fatsis, 2019, p. 1303). It is a criminal offence to breach a CBO, and this was recently seen in the case of drillers AM and Skengdo, who were given a nine-month suspended sentence for breaching their CBOs. The drill duo performed Attempted 1.0[1], which allegedly incited violence against members of a rival gang; this is despite there being no evidence of gang membership in the lyrics of Attempted 1.0.

Aside from these censorious measures, drillers are also subjected to iron-fisted and militaristic responses such as stop and search (Fatsis, 2019, p. 1304). A famous episode of the policing of drill is captured by how police targeted the shooting of drill rapper "Ballistic's" music video. Three Met officers arrived at the music video with machine guns to hand as a helicopter circled Ballistic and his entourage from above. This was in response to a report of a firearm, but there was no evidence of wrongdoing (Fatsis, 2019, p. 1304). Such responses may seem reasonable given the seriousness of offences drill is linked to, but these militaristic responses have been questioned on their efficacy to stop crime, their motivations and their impact on black urban youth.

For instance, The Youth Violence Commission's interim report categorically states that "debates around the potential impact of drill music on youth violence are, in the main, a populist distraction from understanding and tackling the real root causes" (Youth Violence Commission, 2018, p.5). Correcting the root causes would involve tackling "childhood trauma, undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues, inadequate state provision, deficient parental support, poverty and social inequality" (Youth Violence Commission, 2018, p.5). The heavy-handed approaches taken by law enforcement to drill music and knife crime are not long-term solutions as they do not get at the root causes of violence. Further, these militaristic responses —like stop and search— are ineffective, and the claim that stop and search is a necessary tactic for crime prevention does not stand up to empirical scrutiny (Stop-Watch, 2021)

Law enforcement's militaristic responses to and the censorship of drill are more severe instantiations of the over-policing of black subcultures. The way in which drill music is targeted, monitored, and suppressed by authorities such as the Met is ineffective for crime prevention and explicitly discriminatory towards young black males. As in the case of AM and Skengdo, the censorship of drill is often an unjustified restriction on young black people's freedom of expression. It is also counterproductive to the aims of policing drill, since censoring drillers contributes to the same lack of opportunities and resources that drillers make music to avoid. If drillers are having their videos taken down, prevented from performing and so forth, this leads to a lack of exposure, and they miss out on opportunities to undertake successful commerce.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Section 2 – Epistemic Injustice in the Critical Scrutiny of Drill**

In this section, I outline how the evidencing claim about rap music may constitute one or more different forms of epistemic injustice. I argue that when critics default assumptions about rap is that it reports fact, this constitutes two kinds of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice – characterised by Miranda Fricker – and contributory injustice – characterised by Kristie Dotson. I also explore the work of Federico Picinali (2024)–who takes this treatment of drill to constitute a pre-emptive testimonial injustice – and Ethan Nowak (2023) –who argues that when critics take rap as literal, they are committing a distinct form of epistemic injustice, poetic injustice.

Epistemic injustice is broadly characterised by Miranda Fricker as "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). This includes how knowers: are excluded and silenced; have their meanings diminished; are being unjustly distrusted; receive minimal uptake by relevant agents (Kidd, Medina, & Pohlhaus, 2017).

**2.1 –Testimonial Injustice**

Fricker defines testimonial injustice as occurring “when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). By prejudice, Fricker means negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes affecting the credibility assigned to a speaker. A negative identity-prejudicial stereotype is

a widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalisation that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment (Fricker, 2007, p. 35). In other words, when speakers want to transmit knowledge but the hearer has prejudices, the speaker’s testimony is assigned less credibility in virtue of these negative prejudices.

Dotson gives an example of testimonial injustice by looking at Patricia Williams’ book “The Alchemy of Race and Rights” (Williams, 1991). Here Williams describes an instance of anti-black racism she experienced in an attempt to shop at Benneton’s in SoHo of being denied entry for no apparent reason other than racial prejudice.

Williams experienced the testimonial injustice from the replies she got when telling her experience to others. She was stripped of credibility on many occasions, made to feel like a liar and a person with a “diseased mind trying to make all white people feel guilty” (Williams, 1991, p. 242). The inclination not to believe William’s testimony of racial prejudice is indicative of negative-identity prejudicial stereotypes labelling African Americans, such as “paranoid” and “liars” (Dotson, 2012, p. 27). Hearers who hold these stereotypes face difficulties in assigning credibility to the testimonies of African Americans, such as Williams’ reports of discrimination.

**2.2 – Testimonial Injustice in Evaluations of Rap Music**

To show that the evidencing claim constitutes a testimonial injustice I would need to show that a) there are deflated credibility assignments, and b) these follow from negative identity prejudices, in the terms I outlined above. With regards to a), I think drillers testimonies are often assigned deflated credibility. Drillers sometimes label their work as fictional, but they are not believed. Other drillers say their music is merely reflective of the unjust circumstances they find themselves in, and rapping about murder does not make them murderers, but they are not believed. Moreover, many drillers make clear that their use of violent lyrics is merely to sell their music, but they are still not believed. This shows how the assumption that drill music inherently causes, precipitates or glorifies crime is at odds with how those within the drill scene view it. Those with the best source of information about the artworks – those in authorial positions – are not believed. We often think that authors are the authorities on their works, but in the case of drill, drillers are not seen as authorities on their art. This starkly shows that condition a) is met. Regarding b), stereotypes about the criminality of black boys and men produce these deflated credibility assignments. The driller is not believed because they are stereotyped by hearers –court officials, police officers and media agents — as violent criminals.

One might object that the stereotypes involved in the deflated credibility assignments of drillers are not epistemic stereotypes about drillers being less credible or trustworthy (as in Fricker’s and Dotson’s examples). In the drillers’ case, we (at least sometimes) see a non-epistemic stereotype –to do with criminality – deflating credibility assignments. And since the stereotypes of drillers are non-epistemic, one might think we lack the relevant kind of prejudice to establish testimonial injustice.

However, I think the reduced believability of drillers’ testimonies makes for an interesting case of testimonial injustice. In the case of drillers, non-epistemic stereotypes about the criminality of drillers (not specifically ones to do with epistemic features like trustworthiness) can also lead to deflated credibility. But they are working in a relevantly similar way – in Dotson’s case, the inclination not to believe Williams is indicative of prejudicial stereotypes labelling African Americans as unreliable and paranoid. But here, the issue is that a driller is not believed because he is stereotyped as a criminal, and that is what they are testifying to the falsity of. Other stereotypes to do with epistemic features are likely involved too – for instance, negative prejudicial stereotypes about the believability of black boys and men, which become enmeshed with stereotypes about criminality and violence. So we see a “double-whammy” of stereotypes about credibility and stereotypes about criminality and violence.

**2.3 — Testimonial Injustice in Criminal Courts**

In a recent interview between media personality Zeze Millz and Loski – a popular south London driller –Loski explains how drill is fictional, claiming that it is “more like storytelling.” He claims, “the majority of people doing drill are not even yutes [youth] like that – like it’s not even proper road yutes; the yutes that are causing all this violence aren’t rapping really” (Centrl, 2020). Crucially, he clarifies that “Loski is a character,” and his music is his story (Centrl, 2020).

When Loski asserts, “a lot of people [drillers] are nice guys,” Millz responds in disbelief, “are you fucking with me right now?” (Centrl, 2020). This is despite Loski explaining that his account should be assigned credibility because of his experience coming from these places.

It is not only his interviewer in apparent disbelief: authorities have attempted to use Loski’s lyrics as evidence against him at criminal trials (Owusu-Bempah, 2020). For instance, at his trial for a weapons offence, Loski is reported to have explained how his references to criminality are often fictional, and how commercial success requires the appearance of authenticity:

I have to sound as real as possible otherwise you don’t get far. It’s all about YouTube views. If you say something, everyone talks about you and you get more views. Rap doesn’t always have to make sense, it has to rhyme. I don’t look scary, so I have to say something that looks more than I am. (Taylor 2020, as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p.431)

Another case in which the courts were dismissive of drillers’ testimonies “highlighting the conventions of rap and factors influencing its content” is found in R v O [2010] EWA Crim 2985 (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). This trial was for possession of a firearm with intent to endanger, with the prosecution’s case relying on a YouTube video in which the defendant appeared “rapping with many others and using words which were said to relate to guns and gangs” (at [6] as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 431). Owusu-Bempah asserts “There is nothing in the judgement to indicate that the video had any connection to the specific circumstances of the offences charged (beyond it being a firearms case), with O having been arrested in a taxi with a loaded handgun in the footwell of his seat six months after the video was posted online” (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 431). This is on top of the lyrics involving no specific threat to anyone. Where O explained that the video was an attempt to “gain attention in the commercial music market” and that “references to guns and violence were metaphorical, the trial judge and Court of appeal still allowed the video to be used as evidence of “O’s propensity ‘as a gang member to use gun violence for the purposes of endangering life’” (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p.431).

These cases show how state authorities take rappers lyrics literally and disregard their testimonies asserting that their lyrics are not reflective of their actions. One plausible explanation for this is that the courts assign a deflated level of credibility to rappers. Despite drillers like Loski highlighting that their violent drill lyrics are not autobiographical, state authorities and the media are reluctant to believe them, taking action as if their drill lyrics are autobiographical. Insofar as this reluctance to believe rappers is fuelled by stereotypes about the criminality and believability of black boys and men, this constitutes a testimonial injustice.

**2.4 — Testimonial Injustice in the Over-policing of Drill**

The restrictions of and militaristic responses to drill are not merely unjustified –they also constitute testimonial injustice: some drillers who are subject to these measures have made it clear that their work is non-autobiographical and a way of “getting out.” For instance, recall AM and Skengdo’s nine-month suspended sentence for breaching their CBOs. Talking about their injunctions and censorship to the BBC, they made clear the fictional nature of their drill. When asked by BBC 1Xtra’s Twin B what they want people to take away from their music, AM responds he wants people “to appreciate… the way it’s portraying a story of where we have come from” (1xtra, 2019). Here, we see how censorious measures have been taken against drillers who explicitly say their work is fictional and reflective of their surroundings, rather than expressions of violent intent or descriptions of crimes.

Moreover, drillers often explain how drill is a means to make it out of the deprived places they come from. However, the ways in which drillers are overpoliced stifles their attempts to create a better reality. For instance, popular driller Digga D often voices his frustration at the excessive stop and searches he is subject to on his social media accounts and his BBC documentary “Defending Digga D” (DrillnewsUK, 2020). Digga D’s lawyer Cecilia Goodwin claims this over-policing is obstructive to “the ability of the artist to be creative, to put out music and make money” (Goodwin, as quoted in Rymajdo, 2020).

In this subsection, I have argued that despite how some drillers view and describe their artistry—fictional, reflective of their surroundings and an opportunity to sell more music—their views are not assigned credibility, and their music is seen as intentionally precipitating violence by state authorities. I have argued that this scrutiny is based in negative identity prejudices about black believability and criminality, constituting a testimonial injustice.

**2.5 – Contributory Injustice**

Dotson defines contributory injustice as when

“an epistemic agent’s wilful hermeneutical ignorance in maintaining and utilising structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources thwarts a knower’s ability to contribute to shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community by compromising her epistemic agency.” (Dotson, 2012, p. 32)

Contributory injustice occurs when different hermeneutical resources exist –resources used to understand and communicate experiences— but the perceiver uses structurally prejudiced or biased hermeneutical resources (Dotson, 2012, p. 32). An agent uses biased hermeneutical resources when resources used are an ill fit for some social groups’ experiences of the social world, perpetuating epistemic exclusion of those for whom the resources are an ill fit. In using an inapt set of conceptual resources, the ability of other – often marginalised – people to contribute to knowledge is hindered. Contributory injustice resides within a middle-ground “between agential and structural perpetuation of epistemic injustice” (Dotson, 2012, p. 31). It is agential insofar as an agent’s usage of structurally prejudiced resources can act as a catalyst for contributory injustice, and it is structural insofar as biased hermeneutical resources also act as catalysts for contributory injustice.

An example of a contributory injustice would be where someone insists on using the conceptual resources of “banter” or “boys being boys” to describe behaviour that other, less powerful groups (women) are arguing should be described as “sexual harassment.” Where someone now has the conceptual resources to make sense of her experiences in the workplace, if another person insists on using conceptual resources that do not include “sexual harassment,” the use of the former conceptual resources would hinder women’s contributions to shared understandings, as well as preventing them from effectively protesting their experiences .

Dotson asserts that addressing contributory injustice is difficult but possible: it requires not simply adjusting the conceptual resources that one has, but recognising the existence of a range of different conceptual resources or shared meanings and the ability to switch hermeneutical resources. Necessary for this ability is to see the limitations of, and see beyond, any set of hermeneutical resources. Does the critical scrutiny of drill constitute a contributory injustice?

**2.6 – Contributory Injustice in the Scrutiny of Drill Music**

There are readily available frameworks sufficiently influenced by drillers to adequately interpret their work. These frameworks “highlight the importance of local knowledge and familiarity with people and places to interpret the threat levels in online communications” (Ilan, 2020, p. 998). The issue is with how these frameworks are being interpreted and whether there is the right uptake for these conceptual frameworks.

We can identify contributory injustice here because multiple hermeneutical frameworks can make sense of violent drill lyrics. Moreover, contributory injustice highlights that the marginalised, which, in this case, are drillers, have the necessary hermeneutical resources to make sense of their violent lyrics, but these interpretations are shunned. This meets the required components of contributory injustice, since agents are wilfully ignorant in maintaining and utilising structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources in seeing the music as violent autobiographies. This thwarts drillers’ ability to contribute to shared knowledge.

Ilan emphasises the need for “street-literate” interpretations of violent drill lyrics (Ilan, 2020). Street literacy was developed by Dwight Conquergood (2005) to show how gangs could accurately decipher meanings within graffiti that others could not. Ilan has extended this notion to drill in arguing that state authorities and the media do not properly interpret what is being communicated by drill artists. These agents’ street illiteracy both produce and contribute to ongoing dynamics of suspicion between marginalised black populations and agents of criminal justice, enabling the counterproductive and prejudiced policies seen in the first section.

Where the relevant authorities and parties take drill as a glorification of and precipitation to crime, Ilan suggests this street-illiterate interpretation must be replaced with an understanding of drill’s relationship to violence as “complex rather than causal” (Ilan, 2020, p. 1002). As Kubrin explains, “lyrics are discursive actions or artefacts that help construct an interpretive environment where violence is appropriate and acceptable,” but she emphasises this does not mean music causes violence (Kubrin 2005, as quoted in Ilan 2020, 1002). A rigorous and informed interpretation of street culture and street expressivity is necessary to understand these lyrics in a non-marginalising way.

A street-literate interpretation of drill identifies realism – the non-fictional interpretative lens – as just one framework for interpreting drill. Quinn identifies other frames that disrupt this realist frame. For example, drill is filled with braggadocio, where drillers use well-established rhetorical devices to present the persona of the “badman.” Further, It is a popular youth form of entertainment and is heavily fictional. An aspiration to emulate their rap heroes and gain rap recognition to get paid drives drill’s violent content.

For instance, many drillers cultivate an image of street authenticity to sell their music. As Ilan puts it, “cultivating a violent reputation… raises rappers in an economy of street-cultural standing, affirming them as more authentic” (Ilan, 2020, p. 1004). Drillers know that being perceived as a strong, unwavering and genuine criminal type can cause success in the music business, which generates income. Authenticity is cultivated from violent lyrics, and authenticity, in turn, progresses drillers from violence. Real-world violence is neither necessary for their performative “street cool” nor does it assist in their pursuit of status and income, since engaging in criminal behaviour can stifle professional progress (Ilan, 2020).

Crucially, a street-literate interpretation of drill understands the rhetoric and conventions being deployed and understands that seeing lyrics as autobiographical is just one lens through which lyrics can be interpreted. Next, I look at the specific ways in which the over-policing of drill and use of drill as evidence in criminal courts constitutes a contributory injustice.

**2.7— Contributory Injustice in the Over-policing of Drill**

The censorship and restriction of drill — through injunctions and militaristic responses — constitutes a form of contributory injustice because extreme measures are being used to prevent drillers and those within the drill scene from contributing to shared hermeneutical resources. This is grounded in wilful hermeneutical ignorance since the police are insisting drill music is violent and, by doing so, are using structurally prejudiced resources causing epistemic harm. This injustice is intensified since agents are not just insisting the music is violent and so resisting “street literate” interpretive resources, but are also using state force to limit drill. This means that important knowledge is not available for the shared hermeneutical resources, such as how drillers’ social contexts influence their lyrics. Crucially, the means by which drillers are being prevented from contributing to shared resources is not just via the use of biased hermeneutical resources describe but via the enforcement power of the state –constituting a contributory injustice.

**2.8 — Contributory Injustice in Criminal Courts**

The use of drill lyrics and videos in criminal courts constitutes a form of contributory injustice since prosecutors are presenting evidence in street-illiterate ways, such as “autobiographical confessions to crimes, threats of violence or proof of gang affiliation,” through wilful ignorance (Rymajdo, 2020). These street-illiterate interpretations of drill are based on structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources. Where those within the drill scene stress the need for familiarity with rap’s genre codes, so that they do not conflate a violent musical persona with a driller sitting on the dock, they do not receive relevant uptake by the prosecution and jury members. This prevents drillers from contributing to shared knowledge and therefore constitutes a contributory injustice.

The courts do not give uptake to street-literate interpretations of drill. There are two possible competing explanations for this lack of uptake, both of which constitute wilful ignorance, and therefore contributory injustice. First, the authorities are unaware of these street-literate interpretations. Second, they are aware of these street-literate interpretations but continue to use street-illiterate interpretations. I argue for the second explanation.

On the first explanation, it seems that even if agents are unaware of street-literate interpretations, they still ought to be aware of such interpretations. There are readily available resources explaining the importance of street literacy when evaluating hip-hop and its subgenres. And given the consequences of incorrectly interpreting drill lyrics as causing violence—censorship, over-policing and imprisonment—the stakes are very high. This should encourage authorities to avail themselves of these street-literate interpretations given their responsibilities. Moreover, I am not sure that these authorities are unaware of such interpretations. Rap experts, for instance, are found in courts informing the relevant agents of these better interpretations. For these reasons, I think the second explanation for lack of uptake is most plausible. Police officers act as experts on drill for the prosecution. But experts are supposed to offer unbiased opinions and, according to Part 19.4 of the Criminal Procedure Rules: a) where there is a range of opinion on the matters dealt within the report – (i)summarise the range of opinion, and (ii) give reasons for the expert’s own opinion. So if police officers are putting themselves forward as experts, they should at least be aware of the range of opinions and different interpretive lenses when understanding drill.

On the second explanation, it seems that the relevant agents continue to use structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources to interpret drill – in the form of street-illiterate interpretations of drill – despite being aware of less structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources to interpret drill –in the form of street-literate interpretations of drill. The question arises: “why do these agents continue to do this?” I think these actions can be understood as an instance of institutional racism. This can be defined as “processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people” (Fatsis, 2019, p. 1308). When understood as discriminatory actions, such as over-policing, censorship and using lyrics as character evidence, institutional racism becomes “a prime suspect” in the lack of uptake by relevant authorities and the criminalisation of drill.

Where a street-illiterate interpretation insists drill lyrics are literal and autobiographical truth, street-literate readings require a deeper understanding of drill music where stereotypes about black male criminality do not substitute detailed knowledge of street expressivity and street culture. Consequently, these critiques of drill appear to be partly rooted in existing patterns of stereotyping disadvantaged black urban boys and men as violent criminals who lack the intellectual or aesthetic prowess to engage in deep and abstract artistic expression. These sorts of stereotypes involved in testimonial injustice are also at work here, compounding the difficulty for the drillers being believed.

Furthermore, the use of structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources criminalising black boys and men, blames drillers for promoting violence they are victims of. Interpreting violent drill lyrics “as a desired individual lifestyle, instead of an ugly fact of social life” is a useful tool for the state because it criminalises drillers for the unequal social circumstances they are found in (Fatsis, 2019, p. 1309). However, this wrongly places the responsibility for insufficient public provision onto individuals rather than the state. In utilising street-illiterate interpretations that emphasise the threat of violent lyrics to public safety, authorities blame black art forms for the state’s failure to uphold public safety and wellbeing. This is an effective move by authorities who are reluctant to develop policies improving the unjust social arrangements and conditions of drillers. This victim-blaming also reinforces the racist stereotypes identified in the section on testimonial injustice[[10]](#footnote-10).

**2.9 — Pre-emptive Testimonial Injustice**

In this section, I consider a further kind of epistemic injustice found in the use of generalisations about the evidential value of rap music, and the inferences made on the basis of it, which Federico Picinali terms pre-emptive testimonial injustice (Picinali, 2024). Picinali's starting point is the recognition that adjudicators often rely on generalisations, such as «if there is flight from the scene of the crime, the person fleeing is guilty,» to assess the relevance and probative value of an item of evidence (Picinali, 2024, p. 6). Evidence is relevant if it is logically probative, i.e., making the matter which requires proof more or less probable, and it has probative value if the relevant evidence alters the probability of the matter which requires proof. Generalisations like «if there is flight from the scene of the crime, the person fleeing is guilty» require the adjudicator to estimate the probability of guilt given the defendants' flight –posterior probability of guilt—against the probability of guilt if the defendant had not fled the scene –prior probability of guilt. If the posterior probability of guilt is greater than the prior probability of guilt, then the evidence is incriminating (Picinali, 2024, p. 6).

Generalisations like this originate from the rationalist tradition, where judgments about guilt and assessments of relevance and probative value are based on the available stock of knowledge or propositions to assess evidentiary items. Whilst Picinali does not say much about what constitutes a stock of knowledge, I take it to be the available set of known propositions, putative facts about the world, described with particular concepts; inferences made from some of those facts; normative structures that rank what is a good/bad reasons are all included in a stock of knowledge. Picinali, however, claims that the rationalist tradition has paid insufficient attention to the variability of experience and, therefore, stocks of knowledge, across society and from person to person. The rationalist tradition assumes only one stock of knowledge and has not accommodated for the unfairness of evidentiary reasoning due to the variability of stocks of knowledge. For instance, where a black youth fleeing the crime is seen as incriminating by a white police officer, this ignores the competing generalisation according to which a black youth is likely to run from an officer due to fear of suffering injustice at their hands, regardless of involvement in crime. The seeming obliviousness of the rationalist tradition to the variability of stocks of knowledge maintains and contributes to the stock of knowledge of the powerful, "namely white, able-bodied, middle-or upper-class men," being the dominant stock of knowledge in criminal fact-finding (Picinali, 2024, p. 8).

Now, Picinali asserts that given the differences in stocks of knowledge across a society, and depending on what stock of knowledge is considered in assessments of evidentiary items, a party in the proceedings may be a victim of testimonial injustice and, crucially, unfair treatment in the trial. As we have seen in section 2.1 above, testimonial injustice occurs “when a speaker suffers a credibility deficit due to the hearer holding an identity prejudice against a social group to which the speaker belongs” (Picinali, 2024, p. 9, drawing on Fricker, 2007). Picinali is concerned with pre-emptive testimonial injustice, where a hearer's prejudice a priori dismisses a speaker's story, even when the speaker has not said anything. With this notion of testimonial injustice clarified, Picinali moves on to how this affects evidential reasoning. He writes that this occurs:

When the stock of knowledge that a party in the proceeding has qua member of a social group is ignored or discounted due to the adjudicator's identity prejudice against that group (or against another group to which the party belongs) and, as a result, the party's argument about the relevance and the probative value of an item of evidence –argument that relies on such stock of knowledge—receives a credibility deficit (Picinali, 2024, p. 13).

Picinali's focus is on cases where the testimonial injustice is instantiated through discounting or ignoring the stock of knowledge of a party due to membership of a certain social group. He offers the following case of an adjudicator taking rap lyrics as evidence of bad character or gang membership. Picinali argues that this constitutes a testimonial injustice where the defendant utters words contesting this by saying these lyrics are metaphorical and to make money. He also argues that even if the defendant does not utter these words, they still suffer a testimonial injustice but of the pre-emptive sort. On both construals, the defendant would suffer a testimonial injustice were he to have his word or the speech he would offer ignored because of some identity prejudice.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**2.10 – Poetic Injustice**

Finally, I consider a further kind of epistemic injustice involved in how drill is treated in the criminal justice system: poetic injustice. What is striking here is that whilst testimonial injustice involves not having one's testimony taken seriously, this kind of injustice involves being treated as giving testimony when one is not. But they are aspects of the same broader phenomenon: epistemic injustice, broadly construed, whereby people are not respected as epistemic agents. Nowak (2023) compares the reactions from J.R. Cash’s (Johnny Cash) song “Folsom Prison Blues” where Cash sings that he shot a man in Reno just to watch him die with the reactions to Skengdo and AM’s “Attempted 1.0,” in which they rapped broadly similar lyrics (Nowak, 2023). Whilst audience reactions to Cash’s record was generally one of cheer and astonishment at his “skilful creation and depiction of a nihilistic lyrical subject,” AM and Skengdo’s lyrics were taken as "describing violent acts they had participated in and violent intentions they harboured, and the lyrics were used as the basis for legal proceedings against the singers that resulted in convictions" (Nowak, 2023, p. 1). Nowak asserts that when it comes to performances, the most natural position to take involves seeing the speech "produced by an agent whose aims and interests are primarily creative or aesthetic, as opposed to testimonial" (Nowak, 2023, p. 3). However, there seems to be something preventing creativity and aesthetic agency unto rappers unlike other artists.

Nowak calls attention to different ways things can go wrong when we engage agents epistemically. One way is by failing to recognise an agent's participation in a certain kind of activity. Another way is failing to participate in activities with a certain kind of agent that you would participate in if it were someone else. The kind of wrong Nowak is interested in involves “failing to recognise the operation in you of a certain kind of epistemic capacity” (Nowak, 2023, p. 7). Nowak focuses on one capacity in particular, which he sees as fundamental in explaining what goes wrong when the police and prosecutors describe AM and Skengdo’s music as testimonial as opposed to fictive: the capacity to imagine (Nowak, 2023, p. 8). He takes the imaginative activity to be a basic component of our epistemic toolkit, and he follows Shiffrin’s characterisation of imagination in assuming that:

[E]very Individual, rational, human agent qua thinker in community with other thinkers has specific interests in … exercising the imagination. [Each] thinker has a fundamental interest in understanding and intellectually exploring non-existent possible and impossible environments. Such mental activities allow agents the ability to conceive of the future and what could be as well as what could have been. Further the ability to explore the nonexistent and impossible provides an opportunity for the exercise of the philosophical capacities and the other parts of imagination (Shiffrin 2014, p. 86-7, as cited in Nowak, 2023, p. 9).

Nowak asserts that "failing to see someone as an imaginer is to fail to see them as a fully-fledged epistemic agent" (Nowak, 2023, p. 9). If an artist is to describe a scenario they have imagined, but this is taken to be reporting facts, the artist's epistemic activity has been misrepresented in problematic ways. The fundamental issue here is an epistemic one, since by missing the fact that an artist is engaged in imaginative exploration, they are being treated as a less sophisticated agent than is actually the case. Furthermore, in failing to recognise someone as the kind of epistemic agent capable of imaginative exploration, this agent has been failed even more (Nowak, 2023).

Treating lyrics as testimony is incompatible with treating the world described by the lyricist as one imagined by him. Nowak argues that failing to see someone as an imaginer leads to epistemic wrongs, such as "failures to see the person as a producer of knowledge or to allow them to occupy a certain position in an epistemic relationship" (Nowak, 2023, p. 9). He also sees a wrong independent of potential downstream effects; there is a sense in which failing to recognise the role of imagination in an artist's work undervalues them as an epistemic agent. Recall, Shiffrin's quote that imaginative exercise is a "fundamental interest" held by "every individual, rational, human agent qua thinker in community with other thinkers" (Shiffrin 2014, p. 86-7, as cited in Nowak, 2023, p. 9). To treat an agent's song as credible testimony will, therefore, involve cutting a rapper out of his community, seeing him as a less than fully empowered epistemic agent (Nowak, 2023).

Nowak argues that thinking Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues” involves testimony stretches credibility, since normal listeners will likely recognise this is a work of fiction. The contrasting response by the police and prosecutors to AM and Skengdo’s “Attempted 1.0” is stark. They hear not creative fiction, but rather testimony about what the artists were involved in or what they might be involved in. These differences in reaction reveals how social identity prejudice affects an audience's willingness or ability to see someone as an imaginer (Nowak, 2023). Nowak recognises that prejudices to do with an artist's class or education might have something to do with this lack of imaginative assignment, but the most obvious explanation is that this has to do with how they are racialised. Regardless of exactly how the social prejudices play out, Nowak takes AM and Skengdo to be subjected to an epistemic injustice he calls "poetic injustice:"

Poetic injustice is the distinctive subspecies of epistemic injustice that occurs when an agent is undermined, insulted, or otherwise underestimated as an imaginer in virtue of a social identity prejudice (Nowak, 2023, p. 10).[[12]](#footnote-12)

So far, I have introduced four different kinds of epistemic injustice and made the case that each can occur in relation to drill. This lays the foundations for the work of the next chapter, where I evaluate which framework is the most helpful for engaging with critiques of drill music, and for providing strategies for remedying epistemic injustice that drillers face. In doing so, I consider their utility in responding to a commonly heard objection to the lines of argument I have developed: that rap music does, in fact, evidence violence, and so these forms of epistemic injustice are not committed.

**Chapter 3: The Evidencing Claim: (Part 2)**

In the last chapter, I introduced four kinds of epistemic injustice, and showed how each might manifest in relation to drill. In this chapter, I develop this work by showing how each kind of epistemic injustice can respond to a commonly heard objection to the lines of argument I develop. I also evaluate the limitations of the different frameworks, and consider the resources they have for recommending remedial steps to how drill is treated in the criminal justice system. Section 1 outlines the popular objection to the lines of argument I have developed, that rap music does evidence violence. Section 2 shows how the different forms of epistemic injustice outlined in the previous chapter deals with this objection. Section 3 explains why my preferred framework for understanding the scrutiny of drill epistemic injustice involved is contributory injustice, by drawing attention to limitations of the other frameworks. Section 4 considers what remedies for each kind of epistemic injustice there are, arguing that it is worth pursuing these remedies for the sake of justice and/or tackling each form of epistemic injustice.

**Section 1 – A Popular Response: “But Rap does Evidence Violence! Just Look at….”**

In the last chapter I introduced the evidencing claim: the claim that rap music provides autobiographical evidence of rappers’ violent criminality. I argued that this claim is implicated in epistemic injustice of different kinds: testimonial, contributory, pre-emptive testimonial and poetic injustice.

A popular response to my argument that proponents of the evidencing claim are committing an epistemic injustice is that I have overestimated the extent to which rap is fictional. That is, rappers report the truth in their lyrics even in an autobiographical sense. This is a response that I have heard many times after describing the ways in which the critical scrutiny of drill constitutes an epistemic injustice. A recent example of the pervasiveness of this response comes from a letter written by barrister Sam Trefgarne in response to Ciaran Thapar’s Guardian article on the use of rap evidence in criminal proceedings (Trefgarne, 2023). Trefgarne asserts that drill lyrics “are often confessional” and that “I’m sure most readers would agree that if there was evidence against someone suggesting that they had committed a serious violent offence that they now denied, a jury should be able to hear that they have written and sung about that very offence in its aftermath” (Trefgarne, 2023). Trefgarne’s comments highlight the popularity of this response.

Proponents of this response claim this view has substantial reasons to support it. One reason is that rappers themselves, dating from the beginning of rap in the South Bronx and around New York have claimed that one of rap’s good consequences is that it reports what is going on in Black and Latinx communities. Chuck D of Public Enemy said that “Rap is Black America’s CNN” (Light, 2004, p. 141). For instance, in Lil Wayne’s song “Georgia Bush” was dedicated to the former president George Bush. Wayne voiced his frustration at the exceptionally slow reaction by the George W. Bush administration to Hurricane Katrina. He was particularly vocal about how the most vulnerable and adversely affected people were poor and black. “Then they tellin’ y’all lies on the news/The white people smilin’ like everythin’ cool/But I know people that died in that pool/ I know people that died in them schools” (Genius, 2006). Shelby (2016) has written on how political rap can serve as a form of impure political dissent for black people by “1) openly affirm self-respect, 2) publicly pledge loyalty to the oppressed 3) and to explicitly withhold loyalty from the state” (Shelby, 2016, p. 268). We might think that a reason rap can serve these functions is that it describes real-world events.

A second reason to believe rap evidences real-world events, including violence, is because success in the rap industry since NWA’s second album topped the Billboard sales charts in the early 1990s has depended on whether rap artists maintained the idea that their songs portrayed actual rather than fictional events (Dyson, 2007). For example, 50 Cent exposed that Rick Ross’ music did not correspond to a life of a drug lord because he was actually a correctional officer who worked in the penitentiary. This went some way to diminishing Rick Ross’ career. Other US rap artists such as Jay-Z, Slim Thug and Big Pun gained popularity not only because their albums were musically excellent, but also because they made claims in their music about drug dealing and the like that audience’s accept as actually true not merely fiction loosely based on how things go on in their neighbourhoods. A prominent example of this is 50 Cent. That 50 Cent was shot and survived added credibility to his tales of selling crack in South Side of Jamaica Queens. His career consisted in marginal success up to this point.

Regarding drill, when drill collective “CGM” were asked what their influences and motivations were for making drill music, one of the members answered “man just rap about what man’s living innit or what man’s lived” (Media, 2022). They were then asked how they balance keeping the police off their back and “letting fans know they are the real deal?” One member responded that they have to “keep blurring shit” (Media, 2022). They were then hailed by “Fumez the Engineer” as being the ones who pioneered blurring incriminating things in their raps (Media, 2022). They agreed saying that they grew up listening to Chicago drill and Chicago drillers were not blurring anything, but increased police surveillance and pressure from the families of the people who did not like what they rapping about led to self-censorship. They then said that they do not air out as much as they could on the internet and their music, unlike other drillers. It can often seem as though asserting that rap is mostly fictional goes against the majority view. For instance, Hancox (2018) writes that

“Sadly, it’s simply not correct to say the music is always “just art” and its storytelling is unconnected to what may happen on the streets. Local fans paying close attention to the genre know about the actual beefs between crews from rival estates and drill is marked out from other genres by the level of specific IRL descriptions of some of the threats, clashes and retributions” (Hancox, 2018).

A popular example of how drill is allegedly connected to the streets is found in Headie One and RV’s “Know Better” (TV, 2018). Irving Adjei better known as “Headie One” is a famous North London driller. One of his most famous drill songs has been postulated by many as reflecting a series of events –including shootings in Wood Green— that occurred over two days. Allegedly, Adjei took a trip to Bedfordshire University to perform at a show. After the show, he was confronted, assaulted and chased off the campus by a group of men –allegedly a part of a Wood Green gang. When a video detailing the events was uploaded to snapchat, many drill fans saw this a serious violation or “L” (loss) for Headie One. The day after this event a shooting took place in Wood Green –where a 19 year old was shot but survived. RV –an alleged member of a rival gang/music collective “OFB” of which Headie One is an alleged member— in the immediate aftermath of the shooting was seen dissing Wood Green on social media. A day after this shooting, Headie One and RV released “Know Better” which featured numerous lyrics apparently related to the incident at Bedfordshire University and the alleged revenge shooting occurring the day after (Lore Ross, 2021). Fans suggest lyrics such as “They say I took an L in L [took a loss in Luton (Bedfordshire University)], but shh made a W in W [a fellow gang member made a win in Wood Green with the shooting]” show that this song evidences acts of serious violence (TV, 2018). Headie One’s use of “shh” to replace potentially incriminating words also suggests he is a pioneer of self-censorship in drill.

The upshot of this is that where police and prosecutors have been too quick to count rap as autobiographical, I have been too quick to count rap as being fictional and not evidencing violence. There are good reasons to think that a significant number of rap artists take themselves to report facts, not fictional stories, in their music. This view is either incompatible or in deep tension with the view I am presenting to which a significant number of rap artists do not communicate facts through their music. In what follows, I take up and respond to this concern. This leads me to a deeper evaluation of which notion of epistemic injustice is most helpful for diagnosing the problems with the evidencing claim.

**Section 2 – How Do the Different Forms of Epistemic Injustice Deal With this Objection**

This response mischaracterises my commitments. I am not claiming that all rap artists present their drill as fictional, or even that most rap artists do. As seen above there is reason to think that drillers often claim their music communicates fact, not fiction. My claims about the critical scrutiny of drill and by extension rap is more nuanced than this; the idea is that our default understanding of drill music should not be to see it as autobiographical, and that os what involves these forms of epistemic injustice. Crucially, I think my claims about testimonial and contributory injustice still stand. I proceed by showing how testimonial and contributory injustice stand up to this objection, before going on to show how Picinali’s pre-emptive testimonial and Nowak’s poetic injustice stand up to this concern.

**2.1 – Testimonial Injustice**

My claim about testimonial injustice pertains to the cases where drillers explicitly say that their work is fictional, but still police officers and officers of the court are not believing them. It seems plausible given the prevalence of racism in law enforcement –institutional and agential – that deflated credibility assignments are based in racist stereotypes.

Perhaps a challenge would be that the people who say their work is non-fiction are sufficiently pervasive that it informs the stereotype of rap artists reporting fact. This might make the default conception of rap artists people telling authentic stories about their lives, so when the drillers say that their work is fictional and are not believed, it is not because of racist stereotypes about criminality, but rather some default assumptions about rap artists that are supposedly empirically grounded. So it is not a testimonial injustice given it is not based in negative identity prejudices.

We have two explanations for why drillers claiming their work is fictional are not believed. First, testimonial injustice based in racist stereotypes. Second, the Met and prosecutors are not believing these drillers because of generalisations based on the default assumption that drillers are telling authentic stories about their lives. I think both explanations are plausible. However, even if it is the case that sometimes these agents are not believing drillers because of default assumptions about authenticity, this is not incompatible with my view that at least sometimes their inability to believe drillers is based in racist stereotypes. All that is needed to make my claim stick is that at least sometimes, it is based in racist stereotypes. Moreover, sometimes the default assumption will itself be based in racist stereotypes (rather than, e.g., acquaintance with statistical data about the fictive components of drill).

Furthermore, the first explanation seems more plausible given the prevalence of racism in UK society and the often explicit and implicit targeting of black art. This can be seen in how rap lyrics can activate bias in potential jurors (Powers, 2015) and the documented institutionalised racism in both the Met and system of courts (Lammy, 2017) (Macpherson, 1999). This gives us reason to see the Met and prosecution’s deflated credibility assignments based in racist stereotypes, constituting a testimonial injustice.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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**2.2 – Contributory Injustice**

Regarding contributory injustice, my argument does not commit me to the view that the correct interpretation of all rap music is to see it as fictional. Rather, I am committed to the view that there are multiple interpretative frameworks through which we can analyse rap music, and the police’s and court’s insistence on a realist interpretative lens of rap music irrespective of the musician’s claims and of audience’s understandings, constitutes a contributory injustice. Again, this is consistent with the view that the intended meaning of an artist will be hard to determine. As we will see later, I take it that rap experts and not the police should be tasked with the role of interpreting lyrics (if they are to be used in criminal courts or to censor a rap artist) because their knowledge of the conventions of rap will better-place them to understand whether lyrics should be taken as evidencing violence or fictive.

Erik Nielson details two times in which he was acting as a rap expert in criminal trials and was presented by the prosecution with lyrics from Jay-Z’s song “December 4th” (Nielson, 2022). The prosecution’s aim here was to undermine the idea of rap as fiction. Nielson asserts that this line of presentation/questioning –“but rap is autobiographical! Just look at…” – by the prosecution is one that any expert should expect and be prepared for” (Nielson, 2022, p.458). It is true that Jay-Z has described “December 4th” as autobiographical, containing factual details about his early life, parents, and time dealing drugs. Prosecutors and critics more broadly will use examples like this and ones above to undermine a fictional interpretation of rap. However, there is a way in which we can reconcile rap as autobiography and rap as fiction. One approach recognised by Nielson is to cite analogues from different genres. Historical fiction is particularly interesting and applicable to rap. Historical fiction involves characters, events and settings based on historical records. Simultaneously, however, many characters, settings, events and other details will be completely fictional, which makes fiction layered upon facts. As such, “we would never substitute a work of historical fiction for a history textbook in schools, though, because the factual elements don’t alter the fictional nature of the text” (Nielson, 2022, p.458). Moreover, it may not always be clear which the factual elements are.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Drill and rap more broadly work the same way. Murray Forman demonstrates that rappers in the US “emphasise their local topographies, often highlighting actual streets, intersections, neighbourhoods or businesses in their lyrics and videos” (Forman, 2002, as cited in Nielson, 2022, p. 458). As we have seen, the same is true for UK rappers. Drillers often represent their local areas, taunt rivals and so forth. As Nielson puts it, “While the focus on spatiality and accurately representing locality characterises much of rap music, rappers’ fidelity to their environments does not necessarily extend to the actions they depict within these environments” (Nielson, 2022, p.458). Crucially, I argue that to assume a realist interpretation as a default assumption of rap music is a form of contributory injustice.

**2.3 – Pre-emptive Testimonial Injustice**

Similar to contributory injustice, I do not think Picinali’s argument commits him to the view that all rap music is fictional. Rather –like my argument about contributory injustice— Picinali recognises that there are many stocks of knowledge we could use to make sense of violent rap lyrics, and assuming the realist generalisation that someone who writes lyrics and raps about violent crime, drugs and gangs is criminal or “has a propensity to act violently towards other people, in particular, members of other gangs and crews” (Picinali, 2024, p.15) is correct, does not account for other more informed interpretations. In assuming this realist generalisation, the adjudicator ignores the rules and conventions of the genre of rap, according to which rapping about violent gangs and drugs is an effort to construct a credible street persona and undertake successful commerce, and this can be seen as due to their identity prejudice, associating black youth with street violence. When adjudicators rely on the stock of knowledge that “people who write lyrics about gangs and guns are likely to be a gang member and have a propensity to act violently to other gangs or crews,” there is another stock of knowledge we can use to challenge the aforementioned generalisation. For instance, consider the generalisation: “where a rapper pens lyrics about gangs and guns, they are looking to build a street credible persona, undertaking successful commerce and voicing frustrations at their living conditions,” this stock of knowledge reflects the experience of rappers and those within the rap industry who emphasise the need for familiarity with rap’s conventions to avoid conflating a musical persona and performance with a driller sitting in the dock. Consequently, to default to the generalisation about rap music being factual is a pre-emptive testimonial injustice, since it ignores other generalisations which see rap as fictional.

**2.4 – Poetic Injustice**

Recall poetic injustice occurs when an agent is undermined, insulted, or otherwise underestimated as an imaginer in virtue of a social identity prejudice (Nowak, 2023, p. 10). I think Nowak could respond to this objection by emphasising that he is not making the point that all drill music is fictional, but rather that not seeing young black male drillers as engaged in the epistemic capacity of imagination makes it easy to miss that there are ways -- other than seeing it as autobiographical – to make sense of violent drill music. This seems wholly consistent with the view that not every instance of drill rap music is fictive.

**Section 3 — Limitations to Identifying the Scrutiny of Drill as Testimonial/Pre-Emptive Testimonial and Poetic Injustices**

I have presented four kind of epistemic injustice and argued each might be involved in drill. I have qualified what this commits us to. My preferred framework for understanding the kind of epistemic injustices involved is that of contributory injustice. In this section, I explain why, drawing attention to the limitations of the other three frameworks. This is not to say they lack utility, just that there are merits to considering contributory injustice, namely that it is not susceptible to the kinds of objections the other three are susceptible to.

**3.1 – Testimonial and Pre-emptive Testimonial Injustice**

To verify the occurrence of a pre-emptive testimonial/testimonial injustice in the case of rap lyrics being used as evidence, Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez (2022) claim that three facts must be established. First, it needs to be established that the hearer has an identity prejudice (which they may or may not be aware of). Second, this identity prejudice needs to cause the unjustified credibility deficit. Third, it needs to be shown there is in fact a credibility deficit.

Starting with the first condition, Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez argue that we should understand identity prejudice as implicit, since identity prejudice is usually discussed where the hearer is unaware of identity prejudice that might cause them to give a deflated credibility assignment. They also define implicit prejudice as stable associations between, for instance, racialised words and evaluative attributes. Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez reason that this definition is consistent with how identity prejudice is defined by Fricker. For instance, they see implicit prejudice as preserving their identity through time, claiming identity prejudices are “resistant to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment” making them “epistemically culpable” (Fricker 2007, p.35, as cited in Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez, 2022). They also see Fricker’s primary preventative solution, which is based on personal virtues, as supporting the interpretation of bias as a stable personal trait. Moreover, implicit prejudice is usually detected through implicit measures, such as implicit associations tests (IATs). However, they argue that if implicit measures captured stable traits like the negative identity prejudice of testimonial injustice, there should not be considerable fluctuation in results over time, i.e., they should have high test-retest reliability. However, Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez cite multiple studies that suggest low correlations between a person’s score on implicit measures across time. They conclude that all these studies suggest implicit bias fails the reliability test for stable traits. The implication of this for testimonial injustice is that implicit measures are not indicating that hearers have the type of identity prejudice necessary for testimonial injustice, namely stable traits.

Moreover, the low predictive validity of implicit measures for testing the causal relationship between an implicit measure and judgements/behaviours shows that, even if we were to trust that an implicit measure indicates a hearer has an implicit prejudice (in the way implied by Fricker), there is no evidence of a causal connection between the implicit measure and the hearer's judgement (Arcila-Valenzuela & Páez, 2022, p. 6-7). The upshot of Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez’s analysis is that we cannot know whether there has been a testimonial injustice in the specific cases myself and Picinali identifies. For instance, in the case of mine and Picinali’s argument that rappers suffer a testimonial injustice when their words receive a credibility deficit or stocks of knowledges are ignored in criminal courts, we cannot know a testimonial injustice has occurred in these cases because i) we do not know that the adjudicator holds an implicit prejudice in the way implied by Fricker –a stable identity trait; ii) even if they held this prejudice, it is not clear that this is causing the deflated assignment of credibility to rappers’ testimony or it is causing their stocks of knowledge to be ignored. Crucially, more needs to be done to defend the view that a testimonial injustice is occurring given the low test-retest reliability of implicit measures –implying it’s not a stable trait— and the low predictive validity –implying identity prejudice such as racism is not causing the deflated credibility assignment[[15]](#footnote-15).

Regarding the third condition of testimonial injustice, Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez argue that on a popular sense in which we can understand what a credibility deficit means here –«minimum credibility thesis» – it is far from clear whether we can determine a credibility deficit (Arcila-Valenzuela & Páez, 2022, p. 9). The minimum credibility deficit thesis states that there is a minimum degree of credibility that the speaker should have been given by the hearer, given the available evidence. However, Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez argue it is doubtful that such a minimum credibility amount in a given context exists, given that testimonial exchange is heavily personally, socially and culturally contextualised. Crucially, there is no neutral situation or context in which a minimum amount of credibility owed to the speaker can be established. Moreover, even if it could be argued that factoring in the personal, social and cultural factors into context might restore the idea of a normative minimum amount of credibility, there would not be a general epistemic standard for credibility, which Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez argue would render all talk of a credibility deficit meaningless, since there would be a sense in which all credibility assessment is as good as the other as long as no prejudice is involved.

The upshot of Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez’s analysis for mine and Picinali’s argument-that drillers like Loski suffer a testimonial injustice-is that we cannot be sure what is going on when an adjudicator discounts his testimony or uses a stock of knowledge that is unreflective of a party’s experience is caused by identity prejudice. In particular, it will be difficult to ascertain whether this amounts to a testimonial injustice given that uncertainty about whether the three conditions establishing a testimonial injustice have been/can be met.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**3.2 – Poetic Injustice**

I think that Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez’s concerns about establishing the occurrence of a testimonial injustice also apply to Nowak’s notion of poetic injustice. To verify the occurrence of a poetic injustice in the case of rap lyrics, it needs to be shown that first, the hearer has an identity prejudice. Second, the identity prejudice causes the agent to be underestimated as an imaginer. Third, it needs to be shown that the agent is “undermined, insulted, or otherwise underestimated as an imaginer” (Nowak, 2023, p. 10). I take this to mean that there is a deficit in the imaginative capacity assigned to an agent and the full imaginative capacity would have been assigned to them but for the social identity prejudice.

Starting with conditions one and two, Nowak has not given us any description on what social identity prejudice consists in. If we take social identity prejudice to be synonymous with negative identity prejudice, trying to establish singular cases of poetic injustice will be hard for the same reasons stated above. That is, if Nowak takes social identity prejudice as a stable trait, the low test-retest reliability to implicit measures suggests we do not hold social identity prejudice in this way. Moreover, when law enforcement undermine, insult or underestimate the imaginative capacities of drillers, we cannot really know whether this is caused by the social identity prejudice given the low predictive validity of implicit measures.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Regarding the third condition –questions over what a credibility deficit consists in – when Nowak claims drillers like AM and Skengdo suffer a poetic injustice, they are not treated as sophisticated imaginative agents due to their social identity prejudice about black people. What does it mean to treat a driller like a sophisticated imaginative agent? It seems that assigning the “right amount” of epistemic imagination to them would be a crucial starting point. However, it seems that trying to pin down what the right amount of imaginative agency to assign to drillers will run into many of the same issues we saw with trying to elucidate what a credibility deficit consists in. For instance, we can say there is a minimum amount of imaginative agency that must be assigned to drillers given the evidence –I’ll call this the minimum imagination thesis. There does not seem to be an independent neutral context that is not personally, culturally and socially situated in which a minimum amount of imaginative agency owed to a speaker can be established.

Perhaps, as per Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez’ request, a minimum amount of imaginative agency can be retained if we factor in personal, cultural and social values. The required assignment of imaginative capacity would be what a person reaches in the absence of implicit prejudice. This might mean that for a socially and culturally situated hearer, the required minimum of imaginative capacity to be assigned to a speaker would be what they would reach in the absence of implicit prejudice. However, this would mean there is no epistemic standard of imaginative capacity, since any assessment of imagination becomes as good as any other as long as there is no prejudice involved. Crucially, without a normative standard of imaginative capacity, talk of imagination deficits are rendered meaningless. Moreover, Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez argue that the minimum imaginative capacity deficit thesis could lead to absurdity. This is because a higher degree of imagination might be attributed to a speaker by a prejudiced individual than that of an unprejudiced individual who has an very high epistemic aversion to risk (Arcila-Valenzuela and Páez, 2022, p.10). Consequently, the minimum imaginative capacity thesis fails because if the standard is understood in terms of degrees of imaginative capacity, there would not be a way to set up a minimum standard of imaginative capacity that renders the notion of imagination deficit sensible. Further, defining the standard as the absence of prejudice results in a loss of normative force, since doing so does not provide us with any independent standards to evaluate whether there is any prejudice.

The upshot of this is that we cannot know whether a poetic injustice has occurred in the cases where law enforcement are taking drillers’ lyrics are taken as testimony. First, we would not know whether an agent holds an implicit prejudice against drillers, if by social identity prejudice Nowak means stable traits. Second, it is not clear that the social identity prejudice would cause the unfair assignment of an imaginative capacity to drillers. Third, there does not seem to be a sensible way in which we can know what the right assignment of imagination to drillers would be.

**3.3 – The Benefit of the Contributory Injustice Framework**

It seems that contributory injustice does not face the same issues testimonial and poetic injustice face. Recall that a contributory injustice occurs when an agent uses or maintains structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources thwarting a knower’s ability to contribute to shared epistemic resources. In the case of drill music, this involves law enforcement agents using hermeneutical resources which see drill music as literal, but this ignores how those within the drill scene see drill music –not always literal, sometimes expressive and fictional. Agents thereby thwart drillers’ ability to contribute to shared knowledge. Unlike testimonial or poetic injustice, contributory injustice does not rely on the presence of identity prejudice (and the ability to accurately attribute this) or a plausible concept of what a credibility deficit/ imaginative capacity deficit is.

Moreover, it seems that contributory injustice can easily account for pre-emptive testimonial injustice if we take these objections seriously. Whether a testimonial injustice occurs (and whether we are ever in a position to know either way), I argue that a contributory injustice occurs when adjudicators rely on generalisations that do not reflect the experience and stock of knowledge of a party and, therefore, contributes to the epistemic exclusion of said party. To see this, consider Picinali's example of an adjudicator relying on the generalisation “if flight from the scene then (infer) guilt” (Picinali, 2023, p.8). The adjudicator may not have paid attention to the fact that stocks of knowledge and experience differ across a society, so where a black youth fleeing is incriminating to a white police officer, this ignores the competing generalisation that black youth are likely to run from the scene of a crime out of fear of suffering an injustice at the hands of a police officer. This competing generalisation –”if flight from the scene then (infer attempt to seek) safety”— does not receive the right uptake by the adjudicator. We can think of this in terms of contributory injustice since there are different hermeneutical resources that we can use to make sense of black youth's experience of the world, such as differing generalisations about a black youth fleeing from the scene of the crime. However, the adjudicator uses hermeneutical resources that are unreflective of the collective experience of black youth by going with the generalisation “flight from the scene then guilty.” As a result, they perpetuate epistemic exclusion since they contribute to, maintain and utilise the stock of knowledge of the powerful in criminal fact finding. Crucially, we can accommodate cases of pre-emptive testimonial injustice within the framework of contributory injustice, and in doing so we can avoid the burdens and limitations that the frameworks of testimonial and poetic injustice face.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Section 4 – Tackling Epistemic Injustice in Drill Music**

I have presented four kinds of epistemic injustice, and shown that in principle we might find each in relation to how drill is treated in the criminal justice system - in overpolicing and the use of drill music as evidence in criminal courts. I then argued that, in terms of practical application, the framework of contributory injustice is most useful, since it does not depend on establishing that an identity prejudice is causing a deflated credibility assignment or that a stock of knowledge is being ignored due to identity prejudice, or, in the case of poetic injustice, the right of amount of epistemic imagination is not being assigned to them due to social identity prejudice. In the next section, I consider what remedies for each kind of epistemic injustice there are. I show it is worth pursuing these remedies for the sake of justice, whether or not we can decisively prove that testimonial or poetic injustices are being committed, and especially since it appears overwhelmingly the case that contributory injustices are committed by law enforcement agents.

**4.1 – Addressing Testimonial Injustice**

Addressing testimonial injustice requires the pursuit of first-order changes - that is, one that retains the system of epistemic value, but assigns those values differently to agents within that system.[[19]](#footnote-19) Dotson asserts that necessary for the occurrence of a first-order change, in this case, is reform within frameworks where credibility is still authoritative to address the problems of unjustified credibility deficits (Dotson, 2012). Rather than rejecting the idea or value of credibility, first-order change accepts that credibility judgments are valuable, but addresses how credibility is conferred. In other words, we need not change the authority of credibility, but we should make sure people apply it better by redistributing credibility along more equitable lines. Since testimonial injustice is often, as Fricker describes a transactional injustice –injustice involving the errors individuals make in their interactions—tackling testimonial injustice often requires addressing these errors of individuals.

Alison Bailey suggests we can tackle testimonial injustice by pursuing minimal reforms in our interactions with agents to redistribute credibility along more equitable lines (Bailey, 2014, p. 64). For instance, Bailey suggests implicit bias tests can be administered to police officers and jury members to show how prejudiced associations can harm people of colour (Bailey, 2014, p. 64). The idea is to make agents more aware of stereotypes they may hold, and what they must do about it to avoid associations influencing judgements and behaviours. With drill, it seems that making the relevant police and court agents aware of implicit bias might be an important step towards tackling testimonial injustice in criminal courts and over-policing. For instance, when Met officers are reviewing whether to censor a drill song, or when the prosecution and jury partake in a trial, they could take an implicit association test (IAT) –measuring the strength of associations between concepts— beforehand to measure the extent to which they associate black people with negative-identity prejudices deflating credibility.

However, taking these tests would not be enough –the agents would also have to do something to avoid the associations or undo the stereotypes. Some strategies might include bias reduction techniques, such as implicit bias training. This might involve implementation intentions, which are intentions to think counterstereotypical thoughts in particular contexts (Stewart and Payne 2008, as cited in Holroyd and Saul, 2017). For instance, the relevant agents might focus on implementations involving the believability of drillers, such as, “if a driller explains his drill is fictional, I will think ‘believable.” This is a strategy to avoid the associations operating and influencing judgements of the relevant agents.

Bailey’s suggestion for tackling implicit bias is individualistic insofar as they focus attention on correcting individuals’ minds and behaviours. However, such individualistic approaches do not consider the environment in shaping people’s behaviour. Structural approaches, on the other hand, pay attention to the problematic societies forming our problematic associations and prejudices. Instead of fixing our minds’ problematic associations between social groups and negative traits, we fix the environments that form these associations.[[20]](#footnote-20) Academics often stress the need for structural remedies to injustices, even when the injustices are transactional, like many forms of testimonial injustice. By shifting attention to structural approaches, we tackle testimonial injustice by erasing the stereotypes that deflate credibility. These structural remedies should not be read as competing with individualistic remedies to epistemic injustice, but rather as complementary and necessary to tackle epistemic injustice holistically. For instance, many structural remedies provide the conditions that enable individualistic remedies to work. Moreover, attending to how individual and structural injustices interact, and what is needed to address them, enables deeper analysis of epistemic injustices involved –as I show below when discussing non-standard grammar.

Moreover, Anderson argues that structural forms of testimonial injustice are more prevalent than Fricker acknowledges. For instance, one structural testimonial injustice Anderson identifies is group-credibility deficits (Anderson, 2012, p. 169). Fricker observes that we rely on many credibility markers, some of which are explicitly prejudicial and others having reasonable epistemic uses (Fricker, 2007, p. 71). For instance, education is a marker of credibility and expertise where educated judgement is necessary. Standardised grammar is a sign of education and, therefore, credibility. So, it follows that no transactional testimonial injustice is committed if hearers, where educated judgement is called for, take unstandardised grammar as a marker of a lack of education and, consequently, low credibility.

However, in societies depriving the disadvantaged social groups of access to a good education, the markers assessing credibility will be exclusionary of those groups. At the source of this is a structural injustice in the denial of fair education opportunities. This structural inequality creates other structural injustices in opportunities for speakers to exercise their full epistemic agency.

We see a similar structural testimonial injustice in the case of drillers, since black people often lack access to a good education and are more likely to be excluded and expelled (Mcintyre, Parveen, & Thomas, 2021). Black drillers often lack a good education to begin with, which is compounded by disproportionate rates of exclusion. Therefore, their use of unstandardised grammar could be an effect of these structural injustices. Moreover, where drillers substitute unstandardised grammar for street language or “slang” – coded communication between the street literate — this could be understood as a response to how they are overpoliced. By developing a street language utilising unstandardised grammar, street-illiterate police will not understand what they discuss and might, therefore, leave them alone.

Addressing these causes of deflated credibility requires at least two things. First, addressing inequities in educational opportunity, and experiences within education. Second, reevaluating whether standardised grammar (vs slang) really is a good marker of credibility. On the first remedy, by improving education, perhaps drillers would obtain the necessary credibility markers making their testimonies believable. Or, at the very least, we should increase the number of scholarships for those from deprived areas to undergo better education. I can imagine this would increase the number of black people in “good schools,” improving their credibility markers like standardised grammar. The idea is not to give up on non-standard grammar, since it might be useful. Rather, drillers could have available these credibility markers –using standardised grammar in interviews and courts (if they choose), but non-standardised in music, if they choose. Further, the integration of black people into these spaces would target bias by exposing people to counterstereotypical exemplars (Holroyd & Saul, 2017).

However, we might think improving the standards of education puts responsibility on black people to get the relevant credibility markers rather than those who discriminate to recognise the stereotypes informing their discrimination. According to the second remedy, we might think there are good reasons not to conform to the dominant markers of credibility, such as standardised grammar, since slang is communicatively effective, in some contexts, and comprises a useful set of hermeneutical resources. Those who hold associations between standardised grammar and credibility should recognise this association can oppress by assuming those using slang are not credible. Therefore, overcoming structural testimonial injustice might involve tackling the association between non-standard grammar and credibility. This might be done by educating those holding these associations about the communicative benefits of slang. It is worth doing these things even if we do not know whether testimonial injustices have been committed. They have independent value.

**4.2 – Addressing Poetic Injustice**

Nowak has not given us any ways to tackle poetic injustice in drill. However, given the similarities between poetic injustice and testimonial injustice, I think that many of the potential measures taken in tackling testimonial injustice can be reformulated as ways to tackle poetic injustice. Recall that poetic injustice occurs when a rapper is undermined, insulted or underestimated as an imaginer due to a social identity prejudice. Testimonial injustice, however, occurs when a rapper is given a deflated level of credibility due to a negative identity prejudice. Now, assuming negative identity prejudice and social identity prejudice map onto the same phenomenon, the crucial difference between the two is that whereas a rapper is underestimated as a source of imagination in poetic injustice, in testimonial injustice, a rapper is underestimated as a source of credibility.

As a result of these similarities, addressing poetic injustice might also require the pursuit of first-order changes, where, rather than rejecting the idea or value of imagination, we need to address how the capacity for imagination is attributed or conferred. In other words, we need not change the value or authority of imagination, but we should make sure people are applying imagination better by redistributing it along more equitable lines. For instance, if, as Nowak argues, differences in an audience’s willingness to see rapper’s like Loski as an imaginer is based in how they are racialised, then we might look to address the errors in individuals that associate blackness with criminality as opposed to sophisticated artistry. Given this, reforms that look to redistribute attributions of the epistemic capacity of imagination along more equitable lines will be suitable.

For instance, requiring adjudicators to take implicit associations tests will be a crucial first step for them to become aware of how their associations might be affecting to whom they attribute the capacity of imagination. And agents can then do something about this awareness, by, for instance, focusing on implementation intentions, such as, “when a rapper talks about crime in his lyrics, I will think he’s engaging his imaginative capacities and not recounting crime he has been involved in.” Also, increasing the demographic diversity in law enforcement might limit the impact of social identity prejudice that stops agents seeing drillers as imaginers.

Again, even though it might be difficult to show poetic injustice has occurred, I think these steps are worthwhile independently, and/or to reduce likelihood of poetic injustice, irrespective of obstacles to ascertaining whether it has in fact occurred.

**4.3 — Addressing Pre-emptive Testimonial Injustice**

Picinali sees the potential of testimonial injustice being committed both by professional –judges— and lay –jury— adjudicators. Starting with measures aimed at the jury, he argues that the enactment of statutory rules excluding or restricting the admissibility of drill music as evidence. The thought is that the jury “will not hear the evidence or will only hear it when the risk that they will commit testimonial injustice in assessing it is sufficiently contained” (Picinali, 2024, p.27). Picinali, however, sees exclusionary rules as a last resort given that it may involve a loss of sound epistemic material. He sees judicial discretion as less radical, whereby judges consider whether there will be significant risk that testimonial injustice will occur. In the case of drill music as evidence, the judge should exclude the lyrics if they consider testimonial injustice is sufficiently likely to be committed by the jury. He notes that this will be a difficult decision for judges to make, but judges are used to making difficult evaluations regarding admissibility. Picinali also considers the use of debiasing material in juries. This, he claims, would be of greater appeal than the two above since it contains “the risk of testimonial injustice without excluding useful epistemic material” (Picinali, 2024, p.27)

Picinali lays out three measures preventing professional judges from committing testimonial injustice. First, he suggests the “overdue” preventative measure of increasing the judiciary’s diversity (Picinali, 2024, p.28). The thought behind this is that a more diverse judiciary would probably limit the impact of identity prejudice on the judicial assessment of rap as evidence. Second, is to encourage or require judges to offer a detailed articulation of the reasoning underpinning their decision to make rap lyrics admissible (Picinali, 2024, p.28). The thought here is that justifying a decision to others deters and exposes prejudice (Picinali, 2024, p.28). The third measure, applying to both judges and jurors, involves adjudicators taking Implicit Association’s Tests. This is done with the hope of becoming aware of one’s implicit biases which might increase their ability to disengage them.

Even though there might be difficulties in establishing the occurrence of pre-emptive testimonial injustice, the strategies Picinali lays out are worth pursuing independently, and/or to reduce the likelihood of pre-emptive testimonial injustice.

**4.4 — Addressing Contributory Injustice in Criminal Courts and Over-policing**

Earlier, I argued that the framework of contributory injustice is the most helpful for diagnosing epistemic injustice in how drill is treated in the criminal justice system. This is because it does not face the same barriers to establishing its occurrence in the scrutiny of drill as the three other epistemic injustices. Here I outline how we might address contributory injustice in the scrutiny of drill.

In the last chapter, I suggested that the use of street-illiterate interpretations of drill substitutes interpretations requiring a deeper comprehension of drill, with stereotypes viewing black boys and men as violent criminals, lacking the intellectual abilities to engage in abstract artistic expression.[[21]](#footnote-21) Consequently, actions by criminal courts and the Met utilising these structurally prejudiced interpretations seem to be partly entrenched in existing patterns of stereotyping. We might, therefore, think reforms addressing stereotypes, as seen above, will go some way to tackling contributory injustice. That is, using measures of implicit bias as individualistic reforms mapping on to problematic stereotypes, as well as structural reforms tackling the very environments in which these stereotypes are formed, might go some way to tackling contributory injustice in criminal courts and over-policing.

One of the benefits of seeing the criminalisation of drill as a contributory injustice, besides its evasion of criticisms aimed at identity prejudice/social identity prejudice based epistemic injustices, is that many of the reforms tackling testimonial and poetic injustice can be reformulated to reforms addressing contributory. Whilst I have suggested that the reforms are independently motivated, they will also be useful strategies for addressing contributory injustice. For instance, the preventative measures for pre-emptive testimonial injustice that Picinali notes, can be reformulated to address contributory injustice. Take the overdue measure of increasing the diversity of the judiciary as a way of preventing professional judges from committing testimonial injustice in their evidential reasoning. Picinali asserts that this would probably limit identity prejudice's impact on the judicial assessment of evidence (Picinali, 2024, p. 28). We can also frame this as a preventative measure regarding contributory injustice. Dotson asserts that addressing contributory injustice requires that one recognises the existence of different hermeneutical resources and that one has the ability to switch between these different conceptual resources and shared meanings. This requires that the agent is able to see beyond and the limitations of any set of hermeneutical resources. Drawing on the work of Mariana Ortega, Dotson highlights «world travel» as a way to address contributory injustice. Ortega writes world-travelling requires we «really listen to peoples' interpretations however different they are from our own» (Ortega 2006, p.69, as quoted in Dotson 2012, p.34). Ortega believes world-travelling would compel us to appreciate genuine differences between peoples, such as differing hermeneutical resources. It seems plausible that increasing the diversity of the judiciary would expose people to different hermeneutical resources or stocks of knowledge based on that person's experience of the world. Exposing people to different hermeneutical resources would probably go some way to limiting their use of biased or unrepresentative hermeneutical resources in their assessments of evidence. The idea is that a more diverse judiciary might mean judges will likely use unbiased hermeneutical resources. For instance, where an entirely white judiciary might see running from the crime scene as a sign of guilt, a more diverse judiciary would likely come across the idea that running does not equal guilt, but rather fear. Whilst increasing the judiciary's diversity seems like an important reform, we should not overestimate the role a diverse judiciary might have in guaranteeing that unbiased hermeneutical resources are used. My focus on contributory injustice makes the limited utility of this strategy clearer: if we have a super diverse judiciary but they are still using the same set of biased hermeneutical resources, we are going to face the same problems. We need it to be the case specifically that a more diverse judiciary disrupts the biased hermeneutical resources used.

In the last chapter, I also looked at institutional racism as a possible explanation of why the police and courts continue to use street-illiterate interpretations of drill despite often being aware of street-literate interpretations of drill. Where this form of racism is embedded within organisations/institutions, it requires institutional reforms. In the context of drill, this might consist of changes to policies and practices of the police and courts to prevent discriminatory actions.

One such reform in criminal courts might involve altering prosecution lawyers’ heavy reliance on police officers to decipher rap evidence before trials and on the stand. Police are often erroneous with their interpretations, which are based on their street illiterate interpretations of drill. Latoya Reisner has compiled a list of cases showing how police and prosecutors “cherry-pick lyrics to suit their agenda” (Reisner, as quoted in Rymajdo, 2020). For instance, Eithne Quinn describes a case she was instructed in, which involved a drive-by shooting on a moped. Police compiled 100 pages of drill verses and presented two references to drive-bys that the prosecution thought to rely on (Quinn, as cited in Rymajdo, 2020). These verses, however, were taken from a song that is explicitly described as rider music to get you “hyped up” (excited). These lyrics show it is club music for entertainment purposes and not to be taken literally. This illustrates how prosecution lawyers ask for literal interpretations of drill rather than seeing violent lyrics as generic conventions of the genre.

Altering the prosecutor’s heavy reliance on the police’s decoding of drill might involve contesting the police’s interpretation of drill with that of “rap experts.” These experts “comment on the relevance of rap evidence to the crime at issue, write reports and sometimes take the stand” (Rymajdo, 2020). So, for instance, where prosecution lawyers want to use lyrics as evidence, they should rely on the interpretations of rap experts, who will have studied the conventions of drill and therefore can offer more street-literate interpretations of lyrics and videos than the police. This addresses contributory injustice by reducing the reliance on biased hermeneutical resources in police interpretations of drill. Crucially, calling upon rap experts instead of the police when decoding drill constitutes an institutional reform aimed at addressing contributory injustice in criminal courts.

To clarify, these rap experts need not recommend that the street-literate interpretation of drill lyrics and videos is always to see them as fictional. Rather, and unlike the police and prosecution, the rap experts will not be motivated to see, or constrained by a limited understanding of drill as, non-fiction, understood only through a realist lens. Instead, they take a holistic approach – a street literate one that identifies the multiple frameworks, conventions and complexities involved in scrutinising drill – to see if they should be used as evidence in criminal trials. Eithne Quinn, for instance, acts as a rap expert. Quinn has written a book on the culture and commerce of gangsta rap, teaches hip hop studies and leads a project on prosecuting rap. Her expertise draws on knowledges of people within the communities that produce the music. She has written extensively on how rap is not black boys and men snitching on themselves, but is located in a long and complex tradition of black art. From influence of slave spirituals, blues and jazz, West African music, urban fiction and “blaxploitation” films of the 1970s (Quinn 2005, as cited in Nielson, 2022). Experts, such as Quinn, will therefore highlight the connections between rap and its artistic predecessors so that it is not dismissed as being illegitimate art. They would also highlight how interpreting the lyrics as best as one can requires specialised knowledge. Nielson, for instance, highlights how hip hop can appear to judges as a “foreign language” (Nielson, 2022, p. 450). Given its popularity, rap should no longer be considered a foreign language, but rap experts should emphasise the point that “rap lyrics do not lend themselves to easy interpretation, particularly for those unfamiliar with its conventions” (Nielson, 2022, p. 450). These conventions are rooted in long traditions of black storytelling and language games, which are rooted in processes of signifying and “the obscuring of apparent meaning” (Gates 1988, p. 53, as cited in Nielson, 450). Nielson highlights how in the signifying tradition “ambiguity is prized, meaning is destabilised, and gaps between the literal and the figurative are intentionally exploited” (Nielson, 2022, p. 450). Therefore, rap “complicates and even rejects literal interpretation (Gates 2010, p. xxv, as cited in Nielson, 450).

Recognising this “rhetorical flexibility” is important to interpreting rap. Moreover, experts would do well to highlight to prosecutors, police and critics “that most, if not all, art forms require some level of expertise to understand fully” (Nielson, 2022, p. 450). Interpreting rap is difficult because rappers often use devices like other poets such as “symbolism, metaphor; they are also highly focused on form, choosing words not only for their meanings and connotations, but also for their place in metre and rhyme scheme of the song” (Nielson, 2022, p. 450). This is complicated by dense slang, fast-delivery, references that are coded and so forth. As Jay Z writes, “the art of rap is deceptive” and lyrics are often permeated with several unresolved sheets of meaning, making it so that “rap retains mystery” (Nielson, 2022, p. 451). Crucially, experts should emphasise “the fluid, often multi-valent nature of rap lyrics in order to illustrate the problem with trying to ascribe fixed meanings to them” (Nielson, 2022, p. 450).

Quinn has also found that the police and the prosecution often have greater resources than the defence counsel, who are often unaware of how to access rap experts to scrutinise police’s decoding. This creates an inequality, placing more power into the hands of Met officers, whose interpretation is unchallenged. An institutional change targeting this inequality would involve criminal courts providing better resources to the defence on acquiring rap experts. Another change would involve getting the rap experts to approach the defence – instead of the defence needing to approach rap experts – seeing if they need help decoding. A prerequisite to this is building a body of experts/encouraging people with the relevant expertise to act as experts. This reform addresses contributory injustice by making clear to the court the limitations of street-illiterate interpretations. This challenges biased hermeneutical resources by presenting alternative sets of hermeneutical resources needed to make proper sense of the lyrics involved.

Another kind of institutional reform in criminal courts might involve changing the kinds of evidence that is admissible for incriminating drillers. Using drill as evidence of bad character is highly prejudicial –not seen in other genres—and often occurs to bolster weak cases. As discussed above, there has been recent discussions about the unfairness of prosecuting drill by using it as evidence of bad-character, low-level involvement and in relation to joint enterprise convictions (Rymajdo, 2020). By stopping reliance on inappropriate evidence, the prosecution is prompted to use the right hermeneutical resources –not ones relying on racist stereotypes. Using the right hermeneutical resources would mean having a proper understanding of what it means to use certain lyrics, and of the social dynamics involved in the drill scene. Therefore, this reform addresses contributory injustice, since avoiding the use of evidence in these ways avoids courts relying on biased hermeneutical resources. Owusu-Bempah has written about the irrelevance and prejudicial effect of using rap as evidence, which she thinks strengthens the case that a serious review of whether rap is admissible is necessary (Owusu-Bempah, 2022).

**The Irrelevance of Rap**

Using rap as evidence relies on illiterate understandings; proper understanding of rap would reveal that it is rarely relevant, as evidence. Only evidence that is relevant is admissible in Criminal Trials. Evidence is relevant “if, but only if, it contributes something to the resolution of one or more of the issues in the case” (Myers v R [2015] UKPC 40 at [37], as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 435). Put more simply evidence is only admissible “if it increases or decreases the probability of the existence of a fact” (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 435). Rap is said to be relevant in proving a defendant’s state of mind, which includes their intention and motive, or rap can be used to rebut a defence, by proving innocent presence at the crime scene (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). As we have seen rap - drill in particular - is often used as propensity evidence or to link defendants to gangs, and whilst the courts have readily relied on literal interpretations of rap whilst doing this, there has been question marks over whether rap is relevant evidence of a crime. Owusu-Bempah asserts that rap can rarely be relevant evidence of a crime, and would moreover, need to be very specific before it can be considered to have probative value (Owusu-Bempah, 2022). This is because rap cannot tell us much or anything about a person’s dispositions and actions, nor can rap be used to establish a propensity towards violence or using firearms. Taking rap as telling us about dispositions, actions and propensities relies on a street-illiterate interpretation of rap as containing statements of fact which can be attributed to rappers. But this position overlooks the many reasons not to take lyrics and videos as reporting facts, which includes the research suggesting rap is more likely to be taken literally than other genres. [[22]](#footnote-22) As Owusu-Bempah puts it, “the conventions of the genre can make it impossible to distinguish fact from fiction” (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 436).

Moreover, the specificity of lyrics seems to have little bearing on determinations of relevance (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 437). Connections between lyrics and details of an offence would seem to be the most obvious factor affecting rap’s relevance to a criminal charge. As Owusu-Bempah puts it

If there is a strong and irrefutable connection, the evidence may be probative of guilt. This might occur where the defendant wrote lyrics which refer accurately to the specific events which make up the subject matter of the charge (with, for example, reference to names, dates and locations), and include information that was not in the public domain, shared in the local community or otherwise easily accessible to the defendant. Here, the lyrics may be relevant because they demonstrate intimate knowledge of the offence, and someone with such knowledge might be more likely to have been involved in the offence than someone without such knowledge (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 437).

Even where there is specificity, however, there must be an alertness towards misinterpretation. Yet, it seems that in most cases the lyrics that prosecutors are adducing are not meeting this level of specificity. That is, prosecutors are using lyrics that reference violence, guns and gangs rather than lyrics that reference specific crimes. But as has been argued in this chapter, lyrics referencing guns, gangs and violence cannot tell much about a person’s dispositions, actions and propensities (Owusu-Bempah, 2022).

**Prejudicial Affect of Rap**

Regardless of whether rap is rarely relevant evidence, relevant evidence can still be excluded if it would unduly prejudice a jury against a defendant (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 439). According to section 78 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, evidence should be omitted where admission would adversely effect the fairness of the proceedings. More specifically, it is appropriate to think of the prejudicial effect of evidence where it attracts illogical inferences or leads the jury to improper conclusions (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 439). Rap music can unduly prejudice a jury or court in many ways. One important way is when jurors are invited to take rap as literal, since the danger exists that jurors will perpetuate a “reasoning prejudice” in attributing more weight to evidence than is warranted (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 439). There is also the danger that jurors will act in morally prejudiced ways insofar as they conclude the defendant is worthy of conviction based on their perceived character rather than there being proof of the alleged crime (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 439). The risk of reasoning and moral prejudices arises from negative views of rap, specifically rappers as sexually deviant criminals whose life is consumed with violence, moral depravity, drugs and so forth (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 439). Crucially there is a risk of evoking racial prejudice when rap lyrics and videos are used as evidence. As seen in previous chapters, there is empirical research indicating the use of rap as evidence can “reinforce biases and preconceived notions of the criminality of rappers, with racial stereotypes playing a role in perceptions of rap music and people who create it” (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 440). Therefore, allowing prosecutors to cherry-pick lyrics to paint a picture of predominantly black boys and men can be prejudicial, further increasing reasons to eliminate the practice of using rap as evidence.

Given worries about the irrelevance and prejudicial effect of rap as evidence we might wonder what a suitable change to the kinds of evidence that is admissible might look like. These worries with rap as evidence could support a blanket exclusionary rule against rap as evidence, along the lines of Nielson and Dennis’ “rap shield rules” (Nielson and Dennis 2019, p.157, as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p.441). This would completely prohibit the use of rap lyrics, videos and promotional material as criminal evidence. This institutional change is proposed not because rap can never be relevant evidence, but rather “As a group, judges haven’t shown themselves capable of applying the rules of evidence thoughtfully when it comes to rap music” (Nielson and Dennis 2019, p.157 as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p.451). A blanket exclusionary rule would be the most effective means to avoid contributory injustice, convictions and the further criminalisation of black people and black art, all of which are risked by the admission of rap as evidence. However, this rule is unlikely to be welcomed by all. In the absence of a blanket exclusionary rule, a more rigorous and informed approach to rap’s relevance and prejudicial effects should be adopted. For instance, being mindful of factors affecting relevance, reliability and prejudicial effect might include considering

The extent to which lyrics and videos conform to the conventions of rap; who wrote the lyrics or what role the defendant played in music videos; the age of the material and whether it was created before or after the offence; the specificity of lyrics, including accurate and reliable reference to the facts of the offence at issue; whether lyrics contain information about the offence which is not readily accessible; and also, if the prosecution seeks to rely on only certain lyrics from a song or parts of a video, how this fits into the broader context of the song or video (as well as the defendant’s wider body of work) and whether it has been cherry-picked to fit a certain narrative (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p.442).

It would probably be best to consider these factors with the assistance of a suitably qualified rap expert, such as a rapper, a rap-industry insider or a scholar of rap. Moreover, these factors should be explored so that the judge and jury are aware of information about the conventions of rap, for example. This approach to the admissibility of rap as evidence is rigorous but necessary, and until such an approach is developed prosecutors and police must begin to think about how their street-illiterate interpretations of rap are sending messages to young black males that their art will be policed and prosecuted.

Regarding both over-policing and using drill as evidence, another institutional reform might require the relevant agents to do fieldwork with those in the drill scene as part of their training.[[23]](#footnote-23) We know that addressing contributory injustice in the context of drill requires that agents see the problems of street-illiterate interpretations and switch to more street-literate ones. To achieve this, the fieldwork required of the relevant agents would involve learning and hopefully adopting street-literate interpretations. For instance, Met officers involved in the policing of drill might undergo training whereby they interact with drillers in educational ways –perhaps going to studio sessions (unarmed) – and discussing drill with videographers, producers and the like. Hopefully, by immersing themselves in the drill scene, these agents learn the conventions of drill with a deeper understanding of street expressivity and how drill is a sophisticated art form. Consequently, this fieldwork would also be a step forward in correcting for contributory injustice in the context of drill.

This is, of course, subject to the drill scene cooperating with police and other agents of the state. Dotson thinks this adds to the difficulty of addressing contributory injustice since “an epistemic community willing to apprentice the perceiver must be located” (Dotson, 2012, p. 34). And years of oppression and prejudice towards black people and black art forms from state authorities such as the police has created a distrust between the drill scene and state authorities that would make drillers reluctant to apprentice Met officers. It will also require members of the Met be willing to learn, adopting dispositions of humility about what they do not know. This added difficulty, however, should not mitigate the importance of this reform. Moreover, by interacting in positive ways with drillers, state authorities might begin to build trust between themselves and these communities.

There will undoubtedly be a reluctance by many in the drill scene to adopt such a response. I am deeply sympathetic to positions that see the police as an inherent source of problems for young black male drillers. I am also sympathetic to positions which emphasise those within the drill scene protecting knowledge and in-group communication, since having in-group communicative conventions –unknown to the police is highly valuable. However, in-group communicative conventions combined with the widespread prejudice located in the Met can lead to misinterpretation by the police, which is what we see in the scrutiny of drill. However, if the communicative conventions become known to the police, perhaps they will lose their value. This leads to a tricky double bind: drillers will be misunderstood, stereotyped and criminalised or lose important sources of in-group solidarity.

This section has aimed to survey potential routes of response. I have not looked to take a position on which response I think works best, and there might be particular issues with each response. For instance, it might not be efficacious to have officers do fieldwork since being seen cavorting with the police takes away from how drillers present as street authentic. In turn, their station in life might suffer due to being seen as less street credible. While there might be problems with other potential responses, I have not evaluated which responses work best within this chapter, but I think an evaluation of some of the responses I offer here would be fruitful future work.

This chapter has developed the arguments of last chapter, where I argued and described how the critical scrutiny of drill constitutes multiple epistemic injustices. Here, I showed how each of the four epistemic injustices can respond to the popular objection that rap music does evidence violence. I also evaluated the limitations of the different frameworks, and considered the resources they have for recommending remedial steps to how drill is treated in the criminal justice system. In the next chapter, I look at the incitement claim. This claim assumes that rap music evidences violence when drillers taunt their rivals about previous killings, specific locations and other events that have occurred.

**Chapter 4 – The Incitement Claim**

The claim that rap music incites violence (inciting claim) is used by the Met to justify interventions in rapper’s freedoms. To date, there has not been an extensive engagement with whether the police are right to restrict rappers based on the inciting claim. For instance, it is unclear what the police would have to show to prove drill music is inciting violence. This chapter looks to remedy this gap.

In what follows, I will provide a framework for evaluating whether an instance of drill constitutes a speech act of incitement. I also introduce an alternative speech act that drillers may also be performing, drawn from sociological work on drillers. I show that those who claim drill incites violence must meet the explanatory and justificatory burden of showing that the speech act of incitement (rather than something else) has been performed, and that it may often be very challenging to meet that burden. Finally, I argue that where that burden is not met, police interventions in drill would constitute a form of silencing, and be unjust.

Section 1 looks at how the Met advance the incitement claim, ascribing a plausible definition of incitement based on their use of the notion. Section 2 introduces the notion of cross referencing, by engaging with empirical work about the artistic and creative communication techniques drillers use. I argue that drillers are cross referencing when they taunt. Section 3 introduces a speech act theoretic framework for evaluating whether an instance of drill constitutes a speech act of incitement or cross referencing. I cast doubt on whether the police have been or will be able to show the speech act of incitement is being performed. Further, the challenge of showing that the speech act of incitement is being performed is intensified since a more convincing case can be made that drillers are engaging in the speech act of cross referencing. Section 4 offers some concluding remarks, including a brief description about how the treatment of drill music by the Met constitutes a form of silencing and is unjust.

**Section 1 – How Has the Incitement Claim Been Advanced and What Do the Police Mean by *Incitement*?**

The Metropolitan Police state that incitement to violence is one of the main reasons they inform online streaming services that drill music should be removed. Project Alpha – a unit of the Metropolitan Police patrolling the internet for “gang-related content” – dissect the lyrics and videos of drill tracks to determine which tracks incite gang violence (Economist, 2022). They then tell social media sites – mostly YouTube –that this track incites violence and violates their own rules of harmful content, and in the overwhelming number of cases, the video is taken down by the social media site. According to Will Pritchard

the Met’s Project Alpha unit made 1,825 requests to remove rap videos from YouTube, resulting in 1,636 being taken down. The previous year, the London-based force referred 510 music videos to be removed, with YouTube complying in 97% of cases. In 2020, the figure was just 125 — indicating a 1360% increase in referrals over three years (Pritchard, 2023).

James Seager –the lead of Project Alpha— claims that where rappers taunt rivals or reference previous killings, “the *intention* is to incite a response, which is often violent…if we remove the content, it prevents an escalation”(Economist, 2022).

In resonance with James Seager’s claims, the Met responded to an anonymous freedom of information request asking the police to provide information about how they decide what drill rap should be removed from online streaming services, they write

The MPS has been monitoring violent content online, including videos on YouTube, since September 2015…. Material posted online by gangs will then reference these incidents of violence, belittle victims and seek to humiliate opposing gangs, *all with the intention of inciting a response*…. Where officers believe online content *will incite gang violence* based on a range of information available to the police we will refer that material to a social media company or streaming sites seeking its removal for breaching the company’s community guidelines. The MPS continues to work to understand the reality of the links between online activity and ‘real world’ offline offending (Police, n.d.).[[24]](#footnote-24)

Popular examples of songs that have been removed from streaming services include Zone 2’s “No Censor” (Drill, 2022) , Chinx OS’ “Secrets Not Safe” (OS, 2022) and Skengdo and AM’s “Attempted 1.0” (Genius, 2018). No Censor, for instance, involved the naming of deceased rival gang members of Zone 2 in taunting ways. Zone 2 listed deceased rival gang members, referring to them as being “put in a spliff” –which is a disrespectful boast referring to the smoking of a dead person’s ashes (Drill, 2022). Zone 2's Kwengface, for example, raps, "Rage is dead, SK’s dead, all now none of us man been packed (killed)” (Drill, 2022). The police take these sorts of taunts referencing past incidents of violence and deceased rivals as incitement to violence.

Under common law, a person would be liable for incitement if they incited another to commit an offence, with the intention or belief that the offence would be committed with the required fault element.[[25]](#footnote-25) Sections 44-46 of the Serious Crime Act 2007 replaced the common law offence of incitement with three offences of assisting and encouraging an offence: 44) *Intentionally Encouraging or Assisting an Offence*; 45) *Encouraging or Assisting an Offence Believing it Will be Committed*; 46) *Encouraging or Assisting Offences Believing One or More Will be Committed* (Herring, 2022, p. 771). The Met, however, are not defining incitement with reference to a specific incitement or encouragement offence to justify restrictions they impose on drill artists. In fact, there does not seem to be a set definition of incitement used to impose restrictions on drill artists. Instead, when police use the term, it tends to be in the everyday sense (as explained below); they are using the idea of incitement to support restrictions even if incitement in a legal sense has not been proved.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The use of incitement in an everyday sense is supported by the aforementioned freedom of information request. The request also asked the Met to define five terms as they relate to the alleged threat posed by drill music, including “incite violence.” The Met responded that, “The terms you have listed can be viewed in the context of preventing serious youth violence and understood through their everyday meaning or definition” (Police, n.d.).

Everyday definitions of terms differ. This is, in part, why we have legal definitions of terms like incitement, so that different parties can refer to a set definition. However, since the police do not refer to a specific offence of incitement or encouragement, what are the plausible senses of incitement they might mean? One starting definition would be that from Oxford Languages (Languages, 2023). Here “incite” is defined as an action done to “encourage or stir up (violent or unlawful behaviour)” (Languages, 2023). Let us take "encouragement," then, as integral to a plausible general sense of incitement. So far, I take incitement to mean the act of “encouraging violent behaviour.” The Met also seems to include a mental element to their definition since they assert the inciting material is posted online with the *intention* of inciting a response. Given this, I take incitement as the Met use it to mean the “intentional encouragement of violence.” This will be the notion of incitement with which I work in the rest of the chapter.

My interpretation of incitement is based on what the police say they mean by the term. But it also coheres with free speech scholar’s use of incitement, and it is consistent with common law (Bishop, 2023, p. 569). Notably, the police assume that drillers are doing something with their words: inciting. Next, I introduce the idea of cross referencing, so we will then be in a position to evaluate which action - incitement or cross-referencing - drillers are plausibly performing.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**Section 2 - Cross Referencing**

The Met claim that the taunting of rival gang members involved in drill rap music is incitement to violence. However, Forrest Stuart, a sociologist/ethnographer, has written extensively on how the potential for violence from calling out or taunting rival gangs on social media has been overexaggerated (Stuart, 2020a, 2020b).[[28]](#footnote-28) Stuart gathered two years of ethnographic fieldwork data on the behaviour of five Southside Chicago gang factions. His ethnographic research into Southside Chicago’s urban youth saw him develop a relationship with gang-associated youth, particularly a gang-faction named CBE –Corner Boys Entertainment. Over the two-year span, Stuart spent almost every day with young men of CBE, who had relatively large social media followings and released drill music. During Stuart’s time with the members of CBE, he became immersed in their world.

During Stuart’s research, he developed a helpful picture of the role of social media in gang conflicts. He sees social media as a tool for building and validating drillers’ violent reputations conveyed in their music. Gang-associated youth often counter rivals’ social media uploads by publicising information that casts doubt on their enemies' displays of violent dispositions. Stuart asserts that challengers primarily rely on the strategy of *cross referencing* to demonstrate such inauthenticity.

Cross referencing is the notion Stuart introduces to capture what occurs when challengers scrutinise or present information contradicting their targets' online claims of violence. Cross referencing exposes hypocrisy and fabrication of a target's street persona without requiring physical contact with the intended target. During his time with CBE, Stuart found the Corner Boys were both challengers and targets of cross referencing. For instance, CBE often made memes poking fun at their rivals and the circumstances surrounding their death. In particular, they’d poke fun at a deceased rival, "Lil JoJo," by circulating memes “disrespecting him and undercutting his gang’s claims of toughness and supremacy” (Stuart, 2020a, p. 136). Several of the most popular memes taunted rivals over the fact that Lil JoJo was gunned down whilst apparently riding a children’s bicycle, and this was met by memes and posts that would attempt to expose those factions and specific members disrespecting Lil JoJo.

In another occurrence of cross referencing, a member of Crown Town – a rival gang to CBE – found a FaceBook picture of CBE Will four years earlier dressed in an oversized tuxedo, preparing for a school dance. The Crown Town member uploaded this photo to Facebook positioned next to another photo of Will standing menacingly in a street, emphasising that Will is “sweet” and not “savage” in a caption (Stuart, 2020b, p. 198). This caption invites audiences to recognise the contradiction between Will’s claims of being a violent criminal and evidence suggesting he is conformist and sentimental. Stuart argues that, at a minimum, the upload calls on online audiences to treat Will's – and by extension, CBE's –violent claims with suspicion.

Cross referencing looks to contradict a rival's public persona and performance while boasting their own. Those targeted in such online attacks make some effort to repair their reputations online. Stuart argues that responses to social media challenges depend primarily on the amount and depth of counterevidence necessary for targets to refute challengers' public charges of inauthenticity. He asserts that "cross referencing requires relatively little counterevidence, which can be easily and, more importantly, peacefully procured and broadcasted" (Stuart, 2020a, p. 300). Stuart found that in most cross-referencing cases, targets could quickly generate counterevidence refuting a challengers' claims (Stuart, 2020). This is seen in the earlier example where Crown Town members targeted Will for looking "sweet" in his formal wear. Will easily dismissed allegations of inauthenticity by uploading a picture of him at a similar age holding a pistol and looking menacing, captioned "born Savage" (Stuart, 2020a, p. 200). He placed the picture next to the picture of him in a tuxedo to provide evidence of his putative/supposed dedication to violence. Crown Town did not respond further. Will won the dispute with a simple social media upload completed from the safety of his home, and no offline violence ensued.

Whilst Stuart highlights cross referencing as the primary strategy through which gang-associated youth challenge their targets’ online claims of violence, he identifies two other strategies, differing in the amount of counterevidence to refute challengers’ charges of inauthenticity, through which this is achieved: calling bluffs and catching lacking. Calling bluffs involves the strategy of calling out rivals to act in accordance with their online violent personas by daring them to “slide” –enter rival territory– and attempt a drive-by shooting (Stuart, 2020b, p.198). This challenge is often supplemented with challengers advertising their own location. This strategy requires challengers to risk potential injury by opening them up to drive-by shootings if rivals accept their invitations. When rivals accept their challengers’ invitations, rivals will often take care to record and upload media showing that the rivals have travelled to the advertised location, and if their challengers are not physically present, they will draw attention to the inconsistency between their challengers’ online behaviour and their offline behaviour. Calling bluffs requires more counterevidence than cross-referencing to disprove charges of inauthenticity, increasing the likelihood of it catalysing physical violence. This is because targets must prove they are not "bluffing' about their violence, and to convincingly demonstrate this, they must demonstrate they are willing to engage in violence (Stuart, 2020b, p. 201). Demonstrating a willingness to engage in violence, however, is different from actually engaging in violence. Stuart asserts that “participants frequently prioritised modes of producing counterevidence that allowed them to accept rivals’ invitations without putting them directly in the line of fire” (Stuart, 2020, p. 201).

Catching lacking involves catching rivals and confronting them in non-gang related contexts such as work, school or with family (Stuart, 2020b, p.199). Challengers will catch and record themselves injuring rivals which includes compelling them to disrespect their own gangs, before uploading to social media. Catching lacking is the most likely to catalyse gang violence for at least two reasons. First, definitionally it involves physical assault and counterevidence refuting these challenges will require equal or even more violence. Second, catching lacking is most likely out of the three strategies to impact the social networks of a target, which has been found to increase the likelihood of physical retaliation (Garot 2010; Papachristos 2009, as cited in Stuart, 2020a, p. 202).

Of the three strategies that Stuart identifies drillers engage in to challenge rivals’ authenticity, I think cross referencing best captures what drillers are doing with their music. Before I give an argument for why cross referencing is the most apt strategy, I will say something about why the other two fall short. Recall that catching lacking involves the confrontation of a rival in a context where they are not adopting their violent persona. It definitionally involves physical violence since counterevidence will require equal or even more violence. Where drill artists taunt their rivals in their music, they are clearly not involved in a literal physical confrontation of a rival at that moment, although they might rap about how their crew caught members of a rival crew lacking. Still, since a rap taunting a rival does not involve physical violence in the same way a challenger catches a rival lacking, it is not apt to consider drill music as a form of ‘catching lacking’.

Calling bluffs does better by way of capturing the kind of taunts involved in drill music, since drill sometimes involves challengers calling targets to make good on their violent words and drillers expressing their willingness to engage in violence. For instance, lyrics urging rivals to “ride” or “get back” (avenge their deceased friends) are seen in drill. However, given the real time involved in calling bluffs –where locations tend to be disclosed— this is not what is going on in drill music, since drill songs have to be recorded, mastered and released, which likely takes at least a couple of days. For instance, we do not really hear drill music in which a driller calls another’s bluff by rapping a time and place they will be in rival territory. Rather, this is strategy occurs over social media, not in music releases.

Importantly, the drill music the Met claim incites violence does not include the sort of taunts where drillers rap about a time and place they will be in rival territory. For example, recall the three popular songs that have been accused of incitement to violence and have been taken down by YouTube on the Met’s request: “No Censor,” “Attempted 1.0” and “Secrets Not Safe.” None include taunts that dare rivals to slide on them and disclose their location in ways involved in bluff calling.

I argue that when drillers challenge their rivals in their lyrics and videos, these challenges are akin to what Stuart describes as cross referencing. By taunting rivals about the deaths of deceased gang members, for example, they look to show how they are really violent, that it's not just a persona, and that the same is not true for their rivals. Remember how CBE would undercut rival gangs’ claims of toughness and violence by poking fun and uploading memes of the deceased Lil JoJo. This sort of taunting and trolling is what we see in raps that are scrutinised as inciting violence. For instance, When Zone 2’s Kwengface raps, "Rage is dead, SK’s dead, all now none of us man been packed (killed),” he is presenting information that contradicts his rivals –Moscow17 and Harlem Spartans— claims of violence in their songs(Drill, 2022). By mentioning that Rage – from collective Harlem Spartans – and SK – from collective Moscow17 – are deceased, and that none of Zone 2 are deceased, Kwengface is claiming something to the effect of “if you’re the violent savages that defend your block that you say you are in your music, why have your members been killed whereas we are still alive?”

**2.1 – Why Cross Reference?**

The question of why drillers cross reference is relevant to ascertaining what other intentions it may be reasonable to attribute to them. Stuart believes that participants in cross referencing know that being seen as the most violent rapper or collective attracts views, fans and ultimately allows them to make more money. Gang-associated youth compete in the attention economy, and taunting rivals captures attention. The ultimate aim of these strategies is for disenfranchised youth to undertake successful commerce. As will become more important later, we can frame gang-associated youth's –who participate in cross referencing— intentions in terms of indirect and direct goals. Their indirect goal when cross referencing is to expose rivals for not being as tough as they claim, while boasting that unlike rivals, they are as tough as they claim. Their direct intentions are to undertake successful commerce by capitalising off the attention cross referencing attracts. We might think of this in the way a pornographer's indirect goal might be to produce orgasms in the audience as a means to the direct goal of making money. When we think about the intentions of drillers, it is important to include not only the direct intention (purpose/ends of their action) but also any indirect intentions (the means they achieved this purpose with).

However, Stuart also highlights the social and emotional benefits gang-associated youth get from cross referencing. For young black boys, who have spent their lives demonised and being told that they contribute negatively to society, they get attention from fans and corporations, which amounts to the effect of being told: "you are special, unique and worth being paid attention to”(Stuart, as cited in Vanecko, 2022). This humanises these young men in ways that are often not expressed. Whilst it is true that gang-associated youth engage in cross referencing for popularity, not accounting for how their sense of worth is bound up in the attention they get from their drill and online performance misses why popularity is so important to them.

The Met claim that drill music incites offline gang violence. In this section, I have presented the notion of cross referencing as a plausible alternative strategy for what drillers are doing with their taunts. Next, I introduce a framework for evaluating whether taunts in drill constitute a speech act of incitement or speech act of cross referencing.

**Section 3 – Cross Referencing vs Incitement: How Do We Determine What Drillers Are Doing With their Words?**

How do we determine whether drillers are engaging in speech acts of incitement? Drawing on recent feminist use and interpretation of speech act theory, we can characterise a locutionary act as the act of uttering words with particular content (Langton, 1993; Mikkola, 2019; Kukla, 2014; Saul, 2006; McGowan, 2009). A perlocutionary act is the act of uttering words that have an effect. An illocutionary act is the act done in uttering the words (Saul, 2006, p.231). So, suppose Pep Guardiola wants to resign from being the head coach of Manchester City and utters the words, “I resign from being head coach of Manchester City,” his locutionary act would be his uttering the words meaning he resigns as head coach of Manchester City. The utterance would have the perlocutionary effect of leaving Manchester City managerless. His illocutionary act would be that of resigning the role of head coach of Manchester City.

Within this framework, the illocutionary force of an utterance depends on the satisfaction of certain felicity conditions (Langton, 1993; Mikkola, 2019). First, whether the speaker has the relevant intentions attributed to them; second, whether the speaker achieves uptake, that is, whether the hearer recognises the intended illocution being performed; third, whether the speaker is authoritative in the relevant domain of the illocution. So, for Guardiola’s illocutionary act to succeed, his utterance must be intended to mean that he resigns from being the head coach of Man City (rather than, say, an April Fool's prank). His audience must recognise Guardiola's utterance as an intention to resign (rather than the audience think he is joking). And he must be authoritative to do so (Guardiola is authoritative over this domain since he has the standing to resign on his behalf). For Guardiola to produce the illocutionary act of resigning, these conditions must be satisfied.

When the Met claim that drill music incites violence, we can understand them as meaning the speech acts involved in drill music are illocutionary acts of encouraging offline gang violence.[[29]](#footnote-29) There is a burden of proof on the police to show that the speech act of incitement is being performed by making a good case that drillers have the authority to incite, there is uptake for incitement, and drillers intend to incite violence. However, I will cast doubt on whether the police can make such a case. Moreover, the challenge of meeting this burden is intensified, since I argue that there is a plausible alternative speech act drillers are engaging in, which more convincingly meets the felicity conditions: cross referencing. I take it that if drillers are engaged in illocutions of cross referencing, they are not engaged in illocutions of incitement, so the two are rival hypotheses. To determine how drillers might be engaging in each speech act, we will need to pay attention to whether there is good evidence that each of the three felicity conditions (or sufficiently many of them) are met with regard to each speech act. First, I turn to the authority felicity condition.

**3.1 – First Felicity Condition: Authority**

**3.1.a – Do Drillers Have the Authority to Perform Illocutionary Acts of Inciting Violence?**

Inciting violence is an exercitive speech act – the exercise of powers, rights or influence by a speaker – and they require the speaker to occupy positions of authority (McDonald, 2020, p.3505; Austin, 1962, p.150). For example, a parent, but not a stranger, has the authority to prohibit a child from venturing barefoot into the snow because they have “authority in the local domain of the family” (Langton, 1993, p.305). For drillers to encourage rivals to commit offline acts of violence, drillers must have authority in the relevant domain, say, of street violence. We might think drillers have the appropriate authority to encourage rivals to commit acts of violence since they have a proximity to violence or the sort of street credibility, which could mean rivals take their taunts and disses more seriously than someone who has no proximity or involvement to street violence. For instance, suppose Charles, a privileged white child who grew up in Hampton Court, with no proximity to street violence besides listening to drill music, disses Zone 2 in a song that somehow becomes popular on Instagram. Zone 2 might hear this diss and not respond to it because Charles lacks the relevant authority to provoke a more serious reaction. However, suppose someone who has apparent street credibility –like a member of Moscow17 (Zone 2’s rivals) — taunts Zone 2 in their raps; it is likely that this will be taken as a more serious insult than an insult from someone like Charles, who lacks street credibility. Maybe the different reactions will have something to do with fans' reactions. It seems fans of Zone 2 will be more unwilling to see Charles’ diss as a serious threat to the credibility of Zone 2, given he is not a street credible source, than a diss from Moscow17 since they are seen as street credible sources. And since the diss from Moscow17 will be taken more seriously, they would need to be seen as doing more to repair their reputations. Consequently, a driller may have the authority to perform speech acts of incitement that police attribute to them.

**3.1.b – Do Drillers Have the Authority to Perform Illocutionary Acts of Cross Referencing?**

Where drillers engage in cross referencing, we can think of this as an assertive-like speech act that presents what the driller takes as fact. Namely, they are just describing that their rivals are not violent and do not have the sort of reputation they are purported to. Alternatively, there may be something more verdictive about the speech act, insofar as it looks to establish some social ranking. For instance, when drillers taunt, they intend to show that their rivals are lower on the ranking of violence, whereas they are above them. Both assertive-like and verdictive-like speech acts seem to require authority, but it seems like your authority in the domain of street violence restricts which speech act you can perform. For instance, Charles – who is outside the scene and without perceived street credibility – might diss Zone 2 by making some kind of assertion, such as “Zone 2 are not really violent.” This utterance can be seen as purely descriptive without establishing any social ranking. But when the same claim is uttered by a Moscow17 member, who is seen as a street credible source, the speech act becomes verdictive by establishing a social hierarchy based on violence. Crucially, many drillers who perform within the conventions of the genre and post music online do have the authority to perform both assertive-like and verdictive-like illocutionary acts of cross referencing.

**3.2 Second Felicity Condition: Uptake**

Before examining whether drillers recognise taunts as cross referencing or inciting offline violence, I will outline what I consider good evidence of uptake. First, in the absence of countervailing evidence or unusual circumstances, how drillers tell us they understand the intentions of taunters is good evidence that they understand the intentions of taunters that way. Second, good evidence of uptake would have to speak to whether hearers can recognise the illocutionary intentions of utterers, and part of this will involve familiarity with the conventions of expression. Third, good evidence of uptake involves an assessment of how drillers respond to taunts. Drillers might intend to cross reference, but be misunderstood, and responded to with offline violence (as if they had incited it). Or drillers may intend to incite, but not in fact incite any violence. So, the effects of a taunt will not be entirely determinative of the speech act intended. But, with that qualification in mind, how savvy audiences, who are familiar with the conventions of a genre, understand the speech acts of drillers might help us make an inference to the best explanation. I will evaluate both speech acts using these criteria.

**3.2.a – Do Drillers Recognise Taunts as Cross Referencing?**

**3.2.a1 –Testimony**

Drillers' testimonies show us how they understand rivals' taunts. For instance, Ratlin explains that drill collective CGM often diss him in songs "acting like they got a problem" with him, but he explains that these drillers are acting like they got a problem to undertake successful commerce (Network, 2024, 43:32). Ratlin states, "most yutes act like they got a problem so that they can make money. I get that, innit. It’s a business move” (Network, 2024, timestamp, 43:32). Here Ratlin clearly recognises the taunts in songs directed at him as a way of making money by facilitating a response in him to gain audience attention. Further testimonial support is provided by Yungeen Ace who gives force to the view that tauntees understand taunters as intending to gain clout from disrespect as opposed to encouraging offline gang violence. He claims, "when I got shot, everybody [many rappers] wanted to claim they shot me [in diss tracks]…. So, everybody start beefing with me just cos I got on [just because they know he has clout and are trying to steal it]” (djvlad, 2021, timestamp (22:08-22:28)). This is because, as Ace explains, they diss him, so that Ace will diss them back, because they know they will get views and clout from dissing him, “it’s like everybody in my city, they all rap, they rap to diss me to get views, so I can respond [via a diss track]” (djvlad, 2021, timestamp, (21:54)). Here Yungeen Ace provides support for the view that that those most familiar with the conventions of the genre understand taunts as cross referencing.

That drillers understand taunts in drill as cross referencing is evidenced in our paradigmatic case of Kwengface’s lyrics, where Moscow17 taunt Zone 2 by referencing their “fallen soldiers.” For instance, in “The Return” Moscow17 make several references to “Abz,” a deceased member of Zone 2 (Moscow17, 2020). The best explanation for this response is that Moscow17 understood Zone 2’s taunts as intending to undermine their persona, so they responded in ways that would restore their reputation that is in accordance with the amount of counterevidence necessary, i.e., a *diss track* of their own.

**3.2.a2 – Familiarity with Conventions of Expression**

Those familiar with the conventions of rap music know that the call-and-response structure of dissing back is an integral feature of the art form. Contextualising drill as a subgenre of rap helps us to understand why diss tracks responding to diss tracks are commonplace. The taunts and responses in drill can be located in the broader context of rap beef and battle rap. Rap beefs come from a long tradition of “playing the dozens,” in which participants attempt to get the better of each other through disrespectful jabs (Westhoff, 2015). Rap beefs tend to involve rappers trading rhymes in attempt to put their opponents down. They have been occurring since at least 1981, when MC Busy Bee and Kool Moe Dee would trade insults in an attempt to rock the crowd (Westhoff, 2015). 43 years later, rap beefs are still occurring to raise the popularity of even the most popular artists. For instance, Kendrick Lamar and Drake’s beef in 2024 is said to have revived the genre and “brought attention back to the core values of hip hop,” with both releasing diss tracks that scored high on the charts (Subasinghe, 2024). Kendrick Lamar’s “Not Like Us,” for instance, broke several streaming records, topping the US Billboard Hot 100. The popularity of “Not Like Us” undoubtedly helped his career in many ways, including being chosen as the rap star to headline the 2025 Super Bowl half-time show. The upshot is that whilst taunts in drill can be extreme, taunting rivals is far from a new phenomenon in rap. Drillers often know this history of hip hop and aim to release drill songs that win the beef. For instance, when 26 AR and drill collective 41 started trading insults, 26 AR explained that he was bewildered that his diss track was removed from YouTube. When asked about this, 26 AR responded “How would you feel? If somebody dissed you, you dissed back, your shit was better, your shit passed they shit, and your shit was magically gone by 4am in the morning” (TrillMarty, 2024, timestamp (2:01)). He goes on to say that his video being taken down is “disrespectful to hip hop itself” (TrillMarty, 2024, timestamp (3:07)). This suggests he understands his rivals taunts as an attempt to put him down and that he must respond with a diss track of his own to win the beef, which makes sense when we put cross referencing in drill into the broader context of rap beefs.[[30]](#footnote-30)

**3.2.a3 – Inference to the Best Explanation**

Stuart claims that cross referencing requires little counterevidence, which can be easily created and peacefully broadcasted. As such, violence is not an outcome that is sought by these taunts, nor is it seen as necessary –nor even the anticipated way – to respond to them. In rap, a similar process occurs when rappers engage in cross referencing with their rivals in their lyrics and videos. This cross referencing will very likely not result in offline retaliation because little counterevidence is needed to shrug these challenges off. In fact, often, when rappers engage in cross referencing with their rivals in their songs, their rivals will release songs doing the same thing. The fact that online taunts overwhelmingly lead to online responses might allow us to make an inference to the best explanation: that the intention of drillers is to cross reference, and the uptake sought is musical response (as well as appreciation, and attendant recognition and income), not offline violence.

**3.2.b – Do Drillers Recognise Taunts as Incitement?**

**3.2.b1 – Testimony**

The Met believe that drillers recognise rivals’ taunts as speech acts of incitement. However, as I have shown, the Met's claim is unreflective of some drillers' testimonies. Drillers often explain that they recognise taunts by their rivals as cross referencing - an aesthetic technique common to rap music, part of the conventions of such music, and one of the means to recognition and successful commerce. Consequently, the police are making misinformed assumptions about uptake on all drillers without testimonial support from drillers themselves. As a blanket view of how drill operates, then, the police’s stance seem poorly evidenced.

**3.2.b2 – Familiarity with Conventions**

As will become much clearer when we look at the section on intentions, the police are notoriously unfamiliar with the conventions of drill music. Understanding uptake properly requires understanding the conventions of this form of music. The call-and-response structure of dissing and dissing back is integral to drill music, and without a proper understanding of this, you could misunderstand drillers as inciting violence against themselves rather than engaging in musical battle. One of the default frames through which we understand uptake should be one that makes reference to features of the cultural art form.

**3.2.b3 – Inference to the Best Explanation**

Regarding inference to the best explanation, the police could make the case that drillers understand their rivals’ taunts as intentionally encouraging violence because the police seem to believe the overwhelming response to drill music is to engage in offline violence. For instance, Michael Railton, ex-leader of the Met’s project Alpha Unit, sees taunts in drill as triggering trauma and shame, which encourages tauntees to respond offline (Pritchard, 2023). If they can show that the overwhelming response to taunts is to engage in offline violence, then they can infer from these responses that the taunts are understood by drillers as encouraging them to commit offline acts of violence. However, believing that taunts in drill would result in offline violence is empirically unfounded (Fatsis, et al., 2022) (Kleinberg & McFarlane, 2020). As Stuart asserts, "there exist no systematic data or definitive analyses to determine the precise causal relationship between social media [drill music] and offline violence" (Stuart and Moore, 2022, p.311). As I have argued, often the response that taunts in drill call for is not offline retaliatory violence but rather online musical responses.

Even in the absence of evidence of a causal connection between drill taunts and offline violence, maybe we could use drillers' avoidance of certain areas where offline violence can occur as evidence that their rivals understand taunts as inciting violence. As we will see in the next section, it seems plausible that at least sometimes drillers are avoiding areas because they believe their taunts have led their rivals to want to commit acts of violence against them. Although, if the actual aim was to be embroiled in violence with rivals, it would not make much sense to avoid these areas where violence might occur.

Ultimately, I think it would be naïve to deny that at least sometimes taunts fuel some existing gang feuds, make new gang feuds or stoke some gang feuds that would have died out in the absence of social media. However, there are two issues worth separating: 1) whether drill in fact fuels violence (relevant to the uptake issue), and 2) whether given that it sometimes does, it is reasonable to infer that the incitement of violence is the intended speech act (where uptake is only one of other conditions to consider). That on occasions taunts might fuel violence does not mean they are always intended as incitements.

Given what I outlined as good evidence of uptake, I have made the case that there is uptake for cross referencing as a convention of the genre and evidence that offline violence is sometimes fuelled. Regarding cross referencing, the recognition of cross referencing as drillers' intentions when they taunt their rivals is reflected in their testimonies. Also, based on drillers’ responses to taunts in drill music – taunts back – it is charitable to infer that they often understand taunts directed at them as cross referencing. Regarding incitement, it would be wrong to assume that drill taunts are never recognised as encouraging offline gang violence. However, whilst I think there may be evidence that violence is sometimes fuelled, whether this is evidence that violence is intentionally encouraged would require balancing both the evidence of certain understandings in the audiences (what I have done in this section) and other evidence to do with authority and importantly the intentions of drillers, to which I turn next.

**3.3 – Third Felicity Condition: Intention**

Before examining whether drillers intend to cross reference or incite, it is important to outline some parameters that are going to be important in evaluating what a charitable attribution of intentions to drillers will involve. First, and similar to good evidence of uptake, in the absence of countervailing evidence or unusual circumstances, we generally believe what people tell us their intentions are. Second, when attributing intentions, we are guided by the assumption that the person we are attributing intentions to is rational (Broome, 2013). That is, when we attribute intentions, the attributed intentions should be consistent with one another, conforming to principles of means/ends rationality – choosing good means to achieve desired ends (Nozick, 1993). Third, and similar to good evidence of uptake, a charitable attribution of intentions to drillers will involve those imputing intentions to have expertise or familiarity with the conventions of drill. I will be guided by these three principles in my analysis of whether drillers intend to cross reference or incite.

#### 

**3.3.a – Do Drillers Intend to Cross Reference?**

I have argued that when drillers challenge their rivals in their lyrics and videos, these challenges are akin to what Stuart describes as cross referencing: undermining a tauntee’s violent persona whilst underlining the taunter’s violent persona. All of this musical taunting can be construed as a sort of fact-checking, where taunting seems to be done with the intention of showing that rival gangs are not as violent as those making the taunts and challenges. Whether it is through listing dead rivals, making fun of how they died, juxtaposing seemingly contradictory images of rivals, or making memes about rivals, all look to contradict their rivals' online persona and their real-life performances, all while boasting their own public personas. As mentioned in section 2, we can understand drillers engaging in rap that taunts rivals as having the direct intention of undertaking successful commerce and gaining various emotional and social benefits –by drawing attention from fans and elevating in the attention economy— via the indirect intention of cross referencing. For instance, Chief Keef, who is credited as putting drill on the map, was able to land a 6-million-dollar record deal from taunting his rivals in drill (Vanecko, 2022).

**3.3.a1 – Testimony**

Drillers' testimonies show that they intend to cross reference when taunting their rivals. Loosescrew and Screwloose of Moscow17, for instance, explain how their taunts in drill are aimed at undermining their rivals’ boasts of violence whilst underlining their own (Network, 2023). When asked about dissing the dead in their songs, Loosescrew explains, "at the end of the day… if man are gonna try and explain the story from their perspective, and what they think went down, then I’m gonna let you know about my story” (Network, 2023, timestamp (4:08)). Here, they explain that they cannot just sit back and listen to their rivals diss them on songs to undermine their violent personas, so they have got to let drill fans know that their rivals are not as violent as them by responding via taunts of their own, often dissing the dead. This evidences the view that they are cross referencing (or fact checking) in their music. They explain that taunts dissing the dead are a "dark art" that is a "part of the drill" (Network, 2023, timestamp (6:30)). As Screwloose asserts, “Man’s a drill artist. Man’s gonna adapt bro. Everybody’s saying they’re smoking on something [taunting rivals about deaths]” (Network, 2023, timestamp (6:14)).

The intention to undermine drillers’ violent personas is also echoed by driller AbzSav, who released a series of songs titled "Tables Turn" featuring extreme taunts towards his rivals (AbzSav 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). He asserts, "the same way they were tweaking on the mandem [the same way his rivals were dissing his gang] I’m just gonna tweak back on them [diss their gang]’ (Media, 2022, timestamp (1:22)). When asked by Fumez whether he thinks he went overboard with the taunts, AbzSav claims that if you understand the conventions of drill, you would understand that his series of tracks were intended to respond to rivals in ways that undermined their dispositions of violence (Media, 2022). He exclaims that the taunts are “what the drill fans want,” and his distal intention is to blow in the music scene (Media, 2022, timestamp (4:43)). He states that "if you jump in the music scene and not have the intention to blow [be rich and famous], then I don't know why you're doing music…My personal [intention] is to get out the hood" (Media, 2022, timestamp (0:17)).

Drillers often say that the ultimate aim of their music is to “gain attention in the commercial music market” (Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p. 431). And that they have to look as scary as possible to maximise the amount of YouTube views they get (Taylor 2020, as cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2022, p.431; Jalloh, 2022). For instance, the beginning of “No Censor,” starts with “If we don’t talk about drills [if we don’t taunt rivals, or talk about deaths], they won’t love no more.” This reiterates the notion that these taunts are done with the distal goal of gaining "love" from fans, and in the case of “No Censor,” it worked. The group often talk about how they gained notoriety after "No Censor's" release, and members capitalised off this attention (Media, 2020).

**3.3.a2 – Rationality and Expertise**

Cross referencing and undertaking successful commerce are consistent intentions. That is, it is seen by drillers as a good means to achieve their ends. This makes it rational for drillers to pursue cross referencing as a way of gaining financial, emotional and social benefits. Moreover, those who are familiar with the conventions of drill see cross referencing as an established technique in the drill world, that they can use to elevate in the attention economy (Ilan, 2020; Fatsis, 2019; Jalloh, 2022; Owusu-Bempah, 2022). Crucially, given that drillers often express their intentions are to cross reference, cross referencing is seen as a rational means through which they can undertake successful commerce and those with expertise in drill music also identify this as a means through which they can elevate in the attention economy, it is charitable to attribute to drillers an intention of cross referencing.

**3.3.b. – Do Drillers Intend to Incite Violence?**

**3.3.b1 – Testimony**

The Met are taking drillers’ lyrics to have the aim of encouraging rival members to commit offline acts of violence. Whilst drillers explicitly tell us their aims when making drill are to tell their side of the story/fact-check and blow in the music scene, it is hard to come by testimony from drillers expressing that their intentions when making drill is to incite violence. In the absence of testimonial support, the focus becomes whether attributing an intention of incitement to violence to drillers is rational and whether the police are sufficiently familiar with the conventions of drill to attribute such an intention. First, I turn to whether it is rational to understand drillers’ indirect intention as incitement to violence.

**3.3.b2 – Rationality: Direct and Indirect Intentions**

We can understand drillers’ direct intention as gaining material, social and emotional benefits. However, one may object that their indirect intentions could still be to encourage violence. To establish whether drillers have the indirect intention of encouraging offline gang violence, it would need to be shown that this encouragement is a means through which they achieve their intended purpose: elevating their socioeconomic status in society. How might the encouragement of offline violence aid drillers to achieve their aims? The police might claim they profit from violence occurring between their gangs and rivals since it gives them something to taunt rivals about. For instance, Zone 2 profits from taunting Moscow17 about SK’s death, and they profit from the death of SK as a result. Crucially, an objector might claim that there needs to be deaths and offline violence for drillers to profit from, and therefore, encouraging offline gang violence would be a plausible indirect intention for drillers.

However, there is a difference between profiting from deaths that have taken place, and intentionally encouraging more deaths with the taunts in their songs. A critic could claim that drillers profit from deaths that have taken place and also encourage violence so they can profit from future deaths. But how exactly would this work? The Met do not make this clear. But the suggestion might be that rappers are encouraging others to commit violence against themselves, or their friends, in order that they may retaliate. However, were this drillers’ indirect intention, it would be inconsistent with their distal goals of financial, emotional and social benefits. If encouraging gang violence means you run the risk of you and your friends being killed and/or seriously hurt, and then have to respond to this violence with further acts that can land you in prison, dead and/or your friends seriously hurt, this undercuts any financial, emotional and social benefits you might gain from the increased attention of fans. It might, therefore, be uncharitable to attribute such an intention to drillers.

It seems the Met could argue that drillers are encouraging others to try to commit violence against themselves or their friends in order to undertake successful commerce in two ways –1) by showing fearlessness in the face of danger and 2) by insinuating that any such attempts at violence would not succeed because of the strength of that driller, their associated shooters, and broader gang. I can see why calling bluffs would satisfy both ways in which drillers can boost their clout. For instance, since it usually involves advertising your location, daring a rival to enter your territory and attempt a drive-by shooting, it is clear why this would show fearlessness in the face of (potentially immediate) danger and how they showcase that attempts to slide on them would not succeed due to their strength. This critical response looks like it makes a kind of intention towards violence rational for the driller –there is an intention to call for violence against yourself and incite enough violence against rival gangs to establish enough clout that the likelihood of violence against yourself becomes lower. When done correctly, this gives drillers precisely what they are aiming for –enough clout to be successful in drill and enough clout for rivals to be more cautious in perpetrating violence against them. Even though this looks rational, and in line with Stuart's analysis, Stuart still notes that this often does not succeed for drillers, as a lot of clout can make the target on their back even larger.

Whilst bluff calling might involve an intention to encourage violence, it is not clear that drill music involves this intention to call for violence against oneself. The cross referencing involved in drill acts like a form of "fact-checking," and can be done without showing fearlessness in the face of danger (via a YouTube upload from the safety of a driller's home), or that any attempts at violence will not be successful, since "drillers and their gangs often take conscious steps to ensure that challenges don't spill into the streets" (Stuart, 2020a, p. 136). Consequently, it is unclear how drillers are intending to call for violence against themselves through their cross referencing. Whilst drillers’ cross referencing involves boasting of their own, their associated shooters and broader gang’s strength, this is very different from aiming to call for violence against themselves and their friends. For instance, there is a question of whether they have a genuine intention to encourage rivals to commit acts of violence against them by undermining their rivals’ persona whilst underlining their own, or whether they are merely giving the appearance of fearlessness and strength with the knowledge that violence will unlikely occur. Crucially, where there might be the indirect intention to encourage violence against themselves in the strategy of bluff calling, I take it that cross referencing involves the appearance of an intention to encourage violence against yourself, since it does not put them in any immediate danger (in the same way disclosing a location does). Further, insinuating that any such attempts at violence would fail in their music, is quite different from hoping that violence would occur as a means to undertake successful commerce.

**3.3.b3 – Intention Vs Foreseeable Consequences**

The police may not need to show explicit intention, instead, perhaps they can show there was foresight. In English and Welsh criminal law, The House of Lords have made it clear that although foresight is not the same as intention, indirect intention may be inferable from foresight.[[31]](#footnote-31) Put differently, the jury may reason that where the direct intention is unclear, a consequence that is virtually certain to occur –and the defendant sees it as a virtually certain consequence – following a defendant’s actions can be construed as their aim and, consequently, the intended result. Anything less than virtual certainty –say an outcome drillers saw as “very likely”— is “recklessness” not “intention.”

If the police wanted to defer to foresight as a way of deriving intention, it would need to be shown that 1) encouragement to offline violence is a virtually certain consequence of these taunts, and that 2) drillers recognise that this encouragement is a virtual certainty. Regarding the first condition, this will depend on whether rivals recognise that the intention of taunts is to encourage offline violence. As we saw above, however, encouragement to offline violence is far from a virtually certain consequence of these taunts in drill music: the foreseeable consequence is often an online response, which might be best explained by drillers understanding taunts as cross referencing.

Regarding the second condition, what would be good evidence that drillers recognise encouragement as a virtual certainty? Perhaps the police could point out that drillers recognise this encouragement is virtually certain since drillers often go out of their way to avoid places where offline violence can occur in response to online violence. If drillers are deliberately going out of their way to avoid offline violent retribution for their online content, it looks like they understand one of the ramifications of their music is an encouragement to offline violence against themselves by their rivals. This sort of behaviour suggests that they recognise this as a direct outcome of their artistic personas.

It would be difficult, however, to determine whether drillers, who are already engaged within gang/postcode conflict, go out of their way to avoid their rivals because of their online taunts, or because they are often gang-associated youth who would avoid these areas, where they can be caught lacking, to begin with. However, whilst drillers have a target on their back because they belong to gangs, perhaps drillers sometimes understand their taunts as making this target bigger or more visible.

Even if we were to take the avoidance of certain areas where offline violence can occur as evidence that some drillers recognise encouragement to offline violence as an outcome of drill, it is unclear whether they would see it as a virtual certainty, rather than, say, a probable outcome. For instance, even if drillers are avoiding certain areas because they have taunted their rivals, this might just be a precaution to avoid offline violence, rather than them seeing offline violence as a virtually foreseeable outcome.

If drillers thought that a very likely outcome of their taunts was that it would lead to offline violence, they could be construed as being reckless as to whether their taunts lead to offline violence. However, recklessness is not enough to infer intent. I am not denying that sometimes drillers do see violence as a virtual certainty of their taunts, but it is going to be very difficult to determine when this is. This would make it difficult to distinguish cases where there is an intention to incite violence from cases where there is no such intention. Further, there is the concern of whether the police have the expertise to distinguish these cases. I turn to this next.

**3.3.b4 –Expertise: Can We Rely on the Police to Identify the Intentions of Drillers?**

Although drillers may sometimes have an intention to incite violence, I have demonstrated that it is difficult to determine when they have that intention because there is a reasonable competing interpretation of cross referencing. Crucially, it becomes incumbent on law enforcement and the media to learn how to distinguish an intention to cross reference from an intention to incite. But should we have confidence that the police can distinguish these differing intentions? I do not think we should have much faith that the police are able to do this. Part of being able to distinguish cross referencing from incitement to violence requires familiarity with the conventions of drill, which is something the Met have repeatedly shown they do not have. Recent literature has argued that the police are unfamiliar with the conventions within drill music and, as such, should not be seen as experts on what drillers are doing with their lyrics (Jalloh, 2022; Owusu-Bempah, 2022). For instance, the police often take drill music as referencing specific incidents of violence, even when the lyrics denote something metaphorical and fictional (Rymajdo, 2020). The police also mistakenly identify music from another subgenre of rap as drill (Rymajdo, 2020). As Latoya Reisner asks, “if you’re showing that you don’t have knowledge of the genre in general and where it originates from, are you in a position to write an expert report [claim expertise and criminalise based on these apparent expertise]?” (Reisner, as cited in Rymajdo, 2020). Crucially, recognition of the intentions of drillers will depend on familiarity with the conventions of expressions. Those unfamiliar with the conventions of cross referencing, such as the police, are more likely not to recognise when drillers are intending to cross referencing. This is important because the police might impose *street illiterate* intentions on drillers when they take all violent taunts in drill rap to be intentions of incitement (Ilan, 2020).

Stuart also questions whether the police are competent enough to understand the online behaviour of drillers. Many law enforcement professionals are “self-taught” in the use of social media’s role in offline violence. However, as Stuart asserts

research on policing and punishment has long shown, law enforcement personnel typically lack the cultural competencies and knowledge required to understand the cultural practices of urban youth, whether online or off. Instead, they fall back on popular stereotypes of young black men as coldhearted perpetrators (Stuart, 2020a, p. 150).

This incompetency is well-demonstrated in Stuart’s work with Junior –a member of the Corner Boys— who traded insults with rivals online as a way to avoid/deescalate rather than incite violence, but was taken by his probation officer as being evidence of his character and criminality. Whilst Junior was on probation, he refrained from criminal and gang-related activities. This included extricating himself from his gang network, re-enrolling in high school, working at a fast food restaurant, reconnecting with his estranged mother, committing to his pregnant partner and moving out of Corner Boys’ territory. Given all of these efforts, Junior was excited about his probation hearing since he had avoided re-arrest, did not fail a drug test and carried a letter from his English teacher showing his dedication to school. Despite all of this, Junior’s probation officer recommended that his probation continue, given “A series of Facebook and Instagram uploads where Junior exchanged aggressive, profanity-laden insults with several longstanding rivals” (Stuart, 2020, p. 204). They thought that his social media content provided that clearest evidence of his character, even clearer than his clean record and support letter. Given that Stuart spent time with Junior on a near-daily basis, he asserts that the probation officer’s reading of Junior’s social media content was hugely inaccurate (Stuart, 2020, p. 204). Despite his online statements, Junior was involved in no offline violence. Junior explains that his uploads were intended to avoid offline violence and opportunistic attacks that would jeopardise his commitment to a different life:

What he [the probation officer] want me to do? I ain’t finna do sum’ [be violent toward] these clowns. I’m tryna’ get right [avoid criminal behavior]. But I also can’t let these niggas talk shit without sayin’ none. If I do that, I’m dead. I can’t stay in my mama’s house forever. I gotta go to work. I gotta go to school. If these niggas see me on the bus, and they think I’m sweet, they definitely gon’ get down [attack him]. But if they think I’m still poled up [armed and ready], then they ain’t gon’ do shit! (Stuart, 2020b, p. 204).

Stuart argues that the court actors not only overestimated the relationship between Junior’s posts and his desire to be violent offline, but they inverted this relationship (Stuart, 2020b, p. 204). I think this is evidence of how the police misunderstand drillers’ intentions. In this case, Junior’s taunts are intended to avoid violence, but this was not recognised by the police.

As stated at the beginning of the section when attributing intentions to people, we rely on principles such as believing what people tell us their intentions are, a principle of assuming they are rational and that those attributing intentions will have familiarity with the conventions of drill. I have argued that a charitable default assumption of intention, satisfying these parameters, is that drillers intend to cross reference as a way of gaining various financial, social and emotional benefits. When the police attribute the intention of incitement, they would need to show that there is a good case to be made by appealing to the three principles guiding our attribution of intentions. However, there is good reason to question whether such a case can be made that drillers always have this intention, given the difficulty in determining whether we can construe incitement as a plausible indirect intention, the intention to incite is unreflective of drillers’ testimony, and the police lack the required expertise to impute intention. Crucially, the onus is on the police to present a stronger case for drillers having the intention of inciting violence against themselves every time they taunt their rivals in songs. And, since there is an alternative consistent interpretation of drillers that takes them at their word and is supported by those with expertise in drill, such a case will be difficult to make.

In this section, I have provided a framework for evaluating whether there is incitement, and it does not look like there has been a proper engagement with the criteria of evaluation from the police. There are two things in contention, is it incitement or cross referencing. If the police wanted to show that taunts are incitement, they need to make a good case that there is an intention to incite, and there are reasons to doubt that will always be the case. They would have to show that there is the appropriate uptake, and whilst sometimes there might be, it does not look like this is true for all violent taunts in drill. Further, they would have to show this is in conjunction with the authority condition, and there is a surer case that this condition can be met over the other two. Crucially, I have casted doubt over whether they have been or will be able to show these conditions have been met when drillers taunt violently. Moreover, I have argued that there is an alternative speech act in cross referencing which more convincingly meets these conditions. That is, drillers have the authority to cross reference; they receive uptake for cross referencing, and there is a strong case to make that they intend to cross reference.

**Section 4 – Conclusion: Illocutionary Silencing and Discursive Injustice**

In this chapter, I have argued that it would be difficult for the police to show that felicity conditions for the speech act of incitement are met. Moreover, they would have to show that it is more plausible that they are performing the speech act of incitement rather than the speech act of cross referencing. I have not aimed to argue that drillers are never involved in illocutions of incitement, but I have argued that the burden of proof is on the police to make the stronger case. Moreover, so long as drillers are at least sometimes engaged in the illocution of cross referencing, it is problematic that the police take as a general policy position that instances of violent taunts in rap are illocutions of incitement to violence. This is significant, because if my arguments are right, then a case could be made that drillers themselves may well be silenced or suffer a kind of discursive injustice, when they are misinterpreted in the ways I have described. I sketch the kind of case that could be made here.

**4.1 – Illocutionary Silencing**

Understood in broadly intentionalist terms, recognition of a speaker’s intention –or uptake— is necessary for the performance of illocutionary acts. For instance, in an example adopted from Langton (1993), Ella may utter the words “not now” with the intention of refusing Craig’s sexual advances but because Craig is in the grip of stereotypes or rape myths about women –that they play “hard to get”— he fails to recognise Ella’s intention. So, Ella is prevented from performing the illocutionary act of refusal.

When the police assume, on the basis of insufficient evidence, the intentions of drillers who taunt are to be that of encouraging gang violence, they illocutionarily disable drillers. Silencing occurs when an audience fails to recognise the intentions of the speakers or prevents speakers from performing the speech acts at all.

Now, when drillers taunt in their songs, I have argued that it is plausible to see their indirect intention as engaging in cross referencing with the direct intention of gaining financial, social and emotional benefits. The police, however, fail to recognise this intention when they take all taunts to be intentions to incite violence – perhaps because they are in the grip of stereotypes about the criminality of black men. For instance, Stuart notes that outcomes like seeing taunts in drill as encouraging violence are common among not only the police but the public that imagines urban streets overrun by hypercriminal and hypersensitive black men, who retaliate violently to the slightest social media insult (Stuart, 2020b).

A complication here is that the police, unlike Craig, are not the intended audience of drillers’ taunts. I have made the case that drillers do cross reference with their rivals, but the police do not take them as cross referencing. It is worth separating out these two types of problematic silencing: 1) illocutionary disablement because intentions are not recognised, and instead incitement is imputed; and 2) further disablement and silencing, when the music is censored and freedom of expression is restricted. The first kind of silencing is more in line with the idea that Langton articulates (being unable to refuse a sexual advance because Ella is understood as consenting coyly). I think that even though the police are not the intended audience, the fact that they are an audience that is able to systematically influence whether drillers can release music based on their reading of intention, their inability to recognise the intention to cross reference matters. This might depart from Langton’s notion of illocutionary silencing, but I think it is a distinctive further disablement and silencing. Consequently, the police’s treatment of drillers by censoring and restricting other freedoms becomes a systematic kind of disablement where certain speech acts by drillers become *unspeakable* (Langton, 1993).

**4.2 – Discursive Injustice**

Kukla has refined and developed this notion of silencing into what they call “discursive injustice”:

When members of any disadvantaged group face a systematic inability to produce certain kinds of speech acts that they ought, but for their social identity, to be able to produce –and in particular when their attempts result in their actually producing a different kind of speech act that further weakens or problematizes their social position –then we can say they suffer a discursive injustice (Kukla, 2014, p. 441).

Kukla gives an example of Celia, a factory floor manager, who tries to issue orders to her male subordinates but is taken to be issuing requests instead. This occurs because Celia's gender, and problematises her social position.

Discursive injustice may be committed if, in the eyes of the police, young black male drillers are not able to produce the speech act of cross referencing. Instead, the police take them to be producing an entirely different speech act –one of incitement to offline violence. It is plausible to suggest this distortion occurs on the basis of the social identity of the drillers, especially when we consider how young black men are subject to stereotypes which see them as criminal, involved in gangs, unable to be involved in complex ritualised and artistic performances (such as cross referencing), violent and lacking in emotional regulation which leads them to respond to insults in rap music with violence (Curry, 2017; Khan, 2020).

The young black male driller occupies a subordinated position in society, and the claim that rap incites violence might be disguised as a concern about public safety. However, we might question whether the police highlighting rap's violent effects are really just concerned about black men “who already loom as a threatening stereotype in the minds of society” (Nielson, 2012, as cited in Dunbar, 2018). This further problematises the social position of drillers, by perpetuating racist stereotypes and unjustly restricting their freedoms. Drillers often make drill music to gain material, social and emotional benefits otherwise unavailable to them due to their social position. However, the police's restrictions on their freedoms and censorship pose further obstacles to securing these benefits, and impose additional burdens in the form of police interventions and interactions with the criminal justice system.

Kukla makes the strong claim that when this injustice happens, the speaker actually fails in producing the speech act they intended to produce. I want to say that drill artists do often succeed in getting the uptake from some of the people who matter/the intended audience (i.e. other drillers), but there is another audience that also matters, namely the police who take them to be producing a different kind of speech act. There is a discursive injustice even though the intended audience often succeed in giving uptake, since the police -- who matter very much to the freedoms and capacities of drillers -- do not give uptake for cross referencing. Whilst I think this is some departure from Kukla, like above, I do think the police's misunderstanding is important because of their power to restrict based on their illocutionary distortions. I think this is a distinctive further discursive injustice

Since illocutionary silencing and discursive injustice are grave harms, it shows the significance of my argument here. It also shows that drillers are owed careful consideration of the illocutionary acts they perform in their music – more careful than police assumptions about incitement have been.

This chapter concludes my focus on rap’s alleged problematic connection to violence. In the next chapter, I shift my focus to a feminist critique of rap music, which sees self-sexualising black women rappers are reinforcing problematic stereotypes.

**Chapter 5 –Prospects for a Progressive Critique of Rap: The Challenge of Oppressive Double Binds**

Rap music is often scrutinised for its representations of black women. Although most criticism focuses on how male rappers' presentations of black women in their lyrics and videos perpetuate oppression against black women, black women rappers have been criticised – by a range of critics – as being agents in their oppression (Rose, 2008). One strand of this criticism focuses on black women rappers’ self-sexualisation – black women rappers foregrounding their own sexual properties/desires – where some black feminist critics argue that these representations reinforce or perpetuate problematic stereotypes (Benard, 2016; hooks, 2014). However, criticism of self-sexualising rap is just one evaluative response to it. Another response lauds self-sexualising rap for its empowering and liberating effects (Young, 2014; March, 2020).

In this chapter, I introduce a framework for understanding these competing responses to self-sexualising rap by using Sukaina Hirji's (2021) analysis of oppressive double binds. This framework helps us to understand the dialectical stalemates that emerge in evaluating black women rappers' self-sexualisation by offering a new understanding of the complexities involved when female rappers engage in self-sexualisation. Consequently, we will be better informed about how to construct any progressive critiques of self-sexualising rap.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 1 briefly defines self-sexualisation and explains how black woman rappers are self-sexualising in their raps. Section 2 outlines a black feminist critique of self-sexualising rap, which sees it as perpetuating problematic colonial stereotypes. Section 3 presents an alternative evaluative perspective on self-sexualising rap, which sees it as empowering and an important form of social resistance. There is a clear tension between these evaluative perspectives, and section 4 outlines the concept of oppressive double binds and diagnoses self-sexualising rappers as being caught in them. Section 5 develops a progressive critique of self-sexualising rap based on this diagnosis.

**Section 1 – What is Self-sexualising Rap?**

Morgan (2024) describes sexualisation as occurring when one person treats another as a sexual being or a sexual object (a sexual entity), specifically, “whenever some actual or perceived sexual property of theirs is foregrounded” (Morgan, 2024, p. 483).

An actual or perceived sexual property includes “a person’s actual or perceived sexual desires and a person’s actual or perceived role in the sexual desires of others” (Morgan, 2024, p. 486). Morgan explains that the properties of a person may be sexualised if properties are generally seen as playing a role in sexual desire. For instance, certain body parts (genitals, breasts and so on) and certain acts (oral, penile-vaginal and other types of sex) are so widely assumed to be implicated in sexual desire that drawing attention to these acts or body parts is sufficient to foreground sexual desires.

Drawing on the work of Amy Olberding (2014), Morgan (2024) and Vince (2023) assert that we can understand foregrounding here as raising property X to salience or treating property X as the most relevant thing about person Y (Vince, 2023, p. 446) (Morgan, 2024, p. 482).[[32]](#footnote-32) Olberding gives the example of a conference organiser who attempts to foreground the feature “philosopher,” –through starting conversations about philosophy– but the conference attendees do not cooperate with this foregrounding (Olberding, 2014). They instead foreground the feature “pregnancy” by focusing on her pregnancy and ignoring her philosophical contributions. Crucially, what she backgrounds –her pregnancy– is foregrounded by the attendees, and what she attempts to foreground –her philosophy– is backgrounded.

Morgan's conception of sexualisation is morally neutral. However, in his paper, he gives the following example of unwanted sexualisation:

Business Meeting: Ashley is attending a business meeting shortly after accepting a job at a new organisation. The small team that she works with, most of whom are men, are also in attendance. The meeting is led by their manager, Bill. After welcoming her, Bill turns to Ashley and says: “You’re very pretty, aren’t you? I know the guys are very happy to have you working here. I’m sure you’ll have a good time with them” (Morgan, 2024, p. 481)

Here, Morgan asserts that Ashley is being treated as a sexual being or a sexual object against her will. This is because Bill “casts Ashley in a sexual light, commenting on (his view of) her sexual capacities and sexual desires, and sexualises her male colleagues by implying that they would enjoy engaging in sexual acts with her” (Morgan, 2024, p. 482). Crucially, she is perceived to have a role in her colleagues desires, and this is taken to be the most important thing to comment on.

In these examples, one person sexualises another in unwanted ways, and there are obviously morally problematic dimensions of this. But it is possible to sexualise oneself - in this paper, I will be concerned with self-sexualisation, particularly of black women rappers. Here, I take self-sexualisation to be when someone treats themselves as a sexual entity by foregrounding an actual or perceived sexual property of their own.[[33]](#footnote-33) That is, black women rappers self-sexualise when they foreground their own sexual desires, which includes raising to salience particular body parts and sexual acts that are associated with sexual desires. Unlike the above example, where it is against a person’s will, it is much less clear what might be wrong, if anything, with such self-sexualisation. However, in the case of black women rappers, self-sexualisation has been the site of conflicting evaluative and moral responses. This chapter takes us through the contours of these responses and critically evaluates them.

**1.1— Self-sexualisation in Black Women Rappers**

There has been a history of chart-topping and record-breaking rap songs which involve self-sexualising black women rappers.[[34]](#footnote-34) Most notable are Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s “Wet Ass Pussy” (WAP) (2020)–which topped the Billboard US 100 Charts– and Nicki Minaj’s Anaconda (2014) –which became the first music video for a solo female rap song to hit 1 billion views. In both songs, artists treat themselves as sexual entities by foregrounding their actual or perceived sexual properties. For instance, in WAP, this sexualisation is not just evidenced by the title of the song, which raises the salience of and celebrates Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's aroused genitalia, but the lyrics of WAP are heavily focused on their own sexual desires. When Cardi raps, "Look, I need a hard hitter, I need a deep stroker/I need a Henny drinker, I need a weed smoker/Not a garden snake, I need a king cobra/With a hook in it, hope it lean over," she is foregrounding her own sexual desires by describing the type of sexual partner she desires (B & Thee Stallion, 2020). Moreover, when she raps, “I don’t cook, I don’t clean/ But let me tell you how I got this ring,” Cardi B treats her sexual properties (rather than her other properties) as instrumental to securing marriage. This also supports the view that she has sexual skills that men desire (B & Thee Stallion, 2020).

The music video to WAP provides further evidence of self-sexualisation. During many scenes, we see both Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion simulating sex positions, sticking their tongues out at one another, which indicates a desire to engage in oral sex. We also see similar self-sexualisation in Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda,” which featured, as Cate Young (2014) puts it, “Ass, ass, everywhere,” with Nicki Minaj also simulating various sexual positions, including deep-throating a banana, which is symbolic of a penis (B & Thee Stallion, 2020). Even the cover art features Nicki Minaj wearing a thong in the squat position.

I have made the case that black women rappers like Cardi B and Nicki Minaj are engaging in self-sexualisation by foregrounding their own actual or perceived sexual desires. Self-sexualisation might sometimes involve self-objectification (Morgan, 2024), but it also accounts for black women rappers expressing themselves as sexual subjects. This is important since some black feminists (Young, 2014) have rejected the self-objectification framework as an appropriate way to understand most instances of black women’s engagement with their own sexuality, something that will become important in section 3. Next, I explore a critique of this self-sexualisation, which sees it as perpetuating/reinforcing problematic stereotypes.

**Section 2 – How Has Self-Sexualisation Been Criticised?**

The kinds of critiques advanced against self-sexualising rap were seen very loudly and clearly in the aftermath of WAP and Anaconda. Since their releases WAP and Anaconda have become paradigmatic examples of self-sexualisation in rap music, and indicative cases of the kinds of responses self-sexualising black women rappers have received due to their music. A range of commentators critically scrutinised both songs. On one end of this spectrum of perspectives were conservatives, whose attacks on both songs were based on values such as modesty, sexual purity and traditional family values. At the other end of the spectrum were progressive critics, whose criticisms were based on freedom and equality.

One of the loudest conservative critics was Ben Shapiro, who went on a viral rant about WAP. He tweeted that his only real concern is that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion seek the medical care they require, since requiring a "bucket and a mop" is, according to his wife's diagnosis, a sign of "bacterial vaginosis, a yeast infection, or trichomonis” (Shapiro, 2020). It is doubtful Shapiro is concerned for Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s medical care. Rather, his rant seems to ridicule them for expressing their sexuality and seems to be motivated by the need to police such expression. Other conservative critics expressed their concern with how WAP is ruining American values, corrupting the kids and a reflection of life without God. James P. Bradley, a Republican congressional candidate at the time, claimed, “Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are what happens when children are raised without God and a strong father figure” (Brown, 2020). He claimed that WAP made him want to pour holy water in his ears (Brown, 2020). DeAnna Lorraine, who had recently lost a Republican primary election, claimed WAP was “disgusting and vile,” and Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion setback “the entire female gender back by 100 years” (Sacher, 2020). Fox news anchor Tucker Carlson asserted that Cardi B is “explaining to women how they can become more useful sex objects” before asking the Fox news audience to imagine what WAP is doing to young girls (Nolan, 2020). When conservative commentator Candace Owens appeared on Fox News to talk about WAP being performed at the Grammys, she asserted, “virtually, what we were looking at last night was a lesbian sex scene being simulated on television, and this is considered feminist” (CNN, 2024). She later remarked that WAP “seems like an attack on American values, American traditions, and you’re actually actively trying to make children aspire to things that are grotesque” (CNN, 2024). The values motivating these critiques are traditional conservative ones such as modesty, expressing sexuality according to religious teachings, family values, purity and so forth.

These conservative critiques appear to be based in prejudice. For instance, Shapiro seeing vaginal lubrication as a medical condition as opposed to a basic biological process, seems to stigmatise female arousal as gross. There is also something insulting about deliberately misinterpreting art in this way. When Cardi B rapped “Now get a bucket and a mop; that’s some wet-ass pussy,” it seems like she was attempting to express how sexually aroused she is (B & Thee Stallion, 2020). But Shapiro deliberately misinterprets her as literally offering a statement of fact, in response to which a medical diagnosis might be appropriate. This could function to deliberately prevent uptake of Cardi B’s expression, which then prevents Cardi B from actually expressing her own sexual desires.

Moreover, the accusation that WAP somehow ruins American values also seems to be based in the prejudicial thought that sexual explicitness –and especially female sexual explicitness— is corrupting. Even if WAP is misogynoiristic, the extent to which critics can say it corrupts American society is limited, given that American society is laden with sexism and misogynoiry. The targeted criticism towards black female sexual expression is clear, especially when conservative politicians – such as Bradley – and commentators dismiss former President Donald Trump’s “pussy-grabbing” comments as “banter” and “locker room talk” (Bradley, as quoted in Mahdawi, 2020). Why are Trump’s comments not seen as corrupting or depraved, but black women expressing their sexual pleasures are? These critiques appear to be rooted in racist and misogynoiristic stereotypes. For instance, Bradley’s comment that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are products of a fatherless household plays on the stereotypes that black men are absent in their children’s lives. Further, it evokes the thought that black women are not strong enough or equipped to raise children on their own and that there is something defective about such households because they are counter-normative.

Conservative critiques are one kind of dissent that gets advanced against self-sexualising rap. In this chapter, I focus on a progressive critique of self-sexualising rap because it is based in important feminist/progressive values, but still, there is difficulty in articulating the kinds of problems these critiques look to identify. I have started by outlining and describing conservative critiques because it provides an interesting contrast to more interesting and compelling critiques, ones that are not bound with hypocrisy as well as problematic racialised views about black women’s bodies and sexuality.

A subset of progressive critiques against self-sexualising rap is a black feminist critique of self-sexualisation. Some black feminists criticise self-sexualising rap for its promulgation of problematic racialised stereotypes. Critics assert that the self-sexualisation occurring in rap can be located in a long tradition of sexualising, objectifying and stereotyping black women’s bodies. Notable black feminists like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, see black female bodies as having always been linked with hypersexuality (hooks, 2015; Hill Collins, 2004). Where, sexuality refers to sexual capacities, including sexual thoughts, feelings, behaviours and attractions (Health, 2024), hypersexuality here refers to sexuality that is abnormal and excessive. Whilst we often think that expressions of sexuality are healthy, black women’s sexual expressions are often seen as “at best inappropriate and at worst insatiable” (Hill Collins, 1990, p.83). Where black women were viewed as commodities during colonialism and transatlantic slavery, stereotypes dating back to these times are still salient today. For example, Sara Baartman – a South African native – was sexually trafficked by Europeans to Europe in the 1810s and made to display her figure to spectators. Commentators draw parallels between how black women self-sexualise in popular media and how Baartman was commodified (Morgan H, 2018). For instance, Benard likens how Nicki Minaj presents herself in “Anaconda” to how Baartman was presented. She asserts, “the image of Nicki Minaj, caged, in chains, displaying, and singing about her prominent buttocks in no way differs from the 19th-century display of Sara Baartman” (Benard, 2016, p. 6).[[35]](#footnote-35)

Other black feminists and feminist scholars have also been critical of self-sexualising rap. Tricia Rose argues that commercial black women in rap, such as Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, self-sexualise because they "have relied on the product reserved especially for black women: sexual excess" (Rose, 2008, p. 124). Gail Dines argues that the hypersexualised images of black women present in self-sexualising rap “serve to breathe new life into old stereotypes that circulate mainstream society” (Dines, 2014).

bell hooks has been very vocal about self-sexualisation in popular media.[[36]](#footnote-36) This is seen in her critique of Anaconda, where, in a public talk about Minaj and Beyoncé, she claimed “this shit is boring” insofar as it stays within a stereotypical framework about black women’s bodies and sexuality. She asserts that Minaj and Beyoncé “can exercise control and make lots of money, but that doesn’t equate with liberation” (hooks, quoted in Stoeffel, 2014). hooks was also critical of Beyoncé’s album “Lemonade,” which she described as mostly staying within a “conventional stereotypical framework” (hooks, 2016). She asserts that Beyoncé’s “vision of feminism does not call for an end to patriarchal domination” (hooks, 2016). hooks has been critical of Beyonce before. On a 2014 panel titled “Are You Still a Slave?” hooks asserted

I see a part of Beyoncé that is, in fact, anti-feminist, that is assaulting, that is a terrorist … especially in terms of the impact on young girls. I actually feel like the major assault on feminism in our society has come from visual media and from television and from videos (hooks, quoted in School, 2014).

The values underpinning hooks’ critiques of self-sexualising rap seem to involve values of freedom from exploitation and domination (hooks, 2016). She claims that the stereotypes perpetuated by self-sexualisation reinforce the domination of black women. They are a mere continuation of the exploitation of the black female body –not under colonialism— but under patriarchal capitalism.

Freedom from exploitation and domination are not the only values at stake in black feminist critiques of self-sexualisation. Benard argues that imagery involved in self-sexualisation exists in opposition to sexual health, sexual rights and human rights, more generally of black women (Benard, 2016). Benard asserts that the values underlying these rights are human dignity and human potential and that stereotypes perpetuating "negative colonial discourses about black female bodies erode both" (Benard, 2016, p. 10). Benard takes a human rights perspective on hypersexualised images of black women. For instance, Articles 3 and 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights highlight the bodily integrity of human beings by guaranteeing "security of person" and freedom from "degrading treatment" (Benard, 2016, p. 9). She argues that degrading images found in self-sexualisation can promote values that violate these rights. Degrading images related to black women’s hypersexuality can be understood as the controlling image –stereotypical images resulting from domination and oppression and designed to make social injustice appear normal (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 69)— of the jezebel, where black women’s “sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable” so she becomes seen as a “freak” (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 83). This is reflected in Cardi B’s lyrics “certified freak 7 days a week” (B & Thee Stallion, 2020). Whilst Benard offers no statistics in support of her claims, the key issue here is that the stereotypical images of black women perpetuated in self-sexualising rap putatively/allegedly violate the rights of other black women by restricting their enjoyment of fundamental rights such as freedom from degrading treatment.

In this section, I have outlined how black feminist scholars have critiqued self-sexualising rap for perpetuating problematic colonial stereotypes about black women’s hypersexuality. Multiple values motivate and underpin these critiques. For instance, hooks’ critiques of self-sexualisation are underpinned by the values of freedom from exploitation and domination. Benard's critiques are underpinned by upholding human rights. Underpinning these broader values are ones related to black women's dignity, potentiality/autonomy, agency, freedom from domination, and equality.

We might think that hooks’ claim that rappers are perpetuating stereotypes, and Benard’s claim that the degrading imagery found in self-sexualising rap violate the sexual health and rights of black women are empirical claims. These claims rely on data about who is listening to the music, watching the videos, and responding to the music in negative ways. Whilst hooks and Benard might need to substantiate their claims some more with empirical evidence, in this chapter my aim is not to scrutinise and defend these claims here. Rather, I am presenting these as illustrative of key lines of critique advanced against self-sexualising rap.

Next, I explore an alternative black feminist perspective to self-sexualisation, which sees it as positive and empowering.

**Section 3 – An Alternative Perspective on Self-Sexualisation: Empowerment and Resistance**

Black feminist scholars, such as bell hooks, have been criticised for “relying too heavily on colonial discourses around the black female body and neglecting the contemporary lived experience of black women” (Benard, 2016, p. 2). Jennifer Nash, for instance, points out the oversimplification of parallels between self-sexualisation and Sara Baartman (Nash, 2008).

Many contemporary perspectives on self-sexualisation see it as a source of empowerment and resistance. Cate Young, for instance, sees Nicki Minaj’s performance in Anaconda as “empowering and profoundly feminist," subverting "the male gaze and achieving ultimate sexual empowerment” (Young, 2015). Young explains that Minaj’s twerking with other women in the video is on her terms, and her overt sexual performance involves almost no men, which indicates she is flaunting her sexual agency (Young, 2015).

Moreover, this evaluative perspective seems to fit what artists say the intentions of their work are. Megan Thee Stallion, for instance, claims that WAP tackles double standards within rap; where men can talk in sexualising ways about black women, black women should also be able to talk in sexualising ways about themselves and men (Richmond, 2020). She asserts, “I feel like for a long time men felt like they owned sex, and now women are saying, ‘Hey, this is for me. I want pleasure. This is how I want it or don’t want it’” (Thee Stallion, quoted in Kibbe 2020).[[37]](#footnote-37)

Another way self-sexualising rap is seen as a source of resistance and empowerment is in its perceived opposition to respectability politics. Where black women are taught to be respectable – “meek, quiet, classy, submissive and wears pearls” (March, 2020, p. 20) – to counter stereotypes about their hypersexuality or loudness, some hip-hop feminists see the self-sexualisation of black women as a big “fuck you” to the restrictions imposed by respectability politics (March, 2020).[[38]](#footnote-38) This manifests in images such as the queen-hoe dichotomy: the queen is a black woman heeding to respectability politics, whereas the hoe is loud, dominant, shakes her ass and is sexually expressive (March, 2020). Self-sexualising rappers such as Nicki Minaj, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion promote sexual positivity, destroy double standards and challenge, critique and reconstruct meanings of black womanhood (Payne, 2020). As Ashley Payne writes, “hip hop allowed me to be unapologetically loud and ratchet, giving me space and voice to be loud and free to move/manipulate my body in ways that were not deemed respectable” (Payne, 2020, p. 27).

Kyra March sees rappers engaging in self-sexualisation as “percussive feminists” (March, 2020). Percussive feminism draws from the term percussion, which is the “striking of one body with or against another with some degree of force so as to give a shock; impact; a strike, blow [or] knock.” She describes percussive feminists as “loud as fuck. Dynamic. It’s bold and goes against all tradition” (March, 2020, p. 21).[[39]](#footnote-39) Self-sexualising rappers can be seen as percussive feminists since they promote sexual freedom, agency and autonomy through unapologetically presenting and expressing the black female body in ways that disrupt and resist constraints on black women’s sexuality. Some self-sexualising rap, then, can be seen as fighting the constraints of respectability politics – which want black women to be quiet and submissive – and policing of black women’s bodies. Crucially, self-sexualisation allows black women to “flaunt their sexual agency, positivity, and freedom,” which provides other black women with the courage to do the same (March, 2020, p. 24). On this reading, self-sexualising hip hop becomes a tool to fight oppression against black women, not perpetuate it.

Recall the motivations underpinning the critique that self-sexualising rap is problematic by virtue of promulgating harmful stereotypes: it leads to the domination and exploitation of black female bodies; it promotes values that could violate the rights of black women. And underpinning these broader values are values of freedom, agency, dignity, potentiality and autonomy. According to black feminists, such as Cate Young and Kyra March, self-sexualising rap promotes these broader values by reconstructing black womanhood. For instance, women’s agency, autonomy and freedom from the domination of oppressive norms are promoted by rejecting the constraints of respectability politics, and by realising their potential to sexualise themselves, they reaffirm their dignity.

In this section, I have presented an alternative perspective to the critique that self-sexualising rap is problematic by virtue of perpetuating problematic stereotypes. According to this perspective, self-sexualising rap is empowering and can be an important tool of resistance against oppression for some black women. For proponents of this perspective, self-sexualising rap affirms the same values it is said to diminish in the alternative perspective. Again, I want to make clear that I am not endorsing the claim that the only means to empowerment is self-sexualisation. I merely want to highlight that it is a possibility that some authors have argued is true for them, and this possibility seems to be closed off if we endorse the view that we should be critical of these kinds of performances because they perpetuate or reinforce problematic stereotypes (and so cannot be genuinely empowering). Crucially, these different evaluative positions – perpetuating problematic stereotypes vs. expressing empowerment/subversion of stereotypes – are in tension and potentially in conflict.

One might question the dialectic I have presented so far. It could be the case that for the individual, self-sexualising rap can be an empowering expression of sexual pleasure; but for the broader community, it perpetuates problematic stereotypes. Since both could be true simultaneously, there is not a conflict between these two evaluative perspectives, and perhaps my focus would be better directed at determining whether the costs of perpetuating problematic stereotypes outweigh the positives gained by the empowerment of self-sexualisation. However, whilst someone might try to dissolve this conflict in this way, I want to take the strategy of endorsing the conflict –not dissolving it– and showing the difficulties it generates for those caught in the middle of oppressive norms –namely, oppressive double binds.

Moreover, it might also be that these different evaluative perspectives are not able to be held simultaneously. When we look at the values underpinning both sides, they are the same. For instance, hooks and Benard critique self-sexualising rap for diminishing the values of sexual autonomy, sexual dignity, sexual agency and sexual freedom. March and Payne, however, praise self-sexualising rap for promoting these values. There seems to be a conflict here insofar as it cannot be that self-sexualisation both promotes and diminishes these values – and as we will see in section 4, this constitutes an oppressive double bind. [[40]](#footnote-40) Whether we think there is an inconsistency between both positions or not, there is a clear tension that we might want to resolve: is self-sexualising rap a form of resistance to constraining norms, or a way of perpetuating oppressive stereotypes? Should it be critiqued or praised? In the next section, I propose a way forward by deploying a framework that allows us to respect these competing views and see the complexity with which they interact.

**Section 4 - Oppressive Double Binds**

In this section, I argue that if the claim that self-sexualisation is problematic hinges on whether the self-sexualisation perpetuates problematic stereotypes, women rappers are in an oppressive double bind.[[41]](#footnote-41) Oppressive double binds (ODBs) are “double binds that exist in virtue of oppression….and are a product of and serve to reinforce oppressive structures” (Hirji, 2021, p. 643). ODBs differ from other choice situations insofar as they result from and are mechanisms of oppressive social structures. ODBs arise when an agent belonging to an oppressed group is given a choice between cooperation or resistance with some oppressive norm. In this choice, two goods are at stake: their prudential good and resistance to oppression (Hirji, 2021). These two goods are bound up together to make cooperation reinforce the oppressive norm controlling their access to security and power. On the one hand, if they cooperate with the norm, they are reinforcing the norm. On the other hand, if they resist the norm, they are likely to face immediate sanctions. On either option, they are acting against their own interest. ODBs are distinctively bad for agents trapped in them because they undermine their agency. Where agency is understood as a capacity to act intentionally or for reasons, there is a clear sense in which individuals in ODBs exercise their agency, yet whatever end is chosen, their agency is undermined by that very same choice; the undermining nature of ODBs is such that, whatever intention or reasons an agent has for acting, these very same reasons are undermined by their action (Hirji, 2021). If our agency involves us acting for a reason, but the action we take ends up going against or undercutting this reason, then there is a sense in which our agency is diminished.

Hirji gives an example of an ODB involving a teenage girl being pressured by her boyfriend to lose her virginity with him. If she refuses sex, her boyfriend will break up with her, and she will be written off as frigid or a tease, leading her to be viewed as sexually undesirable and unavailable. Alternatively, she can comply, but this will only serve to reinforce a system where her decisions are not hers to make (Hirji, 2021, p. 656). The oppressive norm at play here is that girls/women do not have any sexual autonomy –that is, that they not be in charge of their own sexual decisions. The oppressive double bind exists because whichever action she takes – having sex with her boyfriend or not having sex with her boyfriend – her sexual autonomy is threatened. Refusing sex to promote her sexual autonomy would end up threatening her sexual autonomy since she would be labelled as sexually inaccessible. But succumbing to the pressure of sex will also violate her sexual autonomy –since she would rather not have sex— so whichever option she chooses might contribute to her inability to exercise her sexual autonomy. Her agency is undermined insofar as whatever ends she hopes to achieve by choosing to cooperate or resist will be undermined by whichever choice she chooses (Hirji, 2021).

I argue that this framework helps us understand the dialectical stalemates that emerge in evaluating critiques of black women rapper’s self-sexualisation. When rappers choose to self-sexualise as an expression of their sexual autonomy, they choose to resist oppressive norms and systems governing black women’s sexual behaviour, such as norms about respectability and black women being queens (March, 2020). However, in doing so, their self-sexualisation is perceived in light of stereotypes about black women’s hypersexuality, which undermines their agency since they reinforce the oppression they seek to resist (hooks, 2014; Benard, 2016). If rappers choose not to self-sexualise and cooperate with the oppressive norms dictating black women’s behaviour, they reinforce these oppressive respectability norms and systems. Whichever these rappers do their agency is undermined since were they to cooperate with oppressive norms of hypersexuality or respectability, or resist oppressive norms of hypersexuality or respectability, they will still end up perpetuating oppressive norms. The undermining nature of double binds is such that, whatever intention or reasons an agent has for acting [promoting sexual autonomy and expression] these very same reasons are undermined by their action [thereby thwarting sexual autonomy and expression]. [[42]](#footnote-42)

**4.1 – Objections**

One might object that the ODB framework needs further clarification. Why assume that the only choices are between perpetuating stereotypes of hypersexuality and conforming to respectability? One can challenge norms of respectability without self-sexualising. I agree that rappers can challenge norms of respectability without self-sexualising, e.g. Megan Thee Stallion can challenge norms of respectability by just using expletives. However, my focus in this paper is where rappers do self-sexualise, and the audience’s responses to this performance. Where they are self-sexualising, one black feminist audience is claiming they are playing into the hypersexual stereotype, whereas another black feminist audience is claiming they are challenging norms of respectability.

Another potential objection would be that black women rappers are not caught in an ODB since they can find different ways to express their sexuality, which do not perpetuate problematic stereotypes. Although an alternative mode of expression would not make the conflict of norms less oppressive, it might make it less of a bind because one could just do something else. An objector might point to other black women rappers, such as Missy Elliot, Lauryn Hill, Lizzo and Janelle Monae, as artists who have successfully navigated the oppressive double bind and as models for self-sexualising rappers like Cardi B.

However, it would not be clear why these rappers would be counterexamples. Whilst an artist like Janelle Monae has not been criticised with the same strength that someone like Cardi B has, she has been criticised for her relatively new sexual form of expression, with some audiences and fellow black woman artists expressing concerns about hypersexuality (Holland, 2023; Press, 2023). The same is true of Lizzo, who has been criticised for playing into problematic colonial images and hypersexualisation (Obie, 2021). This is despite their large audience of fans who see their performances as liberatory. Further, although their self-sexualisation may not be as explicit as the other artists because they might wear baggy clothes in their videos –Missy Elliot— or they might wear suits in their videos –Janelle Monae— this does not mean that their lyrical content cannot be construed as reinforcing hypersexual stereotypes. Missy Elliot, for instance, often raps in self-sexualising ways. In “Lose Control” she raps “I’ve got a cute face/ chubby waist/ thick legs in shape/ rump shaking both ways,” (Genius, 2005) she foregrounds sexual properties commonly associated with the black female body.

Moreover, to suggest that rappers ought to express their sexuality in different ways, or point to rappers whose self-sexualisation appears to find a way out of the ODB as people to model their sexualisation after, is unreasonably demanding. It could be very difficult to express their sexuality in different ways, insofar as audiences may read any expression of sexuality as confirming the hypersexuality stereotype, which is what we see with rappers who some claim have navigated the double bind successfully. Moreover, no matter how demanding sexual expression becomes, proponents of this objection are saying "this is how you should express your sexuality; this is the acceptable way of doing it,"; so sexual autonomy is still undermined.

Along similar lines, a critic might claim that there are better ways to express and perform a liberatory sexuality that does not undermine the liberation self-sexualising rappers hope to achieve.[[43]](#footnote-43) For instance, when asked what a liberatory sexuality for black women that honours their agency looks like, bell hooks responded, “it may very well be that celibacy is the face of that sexuality” (hooks, 2014). hooks asserts, “what does it mean to be able to say I’d rather not be sexual than to be sexual in any context where I’m being mistreated; where I have doubt; where my feelings are not; where I’m triggered as an abuse survivor or what have you” (hooks, 2014). Cate Young has interpreted hooks’ as “embracing celibacy as a political means to counteract stereotypes of hypersexuality” (Young, 2014).

Whilst this may be a choice some wish to pursue, recommending it as a response to an oppressive double bind confirms that there is such a choice structure here. If black women’s choice is objectionable stereotypes or celibacy, then they cannot enjoy sexual agency and autonomy. Self-sexualising rappers may oppress themselves by perpetuating stereotypes about black women, but in being reluctant to express their sexual agency in ways that they want to, they are cooperating with oppressive norms governing their sexual agency and autonomy. There is no way to win or any way out of the double bind that will not be oppressive according to another set of norms. For instance, by endorsing celibacy, teaching, writing and so forth, as a means of resistance, critics are asking black women to cooperate with respectability and are also constraining their sexual autonomy.

hooks suggestion seems to force black women to choose between perpetuating oppressive stereotypes of hypersexuality or perpetuating norms of respectability –by opting for celibacy. Someone might reply that to embrace celibacy is not necessarily to perpetuate respectability norms, since endorsing celibacy might be a way of escaping heteronormative ideas of sexuality, and by refusing to engage in any kind of sexual activity, the agent escapes both norms of respectability and norms of hypersexuality. They, therefore, transcend both horns of the dilemma that constitute the ODB. However, the worry remains that the choice between perpetuating oppressive stereotypes of hypersexuality and celibacy is an oppressive double bind. This is still a restriction on sexual autonomy (perhaps the restriction does not come from heteronormative patriarchy, but from within feminism – but it is still a restriction.)

**4.2 – Pleasure & Resistance**

Putting the burden of finding other ways to express their sexuality which do not perpetuate problematic stereotypes on black women rappers will constrain their expression: it is difficult to insulate our sexual desires from dominant stereotypes. Black women should not be critiqued for having desires that are influenced by racial ideology –and if they do have such desires, it is not fair and restrictive of sexual autonomy/freedom to tell them that they cannot express them. There are many instances where black women rely on stereotypes for pleasure. This is seen in Jennifer Nash’s reading of Anthony Spinelli’s film “Sexworld” (Nash, 2014). In Sexworld, guests are promised their sexual fantasies will be fulfilled during their time at a sex resort. Roger opens his door to find a black woman –Jill— whom he initially mistakes for staff before realising she was paired with him. Initially, Roger is reluctant to have sex because he is racist, but Jill persuades him through “emphasising her racial difference and by adopting an exaggeratedly stereotypical racial manner of speaking” (Zheng, 2017, p. 183). For instance, when Jill is asked by Roger, “What are you supposed to do for me?” Jill responds with an exaggerated black vernacular, “Me, I provides entertainment, sir” (Nash, 2014, p. 91). After persuading Roger, they both have an enjoyable sexual encounter. This is indicated by Jill’s suggestive smile, knowing glance at the camera and cocked eyebrow indicating her pleasure in this racialised sexual scene (Nash, 2014, p. 97). Nash argues that Jill’s performance of racialised stereotypes is a source of pleasure for Roger and Jill. Nash thinks that the racial stereotypes Jill embodies in her behaviours play a necessary role in Jill’s pleasure-seeking since they provide “an essential lexicon of desire,” allowing her to “name and claim” pleasure that she might not have been able to access (Nash, 2014, pp. 105-106). For instance, Jill emphasises sexually appealing features commonly associated with the black female body: “These thighs, don’t make your peter rise?” And this ass, ain’t this a class ass?” (Nash, 2014, p. 94). The hypersexualised performances in rap, as in Sexworld, can be seen as forms of pleasure for women –and the racial stereotypes that self-sexualising rap is being critiqued for perpetuating are an important component of this pleasure. As Robin Zheng argues

The idea here is that Black women and their capacities for pleasure are not detachable from their specific socio-historical contexts, so some of the pleasures available to and longed for by black women are precisely those that depend on racialising structures and meanings (Zheng, 2017, p. 184).

Black women can rely on hypersexualised stereotypes for pleasure, but they can also demonstrate resistance in the very performance of these hypersexualised racial stereotypes. This is seen in Miller-Young’s analysis of a different pornographic scene in which two white men dressed in the white hoods of the Klu Klux Klan have sex with a black woman (Miller-Young, 2014). Miller-Young thought that the actress’s performance affirmed that she was in control of the scene, evidenced by her expressions of pleasure and gestures (Miller-Young, 2014). For example, her assertion, “I ain’t afraid of no ghosts,” denies the narrative or construction that she is coerced into sex (Miller-Young, 2014, p. 128). Miller-Young concluded that the scene is an “agentive sexual performance that presents the possibility of black women’s fantasies of racial-sexual domination” (2014, 129). The actresses' performance is one of resistance insofar as it “counters straightforward stereotypical narratives” (Zheng, 2017, p.180). There is a reliance on racial stereotypes here, but it is through these racial stereotypes that they affirm their blackness.

The upshot is that there could be pleasures in the performance of racialised stereotypes that are, although undetachable from histories of domination and pain, genuinely pleasurable for black women. These performances can also resist hypersexualised racial stereotypes by expressing strength, control, imagination, skill and discretion in ways that disrupt their sexual objectification. I am not presenting these pornographic scenes as an analogue to rap, and I am not denying that there are differences between these scenes and self-sexualising rap, but I am presenting these scenes as an example of how participating in racialised stereotypes can be chosen and a form of pleasure, resistance and an expression of sexual autonomy.

In the context of self-sexualising rap, perhaps rappers like Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are relying on racial stereotypes but are not being passive receivers of these racialised stereotypes; they are “taking an active stance in claiming a certain kind of pleasure from racial identification” (Zheng, 2017, p. 185). For instance, stereotypes about black women’s sexuality as animalistic and predatory emerged as a justification for the colonisation and rape of black women as a way of taming them (Dines, 2014). WAP features a lot of animal imagery, from the dangerous animals and animal print featured in the video, to the lyric “in the food chain, I’m the one to eat ya” (B & Thee Stallion, 2020). Their reliance on the stereotype that black women are animalistic is an agentive sexual performance that allows them to gain a certain type of pleasure from racial identification. Moreover, if a critic were to scrutinise their partaking in the stereotype as being one in which they are not actively engaging their creativity and critical powers, this also seems to deny black women a form of agency and creativity to reclaim these stereotypes.

So, black women are also caught up in ODBs in their performance of hypersexualised stereotypes. As we have seen in previous paragraphs, certain sexual desires depend on particular racialised meanings (Nash, 2014; Miller-Young, 2014; Zheng, 2017). Although racialised stereotypes are undetachable from a history of dominating and exploiting black bodies, some black women could gain genuine pleasure and demonstrate resistance from taking active stances in their performance of racialised stereotypes. In their performances, they are exercising and promoting their sexual autonomy, but they are still reinforcing racialised meanings and stereotypes about black women’s hypersexuality. For instance, Ariane Cruz (2010, as cited in Zheng, 2017) interprets the Klu Klux Klan scene as reinforcing the stereotype that black women are ignorant, unintelligent and jezebels who are unrapable because they are always sexually willing. However, should they choose not to perform certain racialised stereotypes, they are repressing their sexual desires by robbing themselves of a source of pleasure and empowerment. Their agency is undermined whichever they choose to do. If they do not perform certain racialised stereotypes, despite the pleasure and empowerment they gain, because they are afraid that they will receive backlash for perpetuating stereotypes or reinforcing racialised meanings, they cooperate in a system that polices their desires, undermining their sexual autonomy. If they do perform racialised stereotypes, they are exercising their sexual autonomy to gain pleasure, but they are perceived as reinforcing the very stereotypes that supposedly diminish their sexual autonomy.

According to my diagnosis of self-sexualising black women rappers as being caught in ODBs, behaviours count as resistance or compliance depending on which oppressive norm is focused on. Again, this highlights the pervasiveness and bidirectionality of being caught in an oppressive double bind. If the norm is to do with respectability, then self-sexualising rappers resist these norms but perpetuate hypersexual stereotypes, compromising the values they seek to promote in their resistance, e.g. sexual autonomy, agency and sexual freedom. Suppose they refuse to self-sexualise because they do not want to be seen as hypersexual. In that case, they comply with norms of respectability, robbing them of the sexual autonomy, agency and sexual freedom they look to promote in their compliance. If the norm is to do with hypersexuality, self-sexualising rappers are complying with stereotypical representations and diminishing their sexual autonomy, agency and freedom to express their sexuality. If they decide against self-sexualisation, they will be resisting norms of hypersexuality, but they will be denying themselves sexual autonomy, agency and freedom to express their sexuality. In either case of norms – hypersexuality or respectability – the modes of resistance and compliance are self-undermining insofar as they rob self-sexualising black women of the values – sexual autonomy, agency and sexual freedoms– they look to promote in their actions. The stereotypes and oppressive norms are dominating to such an extent that black women will always be read in terms of one or the other –e.g. hypersexual or respectable.

A critic might object that just because black women gain pleasure from certain racialised stereotypes, this does not explain why it’s a good thing to make public works that promote these stereotypes. They might argue that getting pleasure from something that reinforces stereotypes and is degrading to a category of persons to which I belong might be permissible and even a good thing for me to pursue this pleasure, but it is quite another thing for so many people to publicly promote this form of pleasure and broadcast it with aesthetic intensity to the world.

It seems, however, that recommending black women perform racialised stereotypes in ways that allow them to gain pleasure only privately can be construed as an enforcement of respectability politics. Given that black women’s performance of racialised stereotypes might reinforce racialised stereotypes, this puts pressure on black women not to fully explore their sexual selves. Black women face a “constant burden of representation” where they must be cognisant of how their individualised actions will be construed as representing all of black women –in this case, vindicating hypersexual stereotypes (Miller-Young, 2014, p.170). Zheng argues that this can also lead to epistemic violence, which Kristie Dotson calls "testimonial smothering" (2011), where a person must keep parts of her testimony silent to avoid misinterpretation in damaging and stereotypical ways. Black women are not supposed to talk about liking sex or perform in ways that show them enjoying sex because they are already assumed to be a jezebel.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Moreover, making self-sexualising performances public and broadcasting with such aesthetic intensity is important because those viewing these performances include black women. To ask black women to give up the pleasures involved in making and viewing self-sexualising rap music asks too much of them, since it asks them to give up a source of pleasure in a world where far too little sexual pleasure is available (Zheng, 2017, p.194). As Zheng argues,

In a world so thoroughly and deeply structured by white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalist exploitation, ableism and other oppressions, morally pure pleasures are hard to come by….If we must wait until the patriarchy is dismantled for morally pure sexual pleasures, then we will be allowed no pleasures at all (Zheng, 2017, p.194-195).

I have argued that a diagnosis of self-sexualising black women as caught up in oppressive double binds allows us to respect the competing perspectives of self-sexualisation, whilst acknowledging the complexity in which they interact. Next, I show how my diagnosis can advance the debate, by helping us articulate what a progressive critique of self-sexualising rap might involve.

**Section 5 – Developing a Progressive Critique of Self-sexualising Rap**

My analysis of self-sexualising rappers being caught in ODBs suggests self-sexualising black women rappers participate in their own oppression but, crucially, cannot escape some form of participation in their own oppression: If black women do self-sexualise then they perpetuate oppressive stereotypes and norms of hypersexuality against black women, and if they do not self-sexualise because they are afraid of perpetuating oppressive stereotypes and norms and the sanctions that come with this, they are reinforcing oppressive norms of respectability against black women. Oppressive double binds result from oppressive social contexts and norms, and those found in them end up reinforcing these very same oppressive social contexts and norms in their choices. In the case of self-sexualising rappers, whether they choose to self-sexualise and promulgate problematic stereotypes or not self-sexualise because they do not want to promulgate stereotypes about black women’s hypersexuality, they end up undermining the values they seek to promote: sexual autonomy, sexual agency, freedom of sexual expression and sexual pleasure.

Critiques of self-sexualisation in rap are often advanced in ways that target self-sexualising rappers. For instance, the critique that is the focus of this paper – the claim that self-sexualising rap promulgates problematic stereotypes – is often framed in ways that hold self-sexualising rappers as defective and problematic. For instance, in a study that explored whether self-sexualisation in rap is misogynoiristic (Bailey, 2021) or empowering through the eyes of viewers, a participant felt that self-sexualising rappers are selling themselves and their communities out by reinforcing stereotypes (Faluyi, 2015). The problem with critiques which focus on how self-sexualisation of women in rap is oppressive is that women are blamed for their own oppression rather than the oppressive structures maintaining the oppressive norms as causing oppression. This is unfair to rappers since it ignores how, whatever rappers decide to do – sexualise themselves or not sexualise themselves – they participate in their oppression. There is no choice in the double bind that does not, to some degree, undermine the prudential good of the rapper and the rapper’s resistance to oppressive systems and norms. Consequently, there is no way these rappers can wholly resist their oppression in these ODBs.

Instead, critiques about women’s preferences for self-sexualisation should focus on the oppressive social contexts they find themselves in. Criticisms that just focus on how self-sexualising rappers perpetuate their own oppression without paying attention to the context –and in particular, the oppressive double binds – in which rappers are self-sexualising are misguided. Little is gained by advancing critiques about an agent’s choice to self-sexualise rather than the contexts informing these choices.[[45]](#footnote-45) For instance, the critique that self-sexualising rap promulgates problematic stereotypes is supposed to be motivated by values of respecting women’s agency, sexual autonomy, dignity, freedom from domination, exploitation and so forth. However, this critique ignores how self-sexualisation is said to promote these values and does not pay sufficient attention to the circumstances in which rappers are self-sexualising. All choices in oppressive double binds which promote these values also – because of the oppressive norms – undermine them.

A critic might respond that we can criticise both the oppressive norms and the rappers perpetuating stereotypes. But this response is misguided. There seems to be something oppressive itself in prescribing how women should perform.[[46]](#footnote-46) Moreover, there seems to be an implicit assumption here that their preference to self-sexualise is not a good way to resist oppression, and there are better ways to resist oppression. However, the onus is on critics to show that these ways are not oppressive according to another set of norms. It may be that self-sexualisation as a method of resisting oppressive norms is imperfect and self-undermining, but the onus is on critics to show that there are other methods of sexual liberation which are not also imperfect and self-undermining.

**5.1 – Black Women Rappers’ Duties to Resist**

There is a rich philosophical literature on the notion of “duty to resist.” Authors have argued that the primary source of obligation to resist oppression is the badness of harms victims of oppression suffer (Terlazzo, 2020). Others have argued that the starting point for resistance to oppression begins with more general duties, such as the duty to protect one’s own rational nature or well-being (Hay, 2011; Silvermint, 2013) or duties not to harm other victims (Boxhill, 2010) or cause harm to victims (Superson 1993). It could be that critiques of self-sexualising rap are misguided insofar as they do not focus sufficient attention on the duties of self-sexualising rappers to resist norms. If some self-sexualising rappers are empowering themselves and others in challenging norms about respectability, we should see this as better than the alternative, which would involve compliance with norms of respectability. Consequently, critics of self-sexualising rap who see it as perpetuating problematic stereotypes are zeroing in on the wrong aspect of self-sexualisation.

However, as outlined in the last section, there are at least two oppressive norms governing black women’s sexual behaviour and autonomy: norms of respectability and norms of hypersexuality. Crucially, even if there is a legitimate duty to resist oppressive norms, in the case of self-sexualising rap, either way of resisting oppressive norms involves undermining one’s own agency, so there is no form of resistance that does not come with costs, and participation in oppression.

**5.2 – Other Rappers’ Duty to Resist**

Hirji argues that people who are not members of oppressed groups caught in oppressive double binds might have a “heightened moral obligation” to resist oppressive norms since their resistance incurs less severe costs than the resistance of members of an oppressed group who are caught in an oppressive double bind (Hirji, 2021, p. 654). In the context of rap, this could mean others have a heightened moral obligation to dismantle oppressive norms and systems governing black women’s sexual behaviour. But in discussing that, there should be attention to other oppressive norms too. So, for example, focusing on the obligation of male rappers would mean emphasising their duties not to make sexualising rap and perpetuate stereotypes about black women. Perhaps this would focus attention away from self-sexualising rappers and onto rap more broadly, but we might question whether this is a good strategy. Black art is often the subject of intensive scrutiny. For instance, black art has consistently been blamed for causing violence, corrupting the youth, demeaning women and reflecting all things bad in societies (Rose, 2008). The history of critique that black art forms have been subjected to shows a kind of selectivity regarding what is being critiqued as bad. Critiques about violence or the objectification of women are often framed in ways that lead observers to think black art forms like rap are primarily at fault for these wrongs. We might be worried that a response which says not to focus on self-sexualising rap for the perpetuation of stereotypes and oppressive norms but to focus on rap more broadly will motivate the critical scrutiny of an already often unjustifiably scrutinised art form.

Moreover, in asking black male rappers to think about how they might dismantle stereotypes that oppress black women, critics should be alert to the potential for supporting racially misandrist critiques of rap music. Black males have been stereotyped as being sexually deviant since colonial times (Khan, 2022). There is reason to think that these stereotypes still inform feminist critiques of black male rap today, especially when we compare the hyper-scrutiny of rap to other genres. For instance, Khan has noted the racialised differences between public feminists and anti-sexual violence organisations' differing responses to pop and rap (Khan, 2022). Rick Ross, a world-renowned rapper, was targeted for censure, protests and petitions for his lyrics on “U.O.E.N.O.”. He rapped, “Put molly all in her champagne, she ain’t even know it. I took her home, and I enjoyed that, she ain’t even know it.” (Rocko (Ft. Future and Rick Ross) 2013, as cited in Khan, 2022). Feminist activists rallied against Ross in hundreds of articles, tweets, blogs, costing him his Reebok sponsorship deal. In the same year, hit summer song featuring rappers T.I. and Pharrell, “Blurred Lines,” was the topic of worldwide scrutiny for suggesting sexual consent can be blurry. Sometimes feminist activism has resulted in action taken by state authorities. For instance, Tyler the Creator was prevented by state authorities in Britain, New Zealand and Australia because he was perceived as dangerous due to his music’s views on women (Khan, 2022). These feminist panics are often predicated on the suggestion that these songs will cause harm in the real world. However, this commonly advanced empirical claim is assumed to be true without authors dealing with the complexity of data and analysis, which is far from providing robust support for the empirical claim. Khan compares the severity of feminist responses to Rick Ross, Tyler the Creator and Blurred Lines to Maroon 5’s – a white pop band— hit song “Animals,” which peaked at 3 on the Billboard Hot 100. Maroon 5 were accused by public feminists of “Romanticising Stalking” in the song and accompanying video (Khan, 2022). However, there were no boycotts, lost sponsorships, cancelled tours and concerts, border interrogations or claims that the music threatened national security, as was the case with Rick Ross and Tyler the Creator. Khan asserts that this disparity “seems racially conspicuous” (Khan, 2022).

We might have expected feminist attention to be directed towards the most popular of the offending material. This would have been Maroon 5’s “Animals,” which peaked considerably higher than any of Tyler, the Creator’s rap songs and U.O.E.N.O. Considering the grounds of feminist critiques are often placed on the alleged harmful cultivation effects of listening to rap, “Animals” would have had a stronger cultivation effect on its listeners than both Ross and Tyler, the Creator (Khan, 2022). This disparity in attention can be attributed to anti-black bias. Critical race theory, for instance, explains this hypocrisy by pointing out that throughout history black people have been constructed as “bestial,” animal like and resultingly sexually deviant. Levine, however, can portray himself as animal-like and deviant, but "his white privilege protects his humanity" (Khan, 2022, p. 251).

One might question whether this is indeed anti-black bias or anti-rap bias. It could be that the disparities between Levine and rappers like Ross are that Ross is a rapper, and studies have shown anti-rap bias (Dunbar, 2016), whereas Levine is a popstar, and there is no such bias against pop. However, even within the rap genre, there are disparities in the treatment of white and black rappers. For instance, Eminem –a white rapper – has many lyrics packed with homophobia and descriptions of violence against women, but while he faced civil lawsuits for lyrics referencing a particular woman, he never received concrete material losses, withdrawal of tour visas and criminal charges as a result of protest against generalised misogyny in his lyrics (Khan, 2022). In fact, he demonstrated his palatability to the mainstream by being the biggest selling musical artist of the 2000s and the first grammy-winning rapper. While his lyrics — which continue to exhibit descriptions of sexualised violence – were met with some feminist critique, it was nothing to the level of scrutiny the black rappers I have mentioned received (Khan, 2022). Again, critical race theory suggests his whiteness “contributed to his acceptance of his rap as art, and made him appear less dangerous than he might have been if he were racialised” (Khan, 2022, p. 255).

Perhaps this critical scrutiny of black male rappers constitutes two types of epistemic injustice: contributory injustice and testimonial injustice. Recall that a contributory injustice occurs when perceivers use structurally prejudiced/biased hermeneutical resources –resources used to understand and communicate experiences – when different hermeneutical resources exist (Dotson, 2012, p. 32).

When feminists critique black male rap as inherently degrading or misogynoiristic, they are making questionable ideological assumptions about the words. For instance, critics essentialised lyrics in “Blurred Lines” to mean non-consensual sex acts, despite lyric interpretations of the song varying from consent, to non-consent, to not referring to consent at all (Khan, 2022). Feminist critics are also quick to interpret black male rappers’ use of the word “bitch” and “hoe” and words describing aggressive sexual acts as inherently problematic, but this ignores how violent or hypersexual sexual expressions could be therapeutic, counter-hegemonic, pleasure-positive, in many of the same ways the anti-respectability black feminists in section 2 posited self-sexualising rap music. For instance, Khan gives an example of lyrics from black rapper T.I. – “I’ll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two” – where his lyrics were interpreted as literal as opposed to “consensual dirty talk that draws pleasure from taboo words” (Khan, 2022, p. 253)

This constitutes a contributory injustice since there a readily available interpretative frameworks that are sufficiently influenced by rappers and listeners of rap but these interpretations are shunned. A reading of lyrics which does not take a literal minded approach is favoured by many listeners and rappers themselves (Khan, 2022). However, the essentialist reading of sexually aggressive rap lyrics does not allow for multiple interpretations. In taking the lyrics as literal, anti-rap feminists are relying on biased interpretations of lyrics and using state power to censor black male rappers, denying their music the status of art in ways that white rappers or whiter genres of music are not experiencing.

Furthermore, essentialist interpretations of these lyrics extend to assumptions that the behaviours being depicted are based on the personal experience of rappers. Rap artists attempting to differentiate themselves from the characters portrayed in their songs often do so unsuccessfully. For instance, after Ultraviolet –a feminist activist group –accused him of being someone who brags about raping women, Ross claimed

I don’t think taking rap lyrics as straight fact is ever the way to go. I mean that is really setting a precedent we do NOT want to set, then every rapper could be indicted for Drug dealing, Murder, etc… Hip hop is Art (Zeichner, 2013, as cited in Khan, 2022).

I think where feminist activists are reluctant to believe rappers words about the non-autobiographical nature of their art, this constitutes a testimonial injustice. A testimonial injustice occurs “when prejudice [negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes] causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). In other words, when a speaker wants to transmit knowledge, but the hearer has prejudices preventing the speaker’s testimony from being assigned a fair amount of credibility. Where Ross and other black male rappers express how their raps are not to be taken literally, the inclination not to believe them is indicative of stereotypes labelling black men as sexually deviant. Therefore, we see a testimonial injustice in the feminist reaction to rap music. Crucially, critiques targeting black male rap should be alert to this racialised selectivity.

This potential for racist misandry should also mean discussions of obligations to resist should extend beyond rap. If critics are to zero in on the role of media in the oppression of black women, rather than focusing on rap as the foremost source of oppressive sexualisation in society, they should focus on all media perpetuating stereotypes. Although there might be a need to critique rap as a source of promulgating problematic stereotypes, we should not do so in ways that are unjustly selective of rap. Instead, we should aim for a holistic critique of movies, TV shows, gaming, podcasts and music more broadly and on how those with more social power perpetuate the oppressive norms for which self-sexualising rappers are judged. This way, discussions of the obligations to resist oppressive norms should extend to the obligations of white women musicians, producers and directors, other media that perpetuates stereotypes and media commentators who critique rap and black women rappers in particular. For instance, there may be obligations on white women musicians and producers –many of whom would not get far without objectifying black women– to be alert to how they perpetuate oppressive norms about black women (Young, 2013). Moreover, media critics should be alert to how self-sexualising black women are caught up in oppressive double binds, and that their critiques fail to discharge a duty to make cultural space for black women to escape oppressive double binds.

I have argued that self-sexualising rappers are caught in oppressive double binds, and this framework helps us understand the competing evaluative responses to self-sexualising rap. Furthermore, this diagnosis better informs us about how to construct progressive critiques. Whilst critiques are advanced from progressive feminists, self-sexualising rap is also seen as empowering by some commentators. I argued that the framework of oppressive double binds helps to capture the complexity of the normative situation that self-sexualising rappers face. Trapped between the norms of respectability and stereotypes of hypersexuality, it is impossible under conditions of oppression for self-sexualising rappers to fully realise their sexual agency and autonomy. Articulating this helps to focus our progressive critiques on these constraining norms, and the media that perpetuates them, rather than on individual rappers engaged self-expression.[[47]](#footnote-47)

**Conclusion**

This thesis has brought philosophical analyses to bear on critiques about rap’s links to violence and oppression. It has demonstrated the progress we can make with public and academic debates about the criminalisation and condemnation of rap. Most of the thesis has investigated critiques underpinning the criminalisation of rap –particularly drill rap—by exploring rap’s alleged connection to violence. Chapter 1 investigated the claim that rap music is *causing* offline retaliatory gang violence (the causal claim). I argued that the police have an evidentiary burden –showing there is sufficient evidence to support the causal claim—and a justificatory burden—showing there is reason to support censorship-oriented approaches to violence reduction over community-building approaches, but neither burden is met. Moreover, critics should be worried about the racist public meaning of advancing the causal claim and censorship-oriented approaches to drill.

Chapters 2 and 3 investigated the claim that drill music provides autobiographical *evidence* of rappers’ violent criminality (the evidencing claim). Chapter 2 showed how the critical scrutiny of rap based on this claim might constitutes four kinds of epistemic injustice. Chapter 3 evaluated the different kinds of epistemic injustice, showing how each responds to a popular objection and evaluating the frameworks' limitations. It also considered the resources they have for recommending remedial steps to how drill is treated. I concluded that, whilst my preferred framework for understanding the epistemic injustice involved in the scrutiny of drill music is contributory injustice, it is worth pursuing the remedial steps for all four epistemic injustices for the sake of justice/and or tackling each form of epistemic injustice.

Chapter 4 explored the critique that violent taunts in rap music incites violence (the inciting claim). Like the causal claim, the incitement claim is being used to take drillers’ videos down from streaming sites, and impose restrictions on other freedoms. I proposed a framework for evaluating whether an instance of violent taunts in drill music constitutes a speech act of incitement. I also argued that the police will have to meet the explanatory and justificatory burden of showing that the speech act of incitement has been performed rather than the speech act of cross referencing, and it will be challenging to meet that burden. Further, where the burden is not met, police interventions and restrictions constitute a form of silencing and - drawing on the notion of discursive injustice introduced in chapter 2 - are unjust.

Chapter 5 turns away from drill music, and explored a feminist critique of women rappers’ self-sexualising rap. Where self-sexualising rappers are criticised as perpetuating or reinforcing problematic stereotypes, another evaluative response to self-sexualising rap lauds it for its empowering effects. In this chapter, I introduced a framework for understanding these competing responses to self-sexualising rap by using Hirji's (2021) analysis of oppressive double binds. I argued that this framework helps us to understand the dialectical stalemates that emerge in evaluating black women rappers' self-sexualisation by offering a new understanding of the complexities involved when female rappers engage in self-sexualisation. Consequently, this diagnosis better informs us about how to construct progressive critiques.

My contributions to these public and academic debates are threefold. First, critics often criminalise and condemn rap music based on improper understandings of the cultural artform. As we saw, the police, for instance, attribute an intention to drillers that they want to incite violence even though they are not in the right position to be attributing intentions. Imputing intentions and understanding the art form includes understanding the conventions of rap. For instance, critics consistently ignore how drill rap is characterised by ritual and expression. Critics, like the police, have repeatedly shown that they lack a proper understanding of black cultural expression, and as such, we should be suspicious of their criminalisation of rap music. Second, critiques underpinning rap’s criminalisation and condemnation are underpinned by various epistemic, discursive and illocutionary injustices and oppressive distortions. Critiques advanced and interventions pursued by law enforcement, academics, media outlets and the wider public can also have various prejudicial meanings. Critics should, therefore, be mindful about what their critiques might be based in, and how their critiques can oppress even when there is no intention to. Finally, rappers may be caught up in oppressive double binds where conflicting norms mean that their actions are bound up with oppressive norms however they act. Given the tricky choice situations rappers find themselves in, critics should be cognisant of the insensitivity of their critiques aimed at rappers.

This thesis is the first comprehensive philosophical engagement with the critiques of rap. But my hope is that in addition to being a milestone, it is only the starting point for the philosophical investigation of critiques of rap music. As stated in the introduction, I have offered a non-exhaustive taxonomy of critiques underpinning rap music’s criminalisation and condemnation. I acknowledge that there are many critiques that I have not explored here, such as the critiques that rap glorifies violence, that rap hurts black people – is harmful to black men, demeans black women or is not inclusive of LGBTQ+ voices – or that rap is no longer radical. My future work will look to scrutinise these critiques. This work demonstrates the fruitfulness and promise of taking a philosophical lens to rap music, and the importance of doing so for efforts to articulate and challenge aspects of oppression.

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1. I use rap and hip hop interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a sense, the way that the police claim rap music incites violence does require that violence has occurred because they claim that the violence that has occurred is the basis for drillers to taunt rivals, which they claim incites violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I separate the claim that rap causes violence (causal claim) and the claim that rap incites violence (incitement claim) into different papers. The incitement claim is an important one that is worthy of a separate investigation, especially given what we use to prove a causal relation (empirical evidence) is different from what we use to prove an inciting relation (attention to illocutionary acts).I return to the claim about incitement in chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are other philosophical theories of causation (Lewis, 2000; Arvan, 2023), but I find Eaton’s framework to be particularly helpful because it provides a way of theorising how violent media might cause harm. (Arvan, 2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is disagreement about whether we should understand causation in terms of probability-raising (see Beebee, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to the police there were several different stabbings and shootings that occurred as a result of drill videos being put up over the course of a week, but they offer no real support to show that the drill videos caused the shootings and stabbings (Irwin-Rodgers and Pinkney, 2017, p.20). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This served as a way to confirm that the practices observed by CBE were generalisable to other gang factions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I will address claims about women’s sexualisation in chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Some of this section includes material from my Master’s thesis and 2022 paper “Does the Critical Scrutiny of Drill Constitute an Epistemic Injustice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sections 2.1-2.8 incorporate material from my Mater’s thesis and 2022 paper “Does the Critical Scrutiny of Drill Constitute an Epistemic Injustice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This section incorporates material from my 2024 paper “Understanding Epistemic Injustice as Contributory Injustice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. We can understand poetic injustice as occurring whereby words within an aesthetic context are taken literally (and therefore a category error is being committed). The distinction here is between a poetic and literal use of words. The former lacks testimonial force and also resists extracting content from form. Nowak’s point that there is a failure to recognise that someone is taking part in a particular kind of activity can be made clearer with reference to the failure to see drill as an artform and drill artists as producing something that has the status of “art.” We might learn something from those artworks but we have to navigate the fictional/non-fictional with art, aesthetic and poetic use of language. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This section on Testimonial Injustice incorporates work from my 2022 paper “Does the Critical Scrutiny of Drill Constitute an Epistemic Injustice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A piece of work can be authentic –that is, reflect how life was during a historical period – without it being autobiographical. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There are responses to these worries regarding stability and predictive validity (see Berger 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This section incorporates material from my 2024 paper “Understanding Epistemic Injustice as Contributory Injustice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It might be that an agent has an explicit prejudice in the case of poetic or testimonial injustice, in which case we might think that worries regarding implicit measure will not arise. However, my analysis –like Arcila-Valenzuela and Paez – is limited to cases where that do not involve avowed racists/prejudiced individuals. Rather, an assumption of my argument is that the individuals involved do not consciously accept that they have implicit prejudice. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This discussion draws from my 2024 paper “Understanding Epistemic Injustice as Contributory Injustice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This section on testimonial injustice incorporates material from my Master’s thesis and 2022 paper “Does the Critical Scrutiny of Drill Constitute an Epistemic Injustice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It has been argued that our implicit biases are best targeted by structural reforms, given concerns about the efficacy of bias reduction techniques (Saul & Holroyd, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This section on contributory injustice incorporates material from my Master’s thesis and 2022 paper “Does the Critical Scrutiny of Drill Constitute an Epistemic Injustice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See the “Causal Claim” chapter for Fischoff 1999, Dunbar et al. 2016 and Dunbar and Kubrin’s 2018) studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This reform to address contributory injustice incorporates material from my Master’s thesis and 2022 paper “Does the Critical Scrutiny of Drill Constitute an Epistemic Injustice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Police, n.d. my italics. I did not make the request. I found it via a Google search. The webpage is publicly accessible (in references). Here’s the FOI reference number: 01.FOI.22.023585 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. R v Claydon [2006] 1 Cr App R 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Law enforcement’s odd use of incitement can be seen insofar as they treat incitement in a general way i.e. drill artist “incites violence” rather than “inciting group x to be violent towards group y” and consequently it is treated as bad in itself regardless of the effect it has actually had on others (which is similar to an analysis of hate speech). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In my discussion of what is meant by incitement, I am interested in incitement to offline violence, as this is what the police seem to be concerned with – online taunts inciting offline gang violence. We might plausibly construe online taunts to be a form of online violence, and if, as I argue later, online taunts are typically met with online taunts, then there is a sense in which drillers are inciting online violence. However, in this paper, I restrict my focus to offline violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Although Stuart’s research is on gangs in the US, I take it that his findings are applicable to gangs in the UK. in particular, I’m taking the framework of cross referencing to be a plausible rival for the police’s claims regarding what drillers are doing with their words. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I’m taking incitement to be an illocutionary act rather than a perlocutionary act, and I think there is some support for this (Kurzon, 1998; Fyfe, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Insults in rap beefs not only involve coming up with an insult but doing it in a way that is rhythmic and has a quality of completeness. There are better and worse ways to deliver one’s lines. With the example of Kendrick Lamar and Drake, they were challenged to produce their best work through their rivalry. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. House of Lords case of Woolin [1999]. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In this paper, Morgan argues that a property of a person is foregrounded when it is introduced to the score of the encounter. However, he claims that we might also think of foregrounding as raising a property to salience. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Whilst I’m concerned with self-sexualisation, the rappers this paper features also sexualise others –such as the dancers around them– in their music videos. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Some other notable rappers that often spark debate around their self-sexualisation are Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, City Girls and more recently Sexyy Red. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. A major difference between the Nicki Minaj case and the Sara Baartman case is that Baartman was forced into this position in a way that Nicki Minaj was not. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Whilst hooks’ critique focuses on self-sexualising black women in popular media more broadly –and more specifically Beyoncé, who is considered a black singer who sometimes raps— I am taking her critique to also apply to self-sexualising black women rappers, since this is a subset of popular media about which hooks is concerned. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. We might look to artist’s intentions to help determine the moral value of an artwork, but there are problems with solely looking to artists intentions to determine a work’s meaning (see Lin, 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Respectability politics was coined to describe the “worldview adopted by black women who were part of the women’s movement in the black Baptist church during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Higginbotham 1993, as cited in Jefferson, 2023, p.1451) . Those endorsing respectability politics were worried that in order for black people to be treated better by white people, they must distance and abandon themselves from behaviours confirming negative racial stereotypes (Jefferson, 2023, p. 1451). Today it is understood in similar ways, where marginalised people will reject certain behaviours and views associated with them as a method of integration. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Sexualisation is not required for percussive feminism. However, March explains that the explicitness of rappers engaged in self-sexualisation, such as Cardi B and Nicki Minaj, and the responses to this self-sexualisation, provides a great example of how percussive feminism should shock. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Perhaps self-sexualisation promotes autonomy for black women who voluntarily self-sexualise, but diminishes the autonomy of others to whom stereotypes might then be applied. However, given that the stereotypes apply to black women, it seems that those who voluntarily self-sexualise would both promote and diminish their autonomy simultaneously. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Double binds are defined colloquially as dilemmas or difficult choice situations (Hirji, 2021, p.646). Marilyn Frye defines Double Binds as “situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation” and that these double binds cannot be understood in isolation from oppressive structures (Frye, 1983, p.1-16, as cited in Hirji, 2021, p.647). Hirji seeks to vindicate Frye’s view that double binds are connected to oppressive structures by viewing oppressive double binds as a subset of the double binds Frye has in mind, “where no matter what an agent does, they become a mechanism in their own oppression” (Hirji, 2021, p.643). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. I focus on the values of sexual autonomy, agency and freedom to express their sexuality to substantiate the oppressive double bind black women rappers find themselves in. That is, whichever way black women rappers decide to act –cooperate with oppressive hypersexual norms and resist norms of respectability or cooperate with oppressive respectability norms and resist norms of hypersexuality—they end up undermining their sexual autonomy, agency and freedom to express their sexuality. There may be other values that are undermined e.g. sexual dignity, potential and empowerment (the values underlying both evaluative perspectives in sections 1 and 2), but for the purpose of this paper, I argue that there is no way of realising the value of sexual autonomy, agency and freedom to express their sexuality with these competing norms of hypersexuality and respectability at play. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. If there is no way this can be done through self-sexualising rap, there seems to be an injustice at play, in that this valuable means of self-expression and creativity is denied to rappers. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Adapted from Jeanie Pepper, who asserts, "You are not supposed to talk about liking sex because you are already assumed to be a whore” (Pepper, as cited in Miller-Young, 2014). See Hill Collins (1990) for discussion of the jezebel controlling image. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Some adaptive preference theorists, such as Uma Narayan (Narayan, 2018), make a similar move by urging critics to focus on the oppressive social contexts choices are being made in rather than the agent making the choice. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. There are some limits to this; telling women that they should not perform in ways that are, for example, antisemitic or homophobic seems right. Although a critic of self-sexualising black women might claim they are performing in ways that are anti-black by perpetuating problematic stereotypes. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Although I have focused on self-sexualising black women rappers, I think my arguments apply to self-sexualising black women in media more broadly, and this is evidenced by my inclusion of examples –Beyonce and film actors—who are not considered rappers. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)