Against UK Drill: Minstrelsy, War Music, Immanence, Moral Responsibility, and Aesthetic Quality.

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Abstract:

UK Drill music is a subgenre of hip hop that has gained a foothold in the British cultural landscape over the last decade and a half. It is music about violent, murderous criminality, and the behaviour gleefully spoken of in the music disregards the value of human life. My position on the inherent value of human life comes from the position in Genesis 1:26 (each person is made in God's image, according to his likeness). In this project, I argue that drill fits a gap, vacated by traditional blackface minstrelsy in the British cultural appetite for racist depictions of black people – drill is a new form of minstrelsy that does not require the blackening of the face or reddening of the lips for the performer to debase black people. This project explores this new category of minstrelsy and why drill squarely fits within it. I use this project to examine the specific racialisation of drill, drawing on the philosophy of Tamar Szabó Gendler – imaginative resistance, Susan Sontag – her writing on war photography in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, as well as other scholars and my own original thought. I use Fanonian theory to explore the connection between drill and his conception of the immanence of black consciousness. This essay makes moral claims about drill, using the material of the essay and numerous examples from drill and the cultural milieu surrounding it and the context it exists within to argue that it is inherently morally bankrupt and aesthetically poor.

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

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Defining terms

A note on the topic and my methodology

At the outset of this essay I would like to impress upon the reader that this essay is breaking new ground. There is much engagement with other philosophers in this essay, but little with regard to philosophers writing about drill music. This is because this is an underexplored area of research. What I am exploring, the direction from which I am approaching it, and the conclusions that I have come to are philosophically unprecedented; I am hopefully breaking new ground.

At points within this essay, I found it helpful to include personal anecdotes. As the topics being discussed relate to young black British men, and I am a young black British man, I thought it would be grounding to relate it to my lived experience, as Frantz Fanon does in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* when he is discussing being black within the French empire – which was his lived experience.

Foundations of minstrelsy

I posit that there is a category of art called 'minstrelsy'. Minstrelsy is generally assumed to be the use of blackface by both white and black performers, caricaturing black people through the performance of exaggerated stereotypes for white audiences. It can take the form of songs, dances, and other kinds of performances. Minstrelsy developed in the United States of America in the early nineteenth century. It gained popularity in that country and the United Kingdom, which lasted well into the second half of the twentieth century. *The Black and White Minstrel Show* had a peak-time BBC slot from 1958 until its finish in 1978. It was a mainstream programme in which white actors performed gross mockeries of black people in blackface for what many white Britons saw at the time as family-friendly entertainment.

It is not clear exactly when blackface minstrelsy first occurred in the United Kingdom. However, we have records of performances in the United Kingdom as early as the 1820s, with performers such as Charles Matthews copying American minstrelsy and bringing it to the United Kingdom (Olusoga 271). It is worth noting that blackface and questionable portrayals of black people in British drama stretch much further back

than the nineteenth century. Audiences in this country were accustomed to seeing actors playing characters such as Othello, from Shakespeare's play *Othello*, in blackface. In this paragraph, I have referred to 'blackface' in a literal sense, rather than a metaphorical one.

The historian David Olusoga, writing on early blackface minstrelsy and its performances in the United Kingdom, writes that,

> 'Minstrelsy was in essence a form of musical clownery, but one that was so racially toxic to the twenty-first century observer that it is almost impossible to regard it as anything other than a racist attack on black people. The racial stereotyping, the exaggerated gestures, the faux African American dialects and above all the blackening of white faces with burnt cork in a grotesque act of racial impersonation – everything about blackface is profoundly unpalatable today.' (Olusoga 272)

This quotation uses the words minstrelsy and blackface almost interchangeably – to Olusoga, in the nineteenth-century context, to which he is referring, they were inextricably linked. In this essay, I will expand on what minstrelsy can be, broadening the definition to fit artistic expressions that do not use blackface but contain the traditional aesthetic properties of blackface minstrelsy.

The common conception of minstrelsy is limited to the kind of performance, often rooted in musical theatre and vaudeville, seen on *The Black and White Minstrel Show*. However, there are key features of minstrelsy that occur in other art forms and have similarly harmful effects on those being caricatured. Traditional blackface combines with these other art forms to make what I would describe as one singular aesthetic category with multiple facets.

Many texts, including the example just given, refer to minstrelsy as something which a white performer does to imitate the stereotypes that exist (primarily amongst their group – white people) of black people. However, not all minstrelsy was performed by white people. In fact, in a world in which many black people were still enslaved, and many free black people were incredibly disadvantaged, earning money in whatever way possible had a grim appeal to some black people. While they almost certainly did not enjoy being minstrels, we know that they still did it.

Thomas Low Nichols, an American journalist, wrote about P. T. Barnum's use of blackface in his shows. P. T. Barnum was a circus director in the nineteenth century. He has had a resurgence in the awareness of the twenty-first-century anglosphere's public due to his lionisation in the 2017 film *The Greatest Showman*. In this film he is played by Hugh Jackman, and the exploitative and racist nature of Barnum's shows is glossed over or ignored.

Low Nichols wrote about P. T. Barnum's actions to secure a new black performer following his regular white performer of blackface leaving his employment. He records that Barnum found another boy who could play the part in his circus. I have taken the Low Nichols quotation from a citation by the American historian Eric Lott. He wrote:

> 'It was easy to hire him; but he was a genuine negro; and there was not an audience in America that would not have resented, in a very energetic fashion, the insult of being asked to look at the dancing of a real negro....
>
> Barnum was equal to the occasion... He greased the little "nigger's" face and rubbed it over with a new blacking of burnt cork, painted his thick lips with vermillion, put on a woolly wig over his tight curled locks, and brought him out as the "champion nigger-dancer of the world." Had it been suspected that the seeming counterfeit was the genuine article, the New York Vauxhall would have blazed with indignation.' (Lott 228)

Low Nichols' account indicates several key things. Firstly, these performances were exploitative. He writes that it was 'easy to hire him'. This boy needed money and was willing to make a mockery of himself and others of his race to do so. Low Nichols wrote this account in 1864, but he specified that it was 'In New York, some years ago'. The process of abolishing slavery in New York began in 1799 with the passing of the Gradual Emancipation Law. However, this process was not officially completed until 1827. Low Nichols' account would be referring to an event sometime after this. However, it was still during a time in which black people sat firmly in the shadow of the brutal past that was slavery and the brutal present that was the antebellum United States of America. Thus, people were ripe for exploitation. Secondly, Low Nichols attests that the audiences of these crude imitations of black people *disliked* black people. The performances did nothing to engender a spirit of charity towards

black people or artists. He carefully notes that they would 'have resented, in a very energetic fashion', being performed to by the people their entertainment was focused on. More than this, they would have taken it as an 'insult'. Thirdly, and crucially for this essay, Low Nichols' account clearly indicates that minstrelsy is not only done by white performers. It can be and has been performed by black performers. This is an important part of the history of blackface minstrelsy. Black people are capable of performing and profiting from minstrelsy, despite the negative connotations of it for the performers as individuals and their racial group as a collective.

The mocking and derisory nature of traditional forms of minstrelsy is not necessarily retained by all modern forms of minstrelsy, often having been replaced with earnest appeals to the audience that what the artist is portraying is a sincere presentation of the truth. In this crucial way, this differs from traditional minstrelsy and creates a possibly more damaging result. The claims of the artist being read as fact, rather than facsimile or creative performance, can create or bolster the already present prejudices in the audience. Today, to modern polite audiences, blackface is seen as being morally repugnant.[1] It is now unthinkable that it would be performed on the stage or screen within any area of mainstream entertainment. However, this does not mean that the spirit of traditional blackface minstrelsy is not alive and thriving in other areas of art. The aesthetic category of minstrelsy lives on insidiously, now separated from the more obvious historical practices of blackface.

I will define minstrelsy as performances caricaturing black people through the use of exaggerated stereotypes in songs, dances, and acted performances. It is a crude imitation of black people that uses vulgar and crass approximations of blackness to entertain and titillate an (often, but not always) majority white audience. It negatively impacts the portrayed group of people in many ways. It portrays them as uncouth, unintelligent, uninhibited, sexually and morally degenerate, threatening, violent, and murderous. It does not need to show black people in all these ways, but many

[1] Of course, this is a generalisation. Over the course of the year that I have spent working on this Master's by Research, I have had multiple conversations with people about the work that I have been doing and I have had multiple experiences of talking to white Britons, of an age who can recall *The Black and White Minstrel Show* being a fixture of British television. Some of whom have lamented to me the fact that it no longer is on the air and claimed that it was good fun, nothing wrong was being done, and that no one was offended by it. Not shockingly, the black British people I have spoken to who are of a similar age and can also remember the time, do not remember it fondly at all. I include these anecdotes to communicate that I am aware that not all people would condemn blackface minstrelsy, in the current year. However, most people would.

instances of it will do multiple of these things, and all will do at least one. This essay and definition have centred on blackness, but it could conceivably be expanded to examine portrayals of other disadvantaged groups. In this case, I have stuck within the confines of blackness as traditional blackface minstrelsy, and the specifics of it are intrinsically tied to blackness. Of course, there is scope to look at other areas of expression through this lens, but it would require some philosophical reframing. For example, one could apply some of the things that I have said about blackface minstrelsy and its representation of black people to drag queens and their exaggerated portrayals of women. However, because of the many differences between womanhood and blackness, it would require a different focus, which this essay has no space for. It does not apply one-to-one, but there is much crossover.

In this essay, I claim that the aesthetic category of minstrelsy I have outlined above is intrinsically aesthetically poor because of the moral repugnance of the content. Using a natural law framework and a moralist stance in assessing aesthetic quality, I am claiming that morally abhorrent ideas being pushed within a particular piece of work directly impact the quality of a piece of work. The art and the message cannot be separated. There is no improving minstrelsy because minstrelsy is inherently flawed. To make the art good, you would have to remove some of the elements of minstrelsy that make it minstrelsy. To reform minstrelsy, it must die; therefore, minstrelsy cannot be improved, and it cannot be reformed.

I will focus on a particularly prevalent form of modern minstrelsy, known as drill music. Claiming that it is a form of minstrelsy, I am accordingly claiming that drill music is an objectively poor art form. The natural law framework that I am using is based on my Christian faith, believing that each person is made in God's image, according to his likeness (*New Revised Standard Version*, Genesis 1:26), and thus their worth should not be degraded. This moralist stance I adopt and stipulate from the outset, lacking space to defend it comprehensively against autonomist and immoralist challenges. If it can be shown that any art form – specifically drill music in this essay – is intrinsically immoral, then this suffices for me, as a moralist, to show that it is aesthetically inferior. I will seek to demonstrate the intrinsic immorality of drill in this essay.

The natural law theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas writes that,

> ‘sin may occur in two ways, in a production of art. First, by a departure from the particular end intended by the artist: and this sin will be proper to the art; for instance, if an artist produce a bad thing, while intending to produce something good; or produce something good, while intending to produce something bad. Secondly, by a departure from the general end of human life: and then he will be said to sin, if he intend to produce a bad work, and does so in effect, so that another is taken in thereby. But this sin is not proper to the artist as such, but as man. Consequently for the former sin the artist is blamed as an artist; while for the latter he is blamed as a man.’ (Aquinas 1549-1550)

Aquinas’ reference to ‘the general end of human life’ is referring to what he believes human beings should do: namely, to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ (*New Revised Standard Version*, Luke 10:27) The focus here is on how people are treating their neighbours. This is not in a vague sense; one cannot pontificate here about who a person’s neighbour is. We are focusing on music about murdering, brutalising, and terrorising those in one’s own community – their literal physical neighbours. This essay will not focus solely on Aquinas’ first artistic type of shortfall: that of failure to perform with regard to formal properties. It will also not focus solely on Aquinas’ second type of artistic shortfall: failure to perform morally. Instead, in this essay, I will claim that moral failure in art is at the same time, failure with regard to the form of the artwork. Moral failure within art entails failure with regard to the form of the artwork – in this case drill. I am not simply saying that drill fails morally, but that the moral failing impacts the quality of the art.

Modern minstrelsy and defining drill music

UK drill music is a subgenre of hip hop. It is directly influenced by Chicago drill, a subgenre of hip hop that began in Chicago in the early 2010s with artists such as Chief Keef and King Louie. The music is characterised by threats of and claims of having carried out violence and murder against the artists' enemies, often referred to as ‘opps’ – an abbreviation of the word ‘opposition’. The music is replete with bragging about criminal activity, specifically drug dealing and violent gang activity. The denigration of others is a staple. The music is largely made by young black men,

and referring to themselves and other young black men as ‘niggas’ is common. British artists took this genre and transplanted it into a black British context. Thus, UK drill was influenced by British genres such as Grime and British road rap, as well as Chicago drill. The vast majority of UK drill music is made by young black men and boys from London, but there are drill artists, such as Bugzy Malone, who is from Manchester, from other parts of the United Kingdom, and by artists such as Central Cee (who many claim is a drill artist), who are not black.

The connection between the authenticity of an artist's words and their actions is particularly significant in drill. In his article for *Fact Magazine* on UK drill, Ciaran Thapar wrote that ‘in the lyrical economy of drill music, what artists say, and whether they act on it – commonly in the form of a threat directed at their ‘opps’, or enemies – has surfaced as the main currency of musical value.’

UK drill could be originally considered the offspring of Chicago drill, but it has become its own genre. While similar in subject matter, after over a decade of development, it has firmly established its own British sensibilities in lyrical content, dialect, and musical form. This essay will focus on UK drill, but from now on, I will refer to it simply as ‘drill’ for ease.

Drill conforms to the traditional structures of minstrelsy but worsens them by adding an explicit authenticity claim. In drill, young black men play the role of violent, aggressive, uninhibited, murderous thugs. They revel in their abusive and violent actions and present this to an audience as being what young black men are. The stereotypes that they are playing into are offensive and harmful and propagate an already established negative stereotype of young black men that persists in British society. This discussion provokes questions about the responsibility of these young men and what they owe their community. Whether or not they owe their contemporaries positive representation, or whether they should have to be held accountable as a representation of their contemporaries, are important points for further philosophical enquiry. However, this essay will explore the fact that, regardless of what should be the case, the actions of these young men do impact their community. Deriving from this, it will be claimed that they owe their community something other than drill.

The philosopher Jacques Maritain – a natural law theorist whose philosophy chimes with mine – described art, its unique power, beauty, and potential as follows:

> ‘Every work of art reaches man in his inner powers. It reaches him more profoundly and insidiously than any rational proposition, either cogent demonstration or sophistry. For it strikes him with two terrible weapons, Intuition and Beauty, and at the single root in him of all his energies, Intellect and Will, Imagination, Emotion, Passions, Instincts and obscure Tendencies. The question is, as Léon Bloy put it, not to hit below the heart. Art and Poetry awaken the dreams of man, and his longings, and reveal to him some of the abysses he has in himself.’ (Maritain 21)

As I have stated, this essay is written from the perspective that each human being is made in the image and likeness of God. The value and worth of a person is conferred by their status as a human; they need not do anything to earn or achieve this status. Maritain’s description of art as ‘reach[ing] man in his inner powers… more profoundly and insidiously than any rational proposition, either cogent demonstration or sophistry’ indicates that art has the potential and power to educate, inform, direct, and shape those who are exposed to it. Thus, artists are people who have power through influence. Power to direct, cajole, encourage, discourage, incentivise, to awake passion, disgust, and revulsion is perhaps soft power, when compared to the power to direct armies, national banks, foreign policies, etc., but it is power, nonetheless. Living as part of a collective confers duties on the person. If we contend that what art is doing is accessing this power to reach beyond the surface of the human and access and affect the deep recesses of the human spirit, then art is, of course, important and dangerous. Artists thus have a responsibility to use that gift wisely. A person ought not to minimise the value of others (and themselves). Drill does exactly that; the artist makes the active choice to dehumanise and devalue with their minstrel performance.

I am aware that there will be various responses to the idea that drill artists have a moral responsibility for their output. Some will claim that there is no such thing as moral responsibility when it comes to artistic output. Others will concede that there is such a thing as artistic moral responsibility but object that the artist’s moral responsibility does not extend to the actions taken by others arising from or

influenced by that art. Still others might understand artistic responsibility solely in legal terms; so long as an artist abides by the laws of society and does not physically murder and harm anyone (as drill artists claim that they do), their art does not need to fit any sort of moral standard. There are still others that would say that drill artists, by and large, bear moral responsibility for their art, but that this art is not immoral; they are playing a character and there is nothing wrong with that. I will deal with these responses to the idea of drill artists' responsibility individually later in this essay.

As a means of more fully addressing the question of the impact of drill, and the responsibility of its practitioners, this essay will relate drill to Frantz Fanon's claim that 'black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes' (Fanon 103). Fanon claims that the unrealised potentiality of the white person in mid-century France was not present in the same way in the lives of black people in the same context. The inescapable prejudices and judgments placed upon black people meant that they had actuality instead of potentiality. Fanon wrote that 'I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am.' (Fanon 103) He was a man of prodigious talent and potential but felt that this was lessened by the system in which he lived. For black men in the United Kingdom, there are stereotypes that can hold them back from always realising their potential. This essay will explore the connection between Fanon's immanence of black consciousness and drill's partial maintenance of this prison-like structure.

Radical Moralism and my arguments

My view is that there is a direct connection between moral output and aesthetic quality. I am aware that this relies on presuppositions that are too weighty to fully explore in a project of this size and with this particular focus. I will briefly expound on my view and its opponents. Noël Carroll, in his paper arguing for Moderate Moralism, argues that

> 'some works of art may have no moral dimension, due to the kind of works they are, and because I do not claim that moral considerations trump all other considerations, such as formal ones. My position, moderate moralism, only contends that for certain genres, moral comment, along with formal comment, is natural and appropriate.' (Carroll 229)

This view of art would, in theory, be receptive to the criticisms that I have made of drill, but it is not the framework from which I make my critiques. His position would be friendly to mine, because drill would fall under his idea of 'certain genres' in which there are moral considerations to be made. Carroll contrasts his viewpoint with that of Plato, which he characterises as being one which 'maintains that art should only be discussed from a moral point of view.' (229) He calls this view 'radical moralist or Puritan' (229). This is also not my view. Art is clearly not just moral treatises; there is more to art than just 'what it is saying'.

Carroll continues discussing frameworks for viewing artworks and writes, 'The radical autonomist contends that all art is autonomous and takes this to entail, among other things, that discussing and evaluating art from a moral perspective is conceptually ill-founded, indeed, incoherent.' (231) I disagree with this. All art has a moral layer, and this contributes to the quality of a piece of work.

This hardline radical autonomism has a softer sibling: moderate autonomism. Carroll defines it as follows:

> 'A given artwork may legitimately traffic in aesthetic, moral, cognitive and political value. But these various levels are independent or autonomous. An artwork may be aesthetically valuable and morally defective, or vice versa. But these different levels of value do not mix, so to speak. An aesthetically defective artwork is not bad because it is morally defective and that provides a large part of the story about why a work can be aesthetically valuable, but evil. Let us call this view moderate autonomism because, though it allows that the moral discussion and evaluation of artworks, or at least some artworks, is coherent and appropriate, it remains committed to the view that the aesthetic dimension of the artwork is autonomous from other dimensions, such as the moral dimension.' (231)

My perspective on art could be described as a cousin of radical moralism. My claim is that art cannot be only evaluated with regard being paid to its moral output. Other factors also must be considered. The form, structure, ingenuity, etc., can all contribute to the quality of the art in question. Nevertheless, the morality of the piece of artwork always comes into question and is inextricably linked to its value and quality. Often, especially with narrative pieces of art, there are clear moralities being

expressed. For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the text clearly expresses (amongst other things) that adult men should not take advantage of the naivety of young girls who look up to them and convince them to abandon their families. This is not necessarily didactic; instead, it confirms the morality of the reader, and the morality arguably serves as shared, agreed upon parameters for the story to be understood within. A moral area in which *Pride and Prejudice* is perhaps more deliberately challenging is in how it portrays the autonomy of women and the obstacles that impinge on this autonomy. There were, at the time (and continue to be today), differing views of the place of women in modern society, and thus Austen's communicated beliefs on the value of women and their constraints are entering into a moral conversation with the reader.

Some artworks, oftentimes found in painting and sculpture, do not necessarily purport to advance any particular moral claims. However, I would still contend that there is a moral element to them. The correct way in which to morally view them is to see that they do not contain certain things. For example, a Jackson Pollock painting may be arguably morally neutral, but were there to be a swastika hidden amongst the paint, there may be a different moral colour to the artwork. Any art can have something hidden in there which negatively impacts the morality of the piece, and it may be harder to elevate something positively with hidden messages or iconography. One must be vigilant about negativity being expressed within art, but an artist can still attempt to (or accidentally) place moral messages within their abstract art. Ideas and concepts can be communicated in abstract work.

One may argue that the view I have articulated neatly fits within Carroll's moderate moralism as he maintains that many artworks should have morality form part of their assessment. However, in the case of these abstract pieces of art, he would argue that they do not contain morality as a category. Where I differ on this point is that, even if we could establish that a piece of art was morally neutral, that moral neutrality is not the absence of moral output; it is the case of being at the midpoint on the scale of morality. It exists in a space on the moral spectrum, rather than being beyond it.

My view is different from radical moralism because I believe that a moral perspective is not the only way in which one can rank art. It can be evaluated via its formal

properties (for example, use of colour in a painting, use of rhyme and meter in a poem, use of sentence structure within prose, etc.). However, the moral status of a piece of art will always affect the aesthetic quality of the artwork, even if the effect appears to be non-existent. I mean to say that no aesthetically great artwork propagates poor morality. However, moral goodness alone does not directly equate to aesthetic quality. Morally great artwork may be aesthetically poor, and thus a poor work of art. It must include positive morality, but a toddler's finger painting that says in the misspelt messy scrawl of an infant, 'be kind', is not aesthetically great on account of its message. It must also engage with the formal qualities necessary for aesthetic greatness.

In the case of drill, it communicates moral messages. It does not, as some claim, merely reflect a reality without inflexion; it is prescriptive morally. The morality (or lack thereof) of drill is a core part of the art. As demonstrated in this project, drill creates a world of rightful aggressors and rightful victims. Opps are weak enemies who deserve death from our strong protagonists. This death and destruction are meted out by men who glamorise the lifestyles that they are bragging about. There is no introspection or reflection; there is only power. This is a deeply normative worldview, which reinforces codes of behaviour as proper and improper – these codes just happen to run almost entirely counter to the moral landscape as conventionally understood.

Chapter Two
The unique specificities of drill

In my introduction, I made an effort to define drill. For this essay to have meaning, it must have some semblance of boundaries around the subject matter. However, drill cannot be strictly cordoned off into its own neat area of music, insulated from connections to other hip hop subgenres. A closed definition of drill is perhaps inappropriate because, like most areas of hip hop, it is not a closed category. There are many hip hop songs that one can debate which subgenre or subgenres the song falls into. Many other art forms have similar debates about how exactly one can define their art forms' boundaries. For example, Stephen Addis writes that,

> 'Although today haiku may be the best-known form of poetry in the world, there is still confusion as to how to define them. Many people would describe haiku as a three-line poem of 5–7–5 syllables, but this does not penetrate more than the surface…Rather than tight definitions, it might be more useful to discuss the guidelines that most haiku follow…
>
> In the past one hundred years, Japanese haiku poets have been divided between those who basically follow 5–7–5, and those who do not. Furthermore, haiku poets in other languages often ignore this guideline. For example, the great majority of fine haiku in English have fewer than seventeen syllables because English is more compact than Japanese, and the same is true of haiku in other languages'. (Addiss 1-2).

Haiku are thought by many to be a simple form of Japanese poetry with easily definable limits, but in fact what exactly haiku are is a debated topic without a unanimous consensus. However, shared commonalities make most haiku easily recognisable as haiku because they correspond to a widely understood and agreed upon set of criteria. The boundaries of the definition are more vague, but the main body of haiku is not debated. Similarly, drill may have porous borders at the edges of its definition, but it can be distinguished from other kinds of hip hop most of the time.

Drill is not just a way to organise music. It is a music category that must correspond with physical reality. Otherwise, it can and will be dismissed as false drill. Its validity as drill is directly connected to the authenticity of the claims made by the artist in a unique way amongst musical genres. What sets drill apart is, in some way, how the

audience interprets it. Drill is about being a real criminal. In the song “Method Man” by Wu-Tang Clan, the beginning is a horrendous stream of sick, violent threats of torture. The song begins, ‘Yeah, torture, motherfucker’, after which the audience is treated to a graphic description of torture, starting with being tied to a bedpost and being sodomised with a clothes hanger that the speaker has heated on a stove. From there, the torture continues with more explicit descriptions and threats. This song is sick, and it revels in violence, similarly to drill. However, for the contemporary audience in the nineties, there was not necessarily a belief that anything stated in these songs was true. In this kind of rap, there is a general aura of danger that an audience can buy into without considering the moral weight of real victims because, presumably, there are none. Please note that I am not saying this makes this music morally pleasing; I am merely demonstrating the difference between it and drill. This general aura of danger starkly contrasts with the specific threat of drill, in which the artist intends that the audience believe their words. These authenticity claims make the minstrelsy extremely concerning because it has real consequences. The performance is not just a performance; it is a performance that claims to be the truth.

The song “Façade” by Digga D, featuring Potter Payper, perfectly illustrates this point. In the song, the drill artist Digga D, a young man who has been found guilty of numerous crimes, brags about his violence, claiming repeatedly that the things that he says are the truth. Digga D’s verses centre around sex, wealth and violence. The chorus that he repeats throughout the song is:

> ‘I love gyal, I love guns, I love fucking baby mums
> Keep playing stupid games until I kill your loved ones
> I love weed, I love cars, and I love Nicki Minaj
> I shoot niggas bae, and this ain’t a façade’

This is drill. The blunt, forceful claims of power and violence, backed by deliberate remonstrations that this is absolute truth, are key tenets of drill. There is no double entendre at play here. Digga D, a man at the forefront of drill in the United Kingdom, helpfully spells out the genre for us. Whether or not the things he is saying are actually true, the threat of Digga D murdering his enemies’ friends and family members hangs in the ether. He means for it to be frightening and blatantly means for it to be read as true.

The racialised element of drill is demonstrated in “Façade” by the contrast between the lines of Digga D and Potter Payper. Digga D is a black British drill artist, and Potter Payper is an Irish-Algerian British rapper. Ergo, he is not black. Potter Payper’s lines are also him bragging about wealth and sex, and he introduces drugs into the song. However, he does not make any explicit claims about or threats of violence. Potter Payper, in his repeated refrain, says:

> ‘I love watches, I love weed, love running my gums
> Keep playing stupid games, ‘til I run in your drum
> They used to say I loved jail coz I was hugging the yard
> I’m really living, this is not a façade’

Admittedly, the threat of ‘running in your drum’ is a threat to enter someone’s home forcefully and presumably then commit an act of violence. However, the threat is not as explicit or as sustained through the song as those of Digga D. The racialised violence of young black men towards each other is evident across drill and will be highlighted more later in this essay. Potter Payper’s allusion to violence is singular. It is repeated, but that is because it is a repeated verse, rather than a varied and sustained motif of violence that he uses to maintain his aura of threateningness – as Digga D does. Digga D’s music will feature again later in this essay.

As this essay details, there have been multiple attempts to insulate this genre of music from criticism. From the words of British academics such as Fatsis to American campaigns calling to ‘protect black art’[2]. However, in his interview with “Dazed”, Digga D said the following,

> “‘There’s a lot of things that are violent: rock music, *GTA*, *Kill Bill*, Anne Frank’s diary – we don’t ban those,” says Digga. “But the younger generation made drill global, and it’s Black-owned. It’s not fair to say that we’re causing violence. We’re just talking about our lives. There might be some violence in there. But that’s what we grew up on.”’ (Digga D, 2023)

This quotation is helpful for a number of points in this essay. It demonstrates that these lyrics are being claimed to be the truth, outside of the lyrics themselves making

[2] See Protect Black Art link in Works Cited. The campaign was backed by a number of public figures, including rappers. It was also backed by academics operating out of British institutions, such as Owusu-Bempah (who I will reference later in this essay).

that claim. It reinforces that the audience is meant to take them as being true. It also leaves the artist with room to say that this is about real life, but not their life, if it comes down to a courtroom. The music is meant to be perceived as authentic. The quotation also completely sidesteps the issue of moral responsibility and says that it is reflective of the truth, rather than admitting that it does make moral claims, as will be proven in this essay.

Drill is also set apart from many other areas of hip hop by its absence of self-reflection and vulnerability. Contemporary hip-hop commonly exhibits self-reflection and vulnerability. The following are examples drawn from non-drill artists. In “You Wouldn’t Understand”, Juice WRLD uses vulnerable imagery such as ‘I’m lost in my abyss/ Wake up, all I see is black, a solar eclipse’. In Stormzy’s song “Lay Me Bare,” he raps about wanting to ‘Shoot my pain and slay my fear'. The song is about his pain and grappling with his demons. He pleads with God and rebukes ‘Satan’. In “My 19th Birthday”, Dave raps about the ‘hole in [his] chest’ and says that he has ‘a hole where [his] heart is’. In the emo rap song “SAD!” XXXTENTACION sings, ‘Suicide if you ever try to let go, uh/ I’m sad I know, yeah, I’m sad I know, yeah’. These lyrics are shocking, manipulative, and abusive, and they express raw emotions. However, whether or not they are the literal truth that this man would attempt to end his life if the woman he is singing to were to leave him does not directly impact where the song sits in the consciousness of listeners. XXXTENTACION did appear to be abusive (his guilty verdicts and ongoing investigations at the time of his murder are some evidence for his behaviour). However, one can argue that that fact makes the song more disturbing rather than adding a kind of special realness quality to it. These lyrics all speak about the artists’ pain. Some of these songs do compensate for this internal pain by making violent claims, sexual boasts and materialistic crowing. However, they are all aligned by their focus on the self.

One could argue that non-drill songs such as Juice WRLD’s, XXXTENTACION’s, Stormzy’s, or Dave’s about their pain resemble Nietzsche’s description of *Oedipus Rex* as ‘a wonderfully complicated legal mystery’ (73). Due to this, ‘a touch of surpassing cheerfulness is communicated to the entire play, which everywhere blunts the edge of the horrible presuppositions of the procedure’ (74). Something ‘horrible’ is somewhat sanitised and beautified by the poetry that Sophocles used to describe it. The language itself is attractive and turns a story of murder, suicide,

incest, and self-mutilation into a moving, profound tale that has lasted for millennia and continues to impact new generations. On the other hand, drill's explicit, blunt language to describe death is attractive in the opposite way. It is raw power and perhaps morbid fascination that entices (and perhaps disgusts but draws in) the listener (particularly the listener for whom the context of the music is alien; for those who can relate, the attraction is different, as will be addressed later in this project).

The song "No Censor" is by Zone 2 (a drill group) and collaborators. The specific artists featured are Unruly Bad, Karma, Trizzac, BGody, Lr, and Kwengface. The song lists the artists' rivals, and their murders are described and gloated over. As the young men list their murdered rivals, the coin collection sound from Sonic the Hedgehog video games plays, thus likening their murders to routine achievements in a video game, which is suitable for children. No linguistic creativity is happening here; the dead and maimed are listed alongside a short descriptor. Some descriptors are of what happened to them, such as having their 'guts spilled on the floor' or having their heads 'smashed…on the floor'. Others are listed as having been 'put in a spliff (Bill it)' or 'nearly got put in a rizz'. There is gleeful reminiscence about having victims 'screamin' out, 'mummy'/ Nowhere near where his mumsy lives', bragging about 'beating up' others, 'smoking' others, using hammers and knives as weapons 'laugh[ing] and giggl[ing] at my dead opp cousin' and boasting of finding inflicting terror 'funny as shit' and it putting 'a smile on my face'. The song glamorises the taking of lives with blunt, threatening, and incredibly offensive language. It may be shocking to someone who is not acquainted with drill, but alarming accounts of disgusting, psychopathic, murderous criminality are standard within drill. The racism needed to excuse and gloss over this treatment and dehumanisation of some young black men by other black men in our society is something that I will examine when I focus on race and class later in the essay.

A central feature of drill is power. This feature is not unique amongst the many subgenres of hip hop. It is common for power to be boasted of, especially when it comes to the sexual prowess, wealth, status, and violent natures of the young men speaking of themselves. In XXXTENTACION's song "Look At Me!" he commands women to 'Look at me' while he makes incredibly violent sexual claims about what he will do and has done to women. DaBaby's song "BOP" also contains claims about power. He brags about money and sex, culminating in claims about his 'rich nigga

dick'. These sexual rap songs show a violent, aggressive sexuality that exists across hip hop. They mirror Digga D's aforementioned claims of '[loving] fucking baby mums' in "Façade". Drill contains elements of braggadocio combined with sexuality, but it is not unique to drill. It is more of a feature of many general areas of hip hop. However, this does not mean that it is not worth highlighting. When combined with the particularities of drill, it presents a particularly disturbing picture of intimate relationships.

In forms of hip hop other than drill, the link between subject matter and authenticity must occur somewhat, lest accusations of fakeness arise, but it does not need to be absolute. The pain, power, and sexuality of drill are not unique to drill. We must keep returning to authenticity as the defining factor of drill.

In songs such as the gangsta rap song "Straight Outta Compton" by the group N.W.A, claims are made about having 'a crime record like Charles Manson', being a 'crazy motherfucker from the street', 'a motherfucking villain', and a 'brother that'll smother your mother'. On the face of it, these claims are very similar to the violent, threatening claims made in drill. However, my argument is that what separates music like that from the music of someone like Digga D is the realness claims.[3] There is an element of humour in N.W.A.'s music, which is distinctly absent in much of drill, but the differences are more profound than that. Drill contains an explicit authenticity claim that is not entirely different from that within older varieties of hip hop, but it is far more pronounced. In fact, when the members of the aforementioned group fell out, their disses towards each other contained insults about each other's authenticity as actual gangsters. For example, in Eazy-E's song "Real Muthaphuckkin' G's", Dr. Dre is insulted because he 'Ain't broke a law in your life/ Yet every time you rap, you yap about the guns and knife' and in Ice Cube's song "No Vaseline" he accuses his former groupmates of 'Yellin' Compton, but you moved to Riverside' (implying that they claim to have a particular affinity with working class black Americans which is minimised by their moving to a wealthier, majority-white place). These insults did occur, and they were meant to be offensive. However, ultimately, they did not

[3] It is worth having an aside here to say that firstly, I am not justifying the existence of gangsta rap. I believe it is detestable and its unrepentant misogyny and murderous violence makes it aesthetically poor. Secondly, many of the genres touched on briefly in this essay are related to drill and much of the criticism I will and have levied against drill can be directly applied to those genres.

significantly impact anyone involved's credibility or ability to make the music and money they wanted. Ice Cube and Dr. Dre went on to have very successful careers in hip hop and across the wider entertainment sphere, and Eazy-E may have achieved similarly had he not died of AIDs at the age of thirty.

In the film *8 Mile,* starring one of the most famous and arguably most successful rappers of all time, Eminem, in a semi-autobiographical role, the final rap battle is famously won by Eminem's character, B-Rabbit, when he exposes his opponent for going 'to Cranbrook, that's a private school' and for having a real name of 'Clarence'. At the same time, he 'lives at home with both parents, who 'have a real good marriage'. In many contexts, none of these claims are particularly scandalous. However, revealing such information in this context renders Clarence speechless because there 'ain't no such thing as halfway crooks'. However, this is not the total sum of more traditional streams of hip hop, and there are allowances made in these areas for lack of authenticity, often to fit in with an image. In the rapper 50 Cent's arguably most famous song, "In Da Club", he says 'We gon' sip Bacardi like it's your birthday', 'You can find me in the club, bottle full of bub', and 'I got the X if you into takin' drugs'. 50 Cent makes all these claims even though he does not drink and avoids taking drugs, something that he admits in his book *Hustle Harder, Hustle Smarter*, referenced in Ian Mohr's *Page Six* article. 50 Cent explicitly discusses how he uses tactics to keep up his image. There is an understanding here from the listener that the rapper is selling an image that may have some basis in some truth, but it could be very far from the truth or not even true at all. This raises a very concerning question of why exactly it is that listeners are attracted to the idea of a black man using explicit language replete with racial slurs to brag about excessive alcohol and hard drug use. The racialised nature of all this music is too much to address in this short essay. However, I will explore the specific racialisation of drill, some of which could be applied to some of these other examples, in greater depth later in this essay.

Drill does not make the same allowances, such as in the case of 50 Cent, for candid admission of playing a part. Drill artists are married to their claims of authenticity. Drill artists do not give interviews like the aforementioned 50 Cent one, as it would remove their credibility. This authenticity claim is seemingly absolute, even though it is probable that some drill artists are lying in their music. There are too many drill

artists claiming to be murderers and violent criminals for it all to be true. However, they wish to remain unexposed and would not casually admit to maintaining an image because the relationship between the image of the self and the truth is far tighter.

There are times at which drill artist's will say that they are playing a part, often when discussing legal issues attached to their art. However, they will oscillate between positions because to their audience, the authenticity claim has importance, and to police and mainstream publications there must be a degree of separation from the artist and the claims in their music.

Chapter Three
The specific racialisation of drill

Who makes drill

The majority of drill artists are young black people, specifically men. It must be noted that there are drill artists of other ethnic groups who make music with a following. However, they are a minority, making music in a genre and subculture which most perceive to be a black art form and space. Drill is an art form which is generally used to express a form of black masculinity, and that is what this essay will focus on.

There are also female drill artists, such as Ivorian Doll and Shaybo, but they are a minority and their expression looks quite different to male artists. The braggadocio and violent claims of criminality are present within their music, but there is a much more overtly explicit sexuality present, which has a slightly different expression of power and control. In addition, the violence in their music is usually directed towards other women, such as in Shaybo's song "Anger" where she raps, 'I remember one girl said it's beef 'til I caught her and found her/ Bun that, I caught her then pound her'. The violence is threatening and unpleasant, but it is far less explicit than drill songs by male rappers. For example, in Clavish's song "Uh Uh", featuring Fredo, he says 'My Rambo [knife] got special powers/ I hit opp block, and it's changin' colour'. The violence is far more pronounced in the male example. The first is wordplay about hamburgers, implying that Shaybo will beat a woman, and the second is saying that Clavish will paint the home area of his enemy's red with their blood, from stabbing them all.

In addition, claims such as Shaybo's in "Streets" that she 'be rollin' with the thugs' and '[runs] the hooligans' are markedly different to the male claims of actually being the 'thugs' and 'hooligans' in question. There are brags about controlling dangerous men and being dangerous men that make a different end result. In addition, the sexual claims made by female drill rappers are different. In female drill, there is an explicit importance placed on what a man materially gives to a woman. In her song "Queen of Drill (QOD), Ivorian Doll raps about the designer clothing brands from which she wants to be gifted free items and tells the listener that she 'Don't want a man that's skint/ Real money man, big bags and tings/ Tryna fly out, live life and tings, you get me?' There is no expectation on a woman to provide financially or

materially for a man in male drill. For these reasons, I will not be focusing on non-black drill or female drill as it is aesthetically distinct enough for there to not be enough space in this essay for exploring these particular minority expressions of drill in sufficient detail.

Imaginative Resistance

Drill is largely music about and by black young adult and pre-adult men and black on black violence. It is a coded discourse that plays into wider societal ideas of what black men are and how they behave. The choices that are made by the drill artists are based on symbolism, which means that the audience finds it easy to accept young black men referring to each other as 'niggas', threatening each other, and bragging about murdering each other. The societal context that they live in means that the minstrel position is available to step into, should they choose to, and the parameters of the character that they must present as are already defined for them. The philosopher Tamar Szabó Gendler wrote that 'the puzzle of imaginative resistance' is 'the puzzle of explaining our comparative difficulty in imagining fictional worlds that we take to be morally deviant' (56). Gendler argues that 'the primary source of imaginative resistance is not our *inability* to imagine morally deviant situations, but our *unwillingness* to do so.' (56)

Songs tell stories and the stories being told by drill artists paint the young black men in them as dangerous, murderous, sadistic combatants in a deadly war of pride and ego. The audience is primed in some way to accept this from young black men. Of course, there is some resistance to these extremely dehumanising and negative portrayals of black men, but it is not as pronounced as if it were a different people group speaking of themselves in this way. Songs such as "He's Dead" by Jmash, Lil S, RD, and TM are normal. In the song's bridge, dead men are listed:

> 'Munna got put in a pack (He's dead)
> Gorz got put in a pack (He's dead)
> Thumpz got put in a pack (He's dead)
> Abz got put in a pack (He's dead)
> Stompz got put in a pack (He's dead)
> S1 got put in a pack (He's dead)

CRose should be in a pack
How's he alive? Man, I'm fuckin' baffed (Should be dead)'

Casually listing dead young men at the start of a song about one's dead enemies is commonplace in drill, as is referring to the dead with extremely derogatory language. Were a white British male artist, such as Ed Sheeran or Harry Styles, to make similar brags in their music about their dead enemies, it would be seen by the general public as being abhorrent, and rightly so. Here, Gendler's '*unwillingness*' 'to imagine morally deviant situations' is at work. The white artists could not possibly do such terrible things, but black artists easily could. There is a willingness in our British context to think of black people in this way – the history and present of traditional blackface minstrelsy and modern minstrelsy shows this. One may say that those artists are not appropriate comparisons, as they are not rappers, but even when one compares drill artists to white British rappers, such as Aitch or ArrDee, the images that they present of themselves are different. An excellent comparison can be made between the non-black rapper Central Cee and traditional drill artists. Central Cee is not black and raps with a drill aesthetic. He uses the criminal conventions of drill in his music, such as illegal drugs, but largely stays away from violence. Interestingly, he is far more popular (within this country and abroad) than traditional drill artists. There is an image of a black man as an uninhibited, violent thug that audiences can buy into, much more easily than with other groups of people. There are other examples of drill artists who are not black, like Official TS. However, he is a very specific case. He was a drill rapper who used drill to glorify Islamic State killings and pled guilty in 2023 to the 'charge of possessing chemicals for terrorist purposes', as detailed in Daniel Sandford's BBC article (see Works Cited). He was actively using a violent art form to push his agenda and praise of terrorism and murder. Nevertheless, these examples are not the focus of this essay. For many, their minds have less imaginative resistance to young black men happily killing each other than they would if any other group were to do so.

Drill artists are, deliberately or without thinking, playing into the racism of low expectations; a form of music by young black people that denigrates young black people, reducing the value of their lives to nothing, is acceptable, in part because it may be unreasonable to expect more from these people. Of course, this is not the case and the potential of drill artists, as it is for all people, is far greater than threats

of violence, jubilant crowing about murder, and bragging about sexual conquests – the way that the audience is willing to think of the artist. Drill has become a fairly mainstream part of British music culture that many people do not push back on, because they fear that they will be called racist[4] (a problem in itself because black drill rappers should not be seen as being some sort of special representation of black people) or because they do not care about young black men killing each other and crowing gleefully about it.

Thus, drill must function in an environment in which there is minimal imaginative resistance to the idea of black men being particularly violent and dangerous. I have stressed this point because it is so galling. I ask the reader to picture Taylor Swift threatening to hack Selena Gomez to death with a machete. It may be imaginable but it actually happening is inconceivable. The way in which we conceive of black masculinity is so toxic that a drill artist doing the same thing is not only conceivable, it is normal. This point will be further strengthened through further discussion in the next section of this essay, focusing on Susan Sontag's philosophy.

Susan Sontag

The American philosopher Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others* is about photographs of war and suffering; how they are used and the effect that they have on the observers. Drill, like war photography, shows the audience a curated view of combatants and the terror that they inflict.

She writes that 'Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience' (14). Interestingly, drill does not present British audiences with stories of conflict in distant lands; it presents them with stories of violence in their own country, perhaps in their own towns and cities. However, to most listeners of drill who are not black, it presents them with a world that is still alien to them, despite its geographic proximity. Sontag makes the point that these images of war that we are presented with in the modern era are not shown with equal dignity attached to all people groups. She writes that 'The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying.' (61) This is

[4] I find it very interesting and discouraging that within British Philosophy, there has been little to no discourse on this topic. There is perhaps a reluctance to engage with drill specifically for fear of being called racist or being accused of not understanding the context.

true of drill, despite its geographic location. In war photography, the disrespectful images of ‘the dead and dying’ are often taken and spread by journalists from nations other than those of the photograph’s subjects. However, with drill, the tales of suffering are spread by combatants themselves. This could further contribute to the dehumanisation in the minds of the audience. Not only is the conflict presented as a fascinating, exciting, and, crucially, distant spectacle, but it is also presented by young men who all seemingly have no regard for each other’s lives, communicating a lack of value in those lives.

Sontag wrote that images of ‘mass terror’ in Sierra Leone, in the 1990s,

> ‘carry a double message. They show a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired. They confirm that this is the sort of thing which happens in that place. The ubiquity of those photographs, and those horrors, cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backwards – that is, poor – parts of the world.’ (62)

This is crucial. The existence of drill and the repetitive nature of it deaden the listener to brutal accounts of the murders of young black men and boys. We have arrived at a cultural point where it is normal for musicians such as Abra Cadabra to make songs such as his first “Daily Duppy” in which he brags about having ‘stamped the fuck out that prick’, ‘having a rack for every pussy that I stamped out’ and how even though ‘Man’s famous’ he’s ‘always got [his] stainless’. A Daily Duppy is a rap performed by a British rapper on the GRM Daily YouTube channel. There is a certain prestige to having a Daily Duppy, and British rappers from various genres have one or more. It is not something given to someone who has not already made something of a name for themself already. Thus, it is worth highlighting this as drill artists take this opportunity and then reach a wider audience. What is done from this position further cements the idea in the mind of the outsider that this is normal. Sontag’s idea of the ‘ubiquity of…those horrors’ normalising the horrors is in full effect. Not only is it ‘the sort of thing which happens in that place’ but it is also cemented in the mind of the listener as the sort of thing that those people do to each other. The minstrels are not just performing; they are teaching their (predominately non-black) audience how to think of them.

There is a candid, brutal nature to what is being described. The deaths of these young people are not described in veiled euphemistic terms. They are shown to the audience in descriptive, explicit language that is like the raw images of war that Sontag describes when she analyses war photography. In “The Life I Live”, Dabwoykd tells the listener ‘Swing my blade, man, you know I can’t stop/ I love seeing flesh ripping out of tops’. He deliberately describes himself as a man consumed by bloodlust who has no restraint and will continue murdering to see as much violent death as he possibly can. Were this to be an isolated song, it would be disturbing, but it is not. Instead, it is music that falls within the accepted conventions of a particular genre, a genre of music that has no regard for human life. The convention of victims being not just killed but having their bodies violently destroyed is common in drill. In the song “Quincy Promes”[5] by Kwengface, Digga D, Booter Bee, and PS Hitsquad, the rappers say ‘I shot him in his head, had to open his thoughts’, that they have ‘blood on my rambo…dip that shit in your brain’, and ‘Done it in London, done it in Midlands, chingin’ up yutes all over England’. Celebration of violently rending someone’s skin and bones in an act that is essentially butchery, or cold-blooded execution is part of what makes drill what it is. This aligns with Sontag’s description of the dehumanisation that occurs with the showing of one particular group of people’s suffering, with no dignity attached to them.

When referring to images of dead American soldiers, Sontag wrote that ‘photographs of anonymous American casualties had appeared in a number of newsmagazines, always prone or shrouded or with their faces turned away. This is a dignity not thought necessary to accord to others.’ (61) In the photographs that she was referring to, the (usually white) American soldiers who had valiantly died in a courageous crusade for freedom and justice were accorded the rightful dignity that they deserved in death. However, the (non-white) non-American foreigners that they were there to kill did not deserve dignity in life or in death, and as such, their deaths and suffering could be presented plainly to the readers. Drill rappers often justify the deaths of their enemies by referring to them as ‘opps’, and this creates a justification, however flimsy, for a listener.

[5] Named after the Dutch footballer Quincy Promes who was ‘sentenced to eighteen months in jail for stabbing his cousin in the knee’ and was ‘accused of being involved with smuggling 1,362kg of cocaine to the Netherlands or Belgium’. Information about both cases can be found in the two corresponding BBC articles on the respective incidents found in the ‘Works Cited’ list.

Sontag made the point that ‘Generally, the grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa.’ (63) Again, drill is obviously not photography, but it does focus on a specific racial group, much like the war photography in question. This particular focus can lead to various responses in the audience, from pity to apathy, to thinking they deserve it. None of the responses listed are humanising or edifying. The possible positive response that it could engender in an observer could be one of righteous anger at the flagrant disregard for the value of human life, but this does not tend to be the response to the music.

Drill as journalism or escape

It is difficult to even conceive of white Britons or another ethnic group having a genre of music in which their youth brag about killing each other and threaten each other, whilst tensions amongst their group escalate and lead to real deaths. However, there are members of society, both black and not black, who are happy to legitimise this music and even level the accusation of racism at people who think that it is wrong.

Drill is often met with claims, by well-meaning people, that this music is ‘addressing the reality of their lives’ (according to Fraser and Animashaun) and that this should be respected. This gives drill an elevated status as a kind of journalism or reportage. And as already explored above, drill certainly does aspire to take on some of the aesthetic hallmarks of war reportage. It is commonly stated in discussions of hip-hop that ‘Rap Music is the CNN of the ghetto’. This statement is one made by Chuck D, leader of Public Enemy – an American rap group, in 1989.[6] If one takes it to be true, Chuck D was speaking in a particular context in 1989. Rap music was a much newer phenomenon then than it is today, and he was perhaps referencing less variance than we see now with the seemingly infinite number of subgenres of hip hop. Public Enemy were making music that described and interacted with real systemic issues in poor urban contexts. By contrast, drill delights in killings in such great numbers that it cannot possibly be the truth. As stated elsewhere in this essay, drill moralises. It propagates a worldview that is at odds with any position that values human life. One

[6] Please note that this quotation is widely accepted as having been said by Chuck D and the sentiment is felt by many rap fans. From what I can see, it may be apocryphal as I cannot find any firsthand instances of him saying it, but there are many examples of it being quoted by numerous publications discussing rap music and its place within culture. Whether or not it was actually said in the way it has been reported, the spirit of the statement is felt by many fans of, and practitioners of, the music.

could argue that this fits in with the spirit of CNN or any other major broadcaster. This may or may not be the case, but it is biased reporting of fact, blurred facts, and bold-faced lies: all combining to deliver a moralising prescriptive mess that does not reflect the values that many would share, and that many listeners would claim that they do not have.

Claims such as Fatsis' that 'the socio-political context that informs the lyrical content of drill and grime, [mean that] it is no surprise that experiences of disadvantage, discrimination, poverty, social exclusion and blocked opportunities are blasted out in full volume' (Fatsis 1309) belie exactly how evil the actions that are being expressed in this music are. It is absolutely correct that this music comes from a place of poverty, but we must be able to look at young men who are bragging about terrorising their own communities and see it for the disturbing displays of violent, deadly, boastful machismo that it is, whilst also understanding that it comes from a disadvantaged societal position.

This is evidenced by the fact that most people, black or otherwise, from similar backgrounds of deprivation and proximity to criminality, including but not limited to violence, do not turn to drill or criminality as a means of escape. Whilst it is true that there is a correlation between poverty and lack of opportunity and that these circumstances may make these activities more attractive than if a person was operating from a position of plenty, it is not the response that the majority, or even a large minority, have, even though drill normalises these actions.

Further, it is suggested that drill as a genre can be excused from any moral negativity as it can provide 'a means of escape from lives of social deprivation' (Fraser and Animashaun). There is no acknowledgment in these arguments that most people who make drill will not become rich; that drill emboldens a public who have prejudices against young black men to remain fixed in these views; that social deprivation is bad and is also necessary for drill to exist; and that elevating oneself from one's own situation by any means necessary at the expense of one's community is not necessarily a good thing.

As just mentioned, drill is argued by many of its defenders to be something which offers 'a means of escape from lives of social deprivation'. This particular line of argumentation is deeply flawed. The means of elevation beyond the material

conditions of the actor's environment are such that it is done in the most vulgar, nasty, and selfish way possible. Yes, it is true that some people become rich from minstrelsy, but I find it hard to understand why that is a strong enough argument to justify the rank moral repugnance on display, being propagated in the music that is being released for anyone to listen to.

An analysis of drill that praises the artist's 'escape' and fails to criticise the system they escape from is myopic. We live in an unequal society in which young black men are more likely to grow up poor, attain less academically, and earn less money when (or if) they start working, in comparison to some of their peers. There are a number of structural and social inequalities that can and should be addressed. Instead, drill is praised because some people can leave this system behind, thus legitimising the inequality by treating it as an inevitable fact of life. This form of defence and critique places a heavy weight on the individual. It takes focus away from structures because one focuses on how wonderful it is that some people relieved themselves of their burden (by producing musical poison). It contributes to a widespread ignoring of systemic structural inequalities and leaves blame for society-wide issues squarely at the feet of individuals. It is an extension of the idea that all we owe is what we desire for ourselves, rather than there being any kind of social or civic duty.

In addition, escaping a life of 'social deprivation', which would be an environment where it is more difficult than many others to access education, employment, security and a number of other constitutive factors of a comfortable life, by victimising others in the same environment as you and then making marketable music showing off about it is wrong. Bragging about 'being a savage' and '[leaving] a man burnt like the bottom of a Dutch pot', as Loose does in "Welcome to Moscow", is wrong, no matter how much one is paid for doing so.

Much discussion of minstrelsy is wrapped up in a capitalist worldview where anything can be justified if there is money involved. The selling of dead black bodies in gladiatorial combat for audiences to have fun listening to is not good because it gives someone a big house and a German car. At the end of that process, their victims (if they actually have the victims they claim to have) are still victims. Setting aside the few drill rappers such as Bugzy Malone, Abra Cadabra, or Digga D who have

undisputably attained wealth, most drill rappers do not appear to financially elevate themselves in any great way.

“Bando Diaries”, by dutchavelli, is a fascinating song because it touches on many of the ideas presented in this essay. He repeats throughout the song, ‘I can tell you ‘bout bando diaries’. A bando is an abandoned house used for illicit drug-related activities. In the case of this song, it is being used as a catch-all to cover a life of violent crime and drug dealing. In the tale he tells, there is violence and there are drugs, and, for him, there is escape. He acknowledges that ‘The rich are gettin’ richer while the poor are gettin’ poorer’ but does not expand on this idea. His violent and illegal activities are not what appear to liberate him in the narrative of the song because he repeatedly says, ‘Who woulda thought rap would open doors?’ Here lies the paradox. Drill has enabled him to leave behind the life he is describing because he is now rich. However, the opps that he deals with in the song do not attain his material success, yet presumably they are doing the same things as him. His success, in many ways, is based on chance.

Thus, it is not a useful claim to make that this music elevates people from their environment of deprivation. Drill is not a reliable remedy to the deprivation it describes. It can definitely do that for a few – who have the random blessings of both talent and chance – but the unequal environment is a necessary element for the music. Drill is dependent on the existence of this deprivation. The existence of socio-economic inequality is a necessary condition for the production of this music. Drill cannot function without the socio-economic gaps that we have in our country.

The socio-economics of drill

Drill as a genre requires the genuine (or what is believed to be genuine) poverty of the performer. Listeners accept that music that makes claims such as Double Lz’s in “Purge” that ‘[redacted] got put in his place/ When I swung my baseball bat in his face’ comes out of a place of deprivation and crime, and that that is normal. The audience must, regardless of their race, have a lack of discomfort with the dehumanisation and violence being rapped about. The great wealth disparity in modern Britain and the racial prejudices and biases that exist in society are necessary for drill. Drill can only exist in a society with these factors present. It could not take off, in the minstrel fashion that it has, and find cultural purchase in a country

where everyone had a similar standard of living, as there would be no victimised minority group to turn into a spectacle. Modern drill rappers, in this way, mirror Roman gladiators, or (perhaps even more disturbingly) animals such as those in bear baiting, cockfights or dog fights.

Another disturbing racial element of drill is that for some people, the idea of the powerful, dangerous, violent, unpredictable, thuggish black man presented in the music is sexy or enticing as a fantasy. In my personal life, as a young black man, I have encountered people (almost always not black ones) who have an idea of young black men that is formed from media (including, but not limited solely to, drill) which portrays them as an exaggerated, dangerous caricature, one that is not that of a fully realised human. For some of these people, a sense of animosity or even fear is evoked by black men. This brings with it complications for black men in navigating British society, as people are predisposed to have misgivings towards them. On the other hand, there are those who are excited by that which is dangerous and subversive. Perhaps it may not bring open hostility, but it brings its own kind of dehumanisation and othering.

My own personal experience nicely brings us to the question of the black audience of drill. Drill is music largely about black people by black people. Its concerns are within particular communities, and the language and slang used within it comes from black Britons, by way of the Caribbean and Africa. To many black listeners, I include myself in this group, the lives that are being described in drill are neither relatable nor desirable. The language is familiar, and the appearances, physically and with regard to their personal styles, are familiar. Indeed, many of us, our brothers, cousins and friends will be seen as looking like drill artists to people who are not black Britons. Black people in the United Kingdom, just like every other people group, come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, for some, the violent areas being described and the poverty that these men are trying to escape from with their criminal money-making activities are not something that all black people resonate with. However, even if a person comes from a particular area and can therefore easily empathise with the experiences that are described or implied by drill artists, it does not mean that they have dealt with their own experiences with murderous, sadistic violence and other forms of criminality. Black British people are a minority in the United Kingdom, but there are still over two million of us. What drill does is

present the audience with a very small subset of black people who portray outlandish behaviour as normal. This presentation affects both the non-black and black audience.

Their imaginative resistance is completely inactive when it comes to black men killing each other. I believe that many people who criticise this music are correct and that attempts to legitimise it are misguided at best. It may be art, but that does not mean it is good or deserves a place in society. Not all art is good, and some is morally repugnant. The acceptance of drill requires an abandonment of commonly understood moral values and entering into a different social contract. The one required for drill is one in which we do not hold black people to the same moral standards as others. We must accept violence from them and normalise (and perhaps even celebrate) it.

Drill paints a picture of dangerous streets in which a young man is at risk. He is a potential target in the skirmishes being detailed, but he can take control of his surroundings and become a predator, rather than prey. Thus, what drill gives to 'socially deprived' areas is the gift of nothing (if it has no effect) or violent, uninhibited, weapon-carrying men on the streets, searching for opportunities to maim and kill (if it has an effect). It incentivises this action with outlandish proclamations about pussy, power, and pounds. To many young men, women, status and position, and money are things that they do not have access to and would very much like to gain access to, potentially making the lifestyle advertised in the music appealing, simply because it seems like the rewards on offer may make any discomfort coming from being a driller worth it. These incentives will no doubt appeal to many but will be most enticing to black men from similar backgrounds who can see something of themselves in the boys and men who are advertising this perverse kind of power through their minstrel performances. This perverse violent power can also be an incentive itself. Offering power to those who feel powerless or weak has its own allure.

Examples of all the points from the previous paragraph can be found in the song "Auntie" by Kwengface. The song opens with an introduction sampled from the film *Straight Outta Compton*, in which a Blood gang member holds a gun to the head of a child who had previously tried to antagonise him by throwing up rival Crip gang

signs. He tells the child, whilst holding a gun to his head, 'Don't get quiet now…Think niggas out here playin'? Huh?/ Niggas die every day.' The song opens with the explicit statement that life is not a game and 'niggas' are killed every day. Young black men lose their lives to those stronger than them all the time, thus incentivising becoming stronger. Kwengface tells the listener 'Peng ting come my apartment room (ay, come here)/ This ting is freaky as fuck/ She wanna fuck me by the London view (ay, come here)/ By the London Eye'. To many young impressionable boys listening to this, the lifestyle advertised with these claims is attractive for the three reasons given before. Firstly, he is explicitly claiming that he has sexual intercourse with attractive women who desire him. Secondly, he has power over this woman as he is able to command her to 'come here'. This authority to command other people can be attractive to young men, especially if they are in an environment in which they generally feel powerless. Thirdly, Kwengface saying that he has an apartment in Central London with a view of the London Eye indicates that he has wealth. Buying or even renting in Central London is extremely expensive and is a show of both power and financial success.

It might be objected that, regardless of the truth of my claims above, drill does not affect the audience that listens to it, whether they are white or black, and it does not affect those that it is about. In the twenty-first century, there has been much discussion of violent video games and their effects on children, and many have said that playing a violent video game does not a serial killer make. However, it is not this simple. In our country, we consume media such as videogames like *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6*, films like *Top Gun: Maverick*, and newspaper articles by publications such as *The Telegraph* that encourage the British public to have a general hostility and distrust of perceived enemies of our state, often portrayed as non-white and always alien. They further encourage the perception that going to war with such 'enemies' is not only necessary but a moral good[7]. Thus, in times of war, we are

[7] These examples are given to show a range of popular media, consumed in the United Kingdom by different age groups from across society, that position this country and its allies as being in a difficult but morally justified position in the world in which the protections of our freedoms, and the freedoms of others, are constantly under threat from external 'other' forces and we must be ready to defend our own interests with violence, at home or abroad. Whether it be fighting in Iraq in The Gulf War, purportedly in the name of Kuwaiti sovereignty, (*Call of Duty: Black Ops 6*), fighting an unnamed unspecified vague, but definitely foreign, enemy (*Top Gun: Maverick*), or scaremongering about dangerous migrants coming to negatively transform our country and drain its resources (see the cited *The Telegraph* article replete with claims from current Conservative MP Robert Jenrick that

primed to send our young people off to kill such people (such as in Afghanistan and Iraq). This generates far less outrage than when we observe a European war – as in Ukraine – in which the white people being killed look just like us (I am not actually white but the point that I am making still stands). The media that we as a nation consume does affect how we view others.

It is disingenuous to imply that drill exists within a vacuum, as nothing does. In fact, drill is unable to exist independently from the world precisely because it presents itself as a faithful reflection of the world and requires this connection to be perceived as accurate in order for the music to have the desired aesthetic affect.

Some may object that I am singling out drill arbitrarily for this kind of scrutiny. Jalloh argues that,

> ‘to take drill lyrics literally and conflate drill personas with actual persons is to treat drill — an art form predominantly constituted by black people — in a way that would be unthinkable to other art forms, such as ‘violent folk, rock or pop’ (Owusu-Bempah, 2020). To single out drill in this way appears to be motivated by racist stereotypes prosecutors use to construct case theories (Owusu-Bempah, 2020).’

Drill often contains explicit confessions of actual violent crimes. Naturally, publicly claiming that one is a murderer or guilty of enacting Grievous Bodily Harm on others opens artists up to police investigation. Police use of drill lyrics in court settings is frequent and controversial. There is something specific about Jalloh’s claims that there is a unique venom and specificity attached to these investigations of drill. As has been discussed at length in this essay, the United Kingdom has a history and a present that is racist. There is a particular venomous vigour reserved for critique of genres of music that are perceived as black, as there is for black people. Drill will therefore face increased scrutiny and unfair critiques, like other expressions of black people. This is unfair but it does not address the criticisms that I have levelled at drill. Perhaps drill is held to a higher standard than folk or bubblegum pop. However, if drill was to be judged to the standards of those genres, it would still be found wanting

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‘individuals linked to Islamic State and Al-Qaeda have arrived claiming to be refugees’), repeated lifelong exposure to similar forms of media as those cited encourage the views that I have described.

because the content is morally abhorrent, regardless of if it is on a level playing field with other genres or not.

Folk, rock, and pop do not have the same attachment to gang violence and murder as drill does. Implying that they should be treated in the same way muddies the waters of exactly what we are talking about. Drill is a musical genre that is centred around young black men denigrating other young black men and devaluing their own and others' lives. The idea that black people can both be victims and victimisers is lost when we approach this topic from a position that there must be absolute binaries.

Jalloh points towards Owusu-Bempah's examples of 'violent folk, rock or pop'. These genres of music are real and disturbing, but the key difference between them and majority black genres, like drill, is that the majority white artists in these genres are not held as being representative of their groups. For example, the church-burnings and murders committed by the uniformly white members of the Norwegian black-metal scene have never shaped cultural prejudices about white people in general or Scandinavians or Norwegians specifically. However, when it comes to drill, drill artists can and do play a part in shaping the views of the general British public. This is unfair and it is wrong, but it is nevertheless true. Thus, the drill artist occupies a different position and must act accordingly.

The aesthetic conventions of drill; horror-slasher films

Drill prompts me to ask the question: What aesthetic effect is the music aiming for? It appears to me that it is aiming to invoke some of the same emotions in the listener as horror films, TV shows, or novels. Specifically, it uses brutally explicit violence; the audience listen to the horrific deaths of young black men being hunted down on the streets of London or other cities in our country, much like the victims being killed one by one in a slasher film. It is not a coincidence that the primal violence shown in slashers is described explicitly in drill. For example, in "No Respawn", Buni describes hunting down and murdering enemies, whilst, irreverently, video game achievement noises play in the backing track. He raps:

> 'Send me the addy, I'm tracking it down
> Spot me a opp, I'm running it down
> When he got shot, I was oh, so proud

Gulag, how did he make it out?
He got boxed for running his mouth
He got left with his insides out'

Drill places the listener alongside the brutal killer. The stories that these young men are telling about driving around economically deprived neighbourhoods, searching for their next murder or assault victim, should be disturbing and shocking to an audience that is not desensitised to the sheer moral repugnance on display. I have detailed above the hypocrisy present in society for many to dismiss this as individual self-expression. However, it is not just dismissed as being acceptable; when entering into the horror genre, there is a strong element of being thrilled by what is being presented. It is not a neutral presentation of a lived reality; it is a thrilling recollection of a powerful man physically disembowelling and shooting his enemies. The perceived slights or crimes of the 'opps' are not important - they are enemies and their murders are justified. The tense, claustrophobic, energetic narratives that we are presented with have the effect of playing into many people's sick fascination with the macabre and the deadly, but they also titillate them. This music is music that is meant to hype up a listener. It provides an adrenaline boost. Indeed, it is music that is featured in playlists for working out to on Spotify. When I was studying my undergraduate degree in York, I met multiple young white people who did not, according to them, have black people in their lives, and they used drill music to boost them while working out in the gym. Drill provides a seductive danger to its listeners that can amp them up. The use of the word 'gulag' is almost certainly a reference to the *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* video game mission: "The Gulag". This is another example of drill trivialising murder.

Drill achieves the shocking, sickening, twistedly exciting thrills and disgust of the slasher-horror, and the audience of the music can comfortably enjoy this effect precisely because the artists are young black men from underprivileged backgrounds, as opposed to being from some other racial or socio-economic background. It is a presentation of antisocial behaviour that the audience is quite willing to accept from young black men, but not from others. It also makes morality a central part of the work. This morality is the moral word of killer and killed already explored above. If this outrageously immoral display of black masculinity is acceptable, precisely because it is black masculinity on display, the minstrelsy

(playing the particular exaggerated blackness) cannot be separated from its moral message, and thus its aesthetics are inextricably tied to its morals.

Drill demands that the suffering described graphically within it be real, or at the very least be conceivably real. The aforementioned authenticity claims that are extremely important in drill mean that the common arguments around separating the art from the artist or the morality from the aesthetic quality cannot and do not apply here, as they are inextricably linked. For drill to exist, the idea of common black poverty, criminality, and extreme violence needs to be not only understandable but accepted as being something somewhat normal. There must be a racial and socioeconomic imbalance in society for the music to exist. It is not a coincidence that music about gangs, criminality, assault, torture, and murder comes from a deprived environment. Drill requires a racist and classist society for it to make sense.

Chapter Four
The immanence of black consciousness and drill

Fanonian Theory

In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon writes,

> 'black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It *is*. It is its own follower.' (Fanon 135)

In this chapter, I will engage with this idea of the immanence of black consciousness; how it is impacted on by drill music and what this means for drill artists, consumers of the music, and the wider society that it is situated in. At the outset, it is worth noting that the quotation above from Fanon is not claiming that he, as a black man, is without free will. Rather, he is claiming that one's freedom is greatly and directly impacted on and constrained by the external world in a way that is beyond the control of the individual; and this is so to a greater and harsher degree for those who are black. We will return to this later in this chapter. There is a prison-like structure that is affected by stereotypes and wider cultural ideas about black people, and I contend that this prison-like structure is partially maintained by drill artists.

I am not saying that the immanence of black consciousness is the removal of free will; I am saying that black people living in an environment in which there are oppressive and inescapable forces and narratives forced on them are impacted on a metaphysical level. It goes beyond affecting mood and external surroundings, but impacts on them in a mental and holistic sense. I am not merely claiming that stereotypes are mean, but that the forces of society conspire (perhaps without intention) to narrow and dehumanise black people in a way that makes their lived existence more negative and difficult to navigate than their counterparts from other racial groups. This imparts a sense of fixedness, rather than potentiality, to their existence. The black person does not have to search for 'the universal' externally, as they do not need to find their place in the world; it has already been found for them. Thus, the black man can say 'I am wholly what I am' rather than that they have a potentiality of 'probability'. We are reduced to an actuality rather than a possibility. Absolute certainty from others about you does impact you and can create a very

harmful and dangerous perception of oneself as being less in value and, perhaps most disturbingly, not a complete moral agent.

Fanon writes that,

> ‘Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man. Between the white man and me the connection was irrevocably one of transcendence.
>
> But the constancy of my love had been forgotten. I defined myself as an absolute intensity of beginning. So I took up my negritude, and with tears in my eyes I put its machinery together again. What had been broken to pieces was rebuilt, reconstructed by the intuitive lianas of my hands.
>
> My cry grew more violent: I am a Negro, I am a Negro, I am a Negro ….’ (138)

Fanon refers to ‘transcendence’ being key in the relationship between himself, the black man, and the white man. The externality divides them. For Fanon, he is trapped within his immanence. As he repeatedly claims, ‘I am a Negro, I am a Negro, I am a Negro’. He repeats it thrice because the status is absolute. He is ‘defined…as an absolute intensity of beginning.’ He describes himself with the language of ‘machinery’, not that of organic life. He can contrast his static immanence with the fluid transcendence of the white man, Jean-Paul Sartre, who is afforded the luxury of forgetting the reality of immanence in the lives of others because, in his own life, he has the potential to transcend, to go beyond, what he or others perceive himself to be limited to. There is the potential for wide-reaching options.

Recognition

There is a need in the individual to not just be seen and identified but to be recognised. The philosopher Axel Honneth has written extensively on recognition. According to Honneth,

> ‘As needs and emotions, in a certain sense, can only receive “confirmation” by being directly satisfied or answered, recognition in this case must itself take the form of emotional approval and encouragement. This relation of recognition thus also depends on the concrete physical existence of other persons who acknowledge each other with special feelings of appreciation.

> The positive attitude which the individual is capable of assuming toward himself if he experiences this type of emotional recognition is that of self-confidence. I am referring, in other words, to the underlying layer of an emotional, body-related sense of security in expressing one's own needs and feelings, a layer which forms the psychological prerequisite for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect.' (193)

He also describes a,

> 'form of disrespect, namely, denying someone and ostracizing them socially. With this form, a human being incurs the dishonor of having the community refuse to grant him the moral accountability that a full-fledged legal member of that community would have. Accordingly, this type of disrespect must be paired with a condition of mutual recognition in which the individual learns to see himself from the perspective of his partners to interaction as a bearer of equal rights.' (194)

To be truly recognised as a person goes beyond mere acknowledgement that a physical person-shaped object is there. Recognition is an identification and acceptance of the value and substance of the individual that goes beyond merely the material. Whether one actually believes in a spirit or metaphysical reality beyond the empirically observable one is not relevant. Human beings are complex and have needs beyond those of mere objects for their potentiality to be enabled. Honneth is claiming that the person is greater than other objects, indeed, that the person is not actually just an object. The person is someone who must be recognised as someone worthy of being granted 'the moral accountability that a full-fledged legal member of that community would have.' This knowledge, combined with a deep-rooted acceptance of the affirmations of others, gives each individual the self-esteem that true recognition can bring.

Criticism and coddling of drill artists often does not achieve this understanding of the person. The drill artist is stripped of personhood as they are apparently not capable of committing to being a member of society that does not savagely brutalise their own communities and promote an image of young black men as hypersexual, uninhibited, violent, and murderous creatures of instinct and fury. The excusing of such music denies that these young men are capable of holding 'responsibilities and

exercising authority'. If these men are not responsible for their music, then we must ask who is. If it is society (and the authority figures within it) that made them make this music, we grant recognition to everyone but the drill artist and also deny them a place within our society.

Our self-esteem and self-worth are inextricably linked to others' recognition of us. Absolute recognition by all others is not necessary or even possible. In everyday life, we recognise people to varying degrees. The recognition that a parent has for their own child goes far deeper and has far more wide-reaching consequences than that between a postal delivery worker delivering something to a house and the occupant of the house, who is the recipient, for example. There are differing levels of recognition there, but the concept is still active in our daily lives in our differing relationships, from the fleeting to the most intimate and everything in between.

Drill directly contributes to a lack of recognition of the individual. Drill contributes to an understanding of the black person as something less than a full person. This can mean that when one is viewed, a filter is placed over the individual. This means that as the individual is being viewed, an obscuring force is placed over the person, acting as a barrier. The person is not fully seen as the forces that have coalesced to provide the observer with their views of black people are what they see when they look at a black person – realised actuality rather than potentiality. The black person becomes the observed actualised entity. There is no potential for anything else because they are not being truly recognised. Thus, Fanon's idea of the immanence of black consciousness is greatly impacted by the lack of recognition afforded to black people by a society in which they are a minority.

In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon writes of his experience of racism,

> 'I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*, which I had learned from Jaspers. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema…
>
> I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism,

> intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’.”
>
> On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into the world that was ours and to help to build it together.’ (112-113)

This quotation is long but provides a step-by-step outline of the argument that I am making in this chapter. I am using Fanon’s perspective to analyse drill and improving and adapting his analysis to fit this purpose and improving it for analysing drill in modernity. Firstly, the culture that we are immersed in has multiple avenues that coalesce to portray black people in a negative and inescapable light. The ‘corporeal schema’ that Fanon refers to, also known as ‘body schema’, ‘refers to that more persistent and enduring sense of the body’s ability to act in a particular situation, and the means by which particular habits can be acquired.’ (Hale 296) This sense of self that includes a sense of agency, which all people should possess, is stripped away. It ‘crumbles’ and is replaced by a ‘racial epidermal schema’ in which the person’s sense of self is supplanted by the wider ideas about black people present in culture, meaning that even though each person is individual, there are still shackles on the person restricting movement and perhaps also influencing it. One of these constraining factors on young black men is drill. The racialised minstrelsy present in the music means that there is a gross presentation of blackness that is being imbibed by the public and projected on all young black men. Of course, this is racist and should not occur, but it does.

The list of disgusting portrayals of black people that Fanon lists is chilling. ‘Tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’.”’ is a disturbing list of offensive stereotypes, damaging ideas, disgraceful history, and gross advertisements using black people as caricatured props. These are interesting because they were to Fanon’s, and others of his day, lived reality. However, we as modern readers can

read the list and look down on those of the past because, of course, those are offensive things that should not be permitted, let alone allowed to run rampant, in polite society. However, we are doing the same with drill. The messages and ideas are the same, even if the delivery vehicle has changed. I have demonstrated this throughout this essay with examples of drill lyrics which show a celebration of a life filled with violence and the minimising of the value of (some) human life.

Fanon describes having a sort of collective responsibility for all black people. This paradoxically makes black people supremely responsible, as well as making them individually guiltless. They both retain personal responsibility for all and surrender personhood to the collective – a disturbing state of affairs. What Fanon wishes for is 'to be a man among men', something which is denied to him. His desire is to contribute to society as an equal and contribute to human flourishing. There is a journey many black people go on where this becomes apparent to them, and the choices that they make are varied, but it is with particular constraints. As we live and grow up in a society that has barriers for us, an awareness often develops that some things may be denied to us – grace, job opportunities, fair treatment, etc. – and these things are constraining factors over which we have no control. The modern form of minstrelsy, drill, contributes to these constraining factors as it is one of the pieces of the puzzle that fit together to form common perceptions of blackness.

This desire 'to be a man among men' is a longing for being perceived and treated as a fully human, autonomous moral agent. A man, and in this male drill-related context, we are speaking of men, desires to be both an individual man and a man who is able to harmoniously operate as a member of the collective: his society. What drill, and the wider social milieu of factors that it is a part of, does is attack a man's ability to be an individual by branding him as part of an amorphous mass of violent and dangerous uninhibited thugs; with perhaps a lower responsibility because it is embedded in his nature to be a monster, thus it is an inevitability. Drill also turns the man into being immediately hyper-guilty of unspecified crimes because, due to his identity being contained within that of a black hivemind, he has shared responsibility for the crimes of other black men. This paradoxical supreme responsibility combined with individual guiltlessness is my gloss on Fanon's point regarding being a man amongst men, drawn to its natural conclusion in the context of black life in modern Britain.

One may argue that the immanence that I am describing is what could push a young man into becoming a drill artist, and therefore, it is not their fault (if it is such a thing that one could be at fault for). To this perspective, I would say that, as I did previously, almost all people who face such circumstances do not turn to terrorising their own communities, and that even if we set that rebuttal aside, the idea of immanence does not eliminate the existence of moral responsibility, even if one were to argue that it makes life harder.

Normalisation of a particular type of blackness

As stated above, the words of drill artists portray the lifestyles described in their songs as normal, when they are anything but normal. Statements are made regularly in drill about a life of death so regularly that what is being claimed is normalised. In the song “Welcome To Brum”, Kayos says ‘I had the opps just layin’ there twitchin’’. In “Choppa”, SJ says ‘Let me get my hands on a choppa/ Rinse the clip on your block, tryna drop one/…I’m swingin’ my blade, tryna do him up proper, choppa’. In “Welcome to Brixton”, SR says ‘How many times have I circled an opp?/ Like again and again ‘til man got slapped with a hammer (bow)’. This active choice from the artists directly impacts the lives of others in the social group of drill artists, young black boys and men, as they propagate and maintain negative and harmful societal ideas of young black boys and men.

The question SR asks in “Welcome to Brixton”, ‘How many times’, is crucial to understanding the normalisation of a depraved life that occurs in drill. In “Welcome to Brixton”, as detailed above, he is asking the question of how many times he has circled an enemy and hit them with a hammer. There are drill songs called “How Many Times”, such as M1llionz and Lotto Ash’s one from 2021, and Poundz’s one from 2019. In Poundz’s “How Many Times?” he asks the question twelve times and does not answer it. Each time the question refers to acts of violence and criminality, driving home his violent life and portraying himself and, crucially, his community, as being mired in a life of violence which is normal. M1llionz and Lotto Ash’s “How Many Times” asks the question repeatedly, asking questions about ‘[sliding] on guys’ and being ‘on bail’. The life of violence and being institutionalised without rehabilitation is being normalised in these songs. This is without mentioning other drill songs that don’t use the question as a title but merely as a lyric.

In “Next Up – Part 1”, Sav’o says

> ‘How many times have I rid on Bush? Like one of them boys gotta go
> Back out my ting and make man swim like ching man down on volts
> Catch me a opp then stab up his head then ten toes back to the grove’

He describes a life of violence based on location (‘Bush’ referring to Shepherd’s Bush and ‘the grove’ referring to Ladbroke Grove, both areas in London which have associations with drill artists) with an unflinching bluntness that normalises the rank brutality that he is describing. He asks the question ‘How many times’, which drives home the point that these actions are unspectacular and normal. Making these actions mundane to listeners is incredibly dangerous, as one can contribute to the separation of categories of human beings. Sav’o is not unique in this messaging.

In “Link Up”, Chucks asks ‘How many times have we run down Adz?/ Got chased with shanks, some stupid nigga’. According to the words of this song, chasing men with knives is a normal act. It is normal and just something that these men do. In “Play For The Pagans”, Horrid1 says ‘How many times have I made you run? (Sorry)/ TeeWizz got splashed and died, and I don’t feel sorry for his mum (Wizz)’. Making people fear one to the point that they flee is boasted of and spoken of as normal. Inflicting terror and being close to murder is glorified and normalised.

A violent, dangerous life in which the value of human life is very little, and the speaker has supreme power over others is not only celebrated, but normalised. This increases the immanence of black consciousness for those that have nothing in common with anything being expressed in these words. They will nonetheless be treated as if they were the ones that spoke them by a society that is less willing to draw major distinctions between young black men then they are for young men of other ethnic backgrounds.

Of course, there is the salient point that were all these disgusting and violent acts as normal and inconsequential as drill artists sometimes attempt to portray them, they would not be worth mentioning. Within drill, there is a deliberate and concerted effort to portray oneself as habitually, regularly, and, crucially, normally dangerous, powerful, fearless, and an uninhibited hunter who violates and is not violated. Such a ubiquitous feature of drill is not a coincidence but is instead indicative of a culture of incredibly forceful and violent masculinity within the genre of music. Such a forced

portrayal of oneself could be argued to be inauthentic, supporting the claim that it is performed minstrelsy, and in many cases, probability would tell us that it is. However, the words and the messages are communicated as truth. They are blunt, and without allegory alluding to an esoteric message up for interpretation. The music is meant to say, 'I am the biggest, strongest, most dangerous killer, and my violence is both regular and terrifying'. This message has reached some people, or it has been added on top of other existing ideas about blackness that persist in British society. Thus, the collective black guilt that Fanon refers to, aforementioned in this chapter, contains a shame and responsibility associated with drill, as it has come from our community. This cycle of violence presented within drill lyrics continues to contribute to our oppression, regardless of whether the lyrics are actually true.

Repeated exposure to lyrics that denigrate black lives contributes to a wider perception of them being of less value than those of other people. This does not happen in a vacuum, and there is definitely much to be said about poverty and lack of opportunity, but the dehumanisation that happens when human life is spoken of so callously and disregarded so casually leads to harmful practices. In "Lagga", M1llionz raps, 'Can't put faith in this rebore jammer/ I got more trust in this kitchen stabber'. He indicates that he has a rebore (an airsoft gun or other type of less deadly gun that has been illegally reworked to fire bullets), but that he does not trust it and instead relies on a kitchen knife because its sharpness and his strength will not let him down. This casual discussion of the weapons that he uses for maiming and killing, and their effectiveness or lack thereof, exists as part of a wider body of music that is connected to a genre which is (unfairly) placed onto a race of people.

In "Bando Diaries", dutchavelli does the same thing. He says, 'When I buck my opps, there's no remorse'. Again, we see the casual discussion of forceful black violence and the explicit, gleeful confession that killing other people comes with no remorse. These regularly repeated motifs of violent black men killing and being killed as events of very little consequence serve to numb the audience to their pain and narrow them into a perceived view of them. This is wrong, but it does not stop it from occurring. As a black person, when we make incredibly negative music, like this, that feeds into a narrative that already exists we strengthen that narrative. Thus, the black drill artist has a greater responsibility than a drill artist (or artist from another genre) of any other race because their words have a greater impact on their social

group. This is because we are perceived as being actuality rather than potentiality, in Fanon's terms.

With our grounding in Fanon's account of the immanence of black consciousness established, we can now turn to the question of artistic responsibility. If one contends that the value of the human life is great and that it should not be diminished, either unintentionally or through one's own deliberate fault, the question of the moral responsibility of the drill artist is answered swiftly and clearly, as my next section will demonstrate.

Responsibility

Responsibility and art have been contentious topics, but at a base level, I would maintain that every person is responsible, to an extent, for the content that they put out into the world. The degrees to which we are responsible, unfortunately, are not even between people. This is not fair, but it is still the case. We are not untethered individuals existing without connection to other people; we are interlinked and owe each other the dignity that a human life is due. I am assuming that each person that I am referring to is of sound mind. Severe mental deficiencies impact on personal responsibility. However, for the most part, people are capable of bearing responsibility for the things that they do and say. If we contend that human lives are valuable, it follows that there is a responsibility that we must take when we denigrate people and contribute to their lack of or erosion of their perceived worth and dignity. This is especially true in the case of the artist because, as Maritain puts it, 'art reaches man in his inner powers. It reaches him more profoundly and insidiously than any rational proposition, either cogent demonstration or sophistry.' (21) Art has an elevated power to inspire, awaken and manipulate. All communication has some potential to be influential, but art is something particular; possessing a strong power to inform and influence, it must be used with care, if we believe that people should be treated with care. Thus, especially in the context of being a member of a minority who is perceived with a lesser degree of independence and a greater level of fixedness by the majority out-group, an individual is answerable to the group that they belong to.

It is true that such answerability is unfair. As black people, we are subject to harsher judgment and the rewards on offer are also often lesser. However, as a community,

we owe each other, at a bare minimum, refraining from dehumanising all of us. A tiny subsection of our community may profit from the denigration of all of us, but they do so at the cost of inflicting social and recognitive harm on our community. By 'recognitive harm' I mean that drill artists harm the ability of black people to gain true recognition. They make it harder for people to be seen as complex individuals because they portray themselves and (as repeatedly emphasised in this essay) unfairly the rest of us as being one-note dangerous people. To suggest that a drill artist has no answerability for their output into society is akin to saying that a painter who paints a picture of Anne Frank with a swastika tattoo has no responsibility for how people feel when they view the artwork, even if the artist is Jewish.

It is worth noting that most people who make drill are not materially successful enough with it for them to be elevated beyond their starting position in society. In a capitalist society, such as ours, that esteems wealth possibly above all else, people who gain a large amount of money and material wealth are given a position inaccessible to others. Of course, once a man is receiving MOBO and BRIT awards and nominations[8] , his social position changes, and he may not always be treated with the same fear and revulsion as his peers.[9] This is especially apparent when one takes into account that drill artists are portraying us in line with preexisting cultural ideas about us, which is partly why they are so easily able to access cultural purchase.

As discussed at length earlier in this essay, there has been a well-established appetite in this country for the portrayal of othered individuals as alien. This occurs when the 'other' is not just portrayed as being different from us in a largely insignificant way, but different to such a degree that the categories of person (or even non-person) become worlds apart. In this country southerners and northerners

[8] For example, "Body (Remix)" by Russ Millions and Tion Wayne, featuring ArrDee, Bugzy Malone, Buni, Darkoo, E1 (3x3), Fivio Foreign and ZT (3x3) won Song of the Year at the MOBO Awards 2021. This is the mainstreaming of drill as a normal expression of blackness that is even further than giving drill its own MOBO award category (which is now a category of its own). The existence of drill within the MOBO awards, supports my claims that drill is minstrelsy. MOBO stands for Music of Black Origin and most of the winners of the awards are black. However, most of the other music does not portray black people so destructively. Drill does exactly that and is treated as being worthy of awards and praise, by the cultural establishment, which is insidious and dangerous.

[9] I am not saying that his position changes entirely. At the end of the day, he is still a black man and his appearance will always make this apparent, thus ensuring Fanon's black immanence. However, due to his wealth and power, he may be insulated from the negativity that others may feel towards him because he has, in another hierarchy, advanced perhaps beyond them but definitely to the level of being worthy of (at least outward) respect.

sometimes other each other but they do not tend to characterise each other as the alien. Whereas minstrelsy makes the minstrel completely different to the observer. The performer becomes something unrelatable and thus empathy for the person is damaged, diminished, or obliterated.

This occurred in traditional blackface minstrelsy and has continued in a modern form of minstrelsy: drill. These ideas about us pushed in these portrayals rob us of our humanity and our ability to be a good or bad person. As we are not potentiality but actuality, we are something fully realised. We are not judged as being a person who may or may not do bad or good. Instead, when found to have committed a crime, we are just one of many inevitable black criminals, almost a member of a malignant hivemind rather than an individual person. Drill artists contributing to this system means that they are answerable to their group because their music alienates and harms us, and in most cases, them, as well.

Human beings are valuable, deserving of dignity, and their lives should not be devalued and denigrated for cheap entertainment (or any other purpose). Thus, as a wider society, we owe each other; it is our duty to, at the very least, not strip any life of its value or worth. As black people, we are part of a community of people that are already at a disadvantage, as members of an immediately visible minority group that encounters various difficulties in British society and therefore have an increased need to be careful about how we portray ourselves, as we are members of a racialised group. Thus, the drill artist has a moral obligation to our community that they fail by making the minstrel art of drill. Making drill is a failure in one's duty to others, and that is its intrinsic aesthetic flaw. One cannot be a morally responsible black drill artist. I would also maintain that it is not possible to be a morally responsible drill artist of any race, as the dehumanisation of others is a necessary component of the music. However, as a black drill artist, the individual has to, unfairly, interact with a world in which their own group is viewed through a particular lens, which means that to some, when he performs, he will be a representative of black people in a way that a white drill artist may not be.

The portrayal of black people in the United Kingdom has been offensive and damaging for centuries. Historically, as detailed earlier in this essay, cultural touchstones such as *The Black and White Minstrel Show* were mainstays in the

landscape of British entertainment. The historic popularities of forms of entertainment such as the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and plays based on it, and the aforementioned television show contributed greatly to the understanding of what black people were like in the United Kingdom.[10] However, we have entered a new era of British entertainment in which a lot of our portrayals of ourselves are done by us. Instead of white authors and white performers, we now take a central role in our own portrayal. Of course, there is a discussion to be had about what wider cultural powers will platform, but the fact remains that drill must exist for it to be pushed. In the modern cultural climate, it would be unacceptable for the BBC, or indeed any other network, to host a blackface minstrel show. However, the BBC no longer need to pay white actors to dress up, paint themselves, and perform as disgusting caricatures. Now there is a surplus of young black boys and men who will do it for free. Our characterisation, as a race, has been given away for nothing. This is of no benefit to our community. Some of the structures that keep us down are being maintained by our own people.

This concept of a characterisation of a race that can be given away applies far more to minorities than it does to the dominant race. For a white artist, they are perceived as an individual, and it is not racial stereotypes that they are conforming to and upholding. The same is true, to an extent, of artists from other ethnic backgrounds, but there are other complications that would need to be addressed with regard to their perceptions as a minority in British society. There is an appetite for the characterisation of black people as being within particular narrow categories in a way that there is not for every group of people, particularly white British people. Our characterisation as a people is being sold by bad actors. This contributes to Fanonian immanence.[11]

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[10] David Olusoga writes in *Black and British*, '*Uncle Tom's Cabin* infiltrated the English language and was refracted through British popular music and collided with another lost feature of Victorian popular culture, the enormous popularity of blackface minstrel acts.' (Olusoga 263) There is a long history of exaggerated portrayals of black people that use the currency of stereotypes and set roles, regardless of whether or not this was well meaning - Harriet Beecher Stowe intended her novel to be an abolitionist text, nevertheless, she was a white woman writing about black people in very limited ways and her work gained a life of its own amongst people who had a variety of intentions, being performed on stages across this country and the United States of America in very loose adaptations..

[11] Of course, for Fanon, there is cultural imperialism to consider, and that there will be particular portrayals of us as a people that are more palatable to a society that denigrates us and has our denigration as part of their artistic history and present, but as I have stated above, drill must exist for it to be promoted.

Drill is servicing a preestablished need in the British cultural context. The need is for minstrelsy, as there is an appetite that has been created and fed within the media landscape of this country for two centuries. Drill's existence is not spontaneous, and it has found purchase because it fits into a cultural gap in which we allow the caricatures of black people to proudly sit. This appetite is Sontag's aforementioned Western appetite for the suffering of othered people.

This responsibility that we have is in part because the lives of others are affected, both positively and negatively, by our actions. This can be in more minor ways that hurt the feelings of the individual, or they can lead to fear and decreased empathy and lead to life and death situations. For example, the response to the murder of George Floyd by police officers, in the United States of America, was mixed in the United Kingdom. Some saw him as a murdered victim, and others perceived him as someone dangerous and who should not be celebrated. Views on him as a person, due to the immutable quality of race, probably led to his death and impacted how his death was received. As racialised individuals in a majority white society in which power structures are not largely to our benefit, we have a heightened duty as we are more likely to be confirming external views of us. Personally, I have had plenty of interactions with others in which their view of me has been informed by my ethnicity, rather than my character or my actions. This has affected me in the workplace, in education, and in my private life, and I am not unique in this respect. For example, I have had a manager in a work environment express to me (a young black man) their personal issues with young black men and how they would be unimpressed by their white daughter bringing a young black man home with her. I expressed my displeasure at what had been expressed, and in retaliation, this person, who at the time was my manager's manager's manager, proceeded to make my working life more difficult. I have also been subject to racially motivated violence and racialised policing.

Drill is not just poetry devoid of connection to reality. It is music which makes claims about the real world. Its value is intrinsically tied to its perception as truth. It is purporting to be the truth. In our current British society a tighter connection will be made between an individual and their group if they are part of a marginalised minority as opposed to the majority. This means that black drill artists will be (unfairly) viewed as being a representative of black people, so when they perform

they have an impact on their community that a white drill artist would not because they would be more likely to be seen as a representative of themselves alone. Thus, black drill artists are answerable to their community for making life harder for those like them. The stereotyping is harmful rather than just offensive; one can stereotype those from a wealthy economic position with ideas about ‘posh’ people that may be offensive, but the end impact on the person’s life is different. When black people are placed into a narrow framework which positions them as being dangerous and a threat to the rest of society, we are all negatively affected. Our interactions with the police, the justice system, teachers, academic institutions and bodies, employers and potential employers, and peers (both professional and private) are all affected by these actions.

Being subject to aggression, hostility, distrust, abuse of power, discrimination, and harassment are all things which occur because people have ideas about those who are black that were not formed in a vacuum but negatively shaped in a culture that is comfortable denigrating black people, and with black people denigrating themselves. These preconceived notions of others that affect our lives are unavoidable because they are applied to us based on an immediately visible, immutable quality or perceived racial group. Being black is inescapable, and drill artists continue to harm our community by sowing discord and incentivising violence, but also by providing ammunition for those in society who are already primed to dislike us, and those who are forming an opinion of us. This is by no means the entire fault or responsibility of drill artists; we exist within a framework with far more and far greater forces than us as individuals, but artists are responsible for their own art. It is unfair that these artists are maybe treated as having a higher degree of responsibility than artists of other races, but this alone does not absolve them of guilt. We exist in a reality in which our professional positions, physical safety, and expectation of fair treatment by the justice system are lessened by factors beyond our control.

Of course, drill artists are not singularly to blame for any of these things. We exist within a framework that has all kinds of negative biases welded into its structure. There is a history in this country of fear and revulsion being directed towards those who are black. This essay has already covered the history of minstrelsy in this country, but we must also contend with narratives around tendencies towards infidelity, violence, and generally poor moral character which exist inside and outside

of minstrelsy. When writing of the popularity of minstrelsy in nineteenth-century Britain in *Black and British,* David Olusoga makes the point that 'it was enormously popular right through into the twentieth century.' (Olusoga 271) He goes on to say that 'The near ubiquity of minstrel shows and minstrel imagery made it one of the cultural forces that helped shape how black people were imagined and how slavery was envisaged in Victorian Britain.' (Olusoga 271-272) For black people in Britain, and under the oppression of British people throughout the British Empire, in the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy would have contributed to their immanence, despite the fact that it could purportedly be used for propagating abolitionist ideals.[12] For black people in Britain today, one of the things that has taken the place of blackface minstrelsy in contributing to their immanence is the modern minstrelsy of drill.

[12] David Olusoga writes that,

> 'On occasions the most benign of the minstrel songs and sketches presented the anti-slavery cause as a form of anti-slavery entertainment, one that condemned American slavery while at the same time lampooning and stereotyping black people. From the 1830s to the 1850s white men in blackface delivered anti-slavery speeches from the stages of British theatres and music halls, in the same acts in which they rolled their eyes and crudely imitated black dancing, during their high-speed comic routines. Thomas Rice's first performances as Jim Crowe in the Surrey Theatre were a mixture of singing and dancing, racial lampooning but also anti-slavery statements.' (272)

Chapter Five
Conclusion

Drill is a British art form that has grown in popularity and influence, establishing a degree of mainstream acceptance and normality that is of particular interest to an observer because of its disturbing content and socially damaging effect. A number of claims are made about its authenticity. As established in this essay, those claims are in many cases true, but in some cases will be false. The music, however, pushes an image of realness and the authenticity of the artist is connected to their perception within the wider drill listenership. There are claims made about the music being true, and when it is unhelpful – such as during court proceedings – to the artist for it to be perceived this way, the opposite is claimed, and that artists are playing into a persona (this supports my claim that this is minstrelsy). Ultimately, the claims being made within drill do not need to be true, but they are lent a particular credence if they are perceived as genuine.

Drill takes some of the aesthetic features of the historical artistic category blackface minstrelsy and modernises them for the twenty-first-century British cultural landscape. However, rather than just continue within this artistic tradition, drill uses different stereotypes and ideas about black people than the vices and foibles that were presented in traditional minstrelsy. Instead of stereotypes amounting to that of a stupid clown or buffoon, drill instead focuses on hyper-aggressive, materialistic, violent displays of murderous masculinity and dominance (sexual or otherwise). There is a cultural gap within the British entertainment framework that is partially filled by drill – somewhat satiating an appetite for othered displays of blackness. Drill artists step into a position that is open to them. We (as a nation collectively – this is not individually calling out people, but there are definitely individuals for whom this is true) have an understanding of the idea of black people being certain things, and drill artists inhabit this particular persona and directly harm their own communities and themselves. Thus, the drill artist morally fails themselves and their community by making drill music. The music is inherently morally bankrupt and aesthetically poor.

As highlighted earlier in this essay, we only have to go back to the 1970s for a time in which blackface minstrelsy was a normal part of British entertainment. Thus, we have a populace who are primed for displays of ludicrous, over-the-top, farcical,

ridiculous blackness. It is this space, vacated by their minstrel forbears, that our twenty-first-century drill artists have stepped into; that of the disrespected, not valued entertainer, selling out their own people, and themselves, for status and money (if they even get to the point of getting paid for their art).

Excuses are made on behalf of drill artists by those who wish to infantilise and explain away all of drill's moral failings with offensively low expectations of those that they perceive as being nothing more than their circumstances. Of course, when put to the test, drill artists also excuse their own actions, often with the excuse that it is merely playing a part. They do not acknowledge that the part they are playing, that of a minstrel, is harmful to both them and their wider community. In addition, it minimises their own personal responsibility. Drill artists are responsible for their music, and their music is harmful. It is true that the responsibility that they are given is perhaps unfair, but this does not make it any less real; drill artists are ultimately responsible for their output into the world, as are we all.

Drill is aesthetically poor because it is intrinsically tied to moral flaws and issues of injustice and inequality. As an aesthetic moralist, this means that it must be poor art. For drill to make sense, within our cultural landscape, there must be a shared idea that these men are describing circumstances that could be real, even if they are not. The audience needs plausibility for it to make sense to them. Therefore, we must have stark social inequality that brings with it a lack of opportunities and incentivises violence and criminality. We as a culture must in some way tacitly endorse these strict divisions and be comfortable (or at least not too uncomfortable) with the inequality that we live alongside in our villages, towns, and cities. The idea that young men would emerge from this culture and would be predisposed towards heinous violence has to be something that a large audience accepts with little or no imaginative resistance for drill to be able to achieve the cultural purchase that it has.

The fact that these young men are usually black and that this genre is perceived as being a legitimate expression of black Britishness by many is both extremely disturbing and alarming, as well as demonstrative of a culture that disparages young black men and is primed for displays of minstrelsy. Drill requires all of the societal and cultural flaws aforementioned to exist. It cannot exist in a culture in which poor young black men are perceived as equals to their other peers in dignity, self-control,

and ultimately their morality. We require a subsection of society that is hierarchically at the bottom for this gladiatorial entertainment to flourish. Discussions of which murders and gang activities are being referenced are commonplace amongst drill fans, many of whom have no connection to the world of which they speak and are enamoured by. Simply put, drill is racist and classist music, and these things are inextricably linked; you cannot have drill without the moral nastiness that is present in our current environment. Each person is valuable and is worth treating with the dignity and respect that each human being is owed, due to being a person. Instead, drill commits to doing the opposite; it dehumanises those who make it by portraying them as violent, uninhibited slasher monsters, as well as broadening these ideas to those like them (other young black men) and/or turning the community that they are part of into one of villains and deserving victims.

This nicely leads to my argument that uses Susan Sontag's ideas about war photography to demonstrate that drill artists act as both the photographer and the photographed subject. They graphically describe themselves as nasty, violent killers, hunting for prey and brutalising those in their paths, both because they deserve this treatment and because all others are powerless to stop them from bestowing it, regardless of whether it is really deserved. This music is accepted by many because they have no imaginative resistance, but it also goes further and not only plays into preexisting cultural ideas, it also functions as its own kind of propaganda. It treats young black men as willing participants in a war of othered peoples occurring in lands that are not ours and which we need not concern ourselves with. These people are dehumanised to the listener, but it also (deliberately or without purpose) incentivises the actions it describes. It reduces the value of black men to listeners (whether they be black or not) and encourages them to engage in harmful behaviour because there is glory to be won. Reducing the value of black life is always wrong. Making the lives and deaths of a group of people matter less is damaging. It encourages a system in which there is differing and worse treatment based on immutable characteristics (we already have this, but drill at the very least endorses it, if not outright encouraging it).

None of this occurs in a vacuum. Indeed, the ideas that drill artists step into and inhabit are available to them because of the cultural landscape that we already inhabit. Thus, unpacking the complexities of drill is a much bigger project because

one would need to fully unpack the history leading up to the present ideas that exist, either promoted or tolerated, and why it came to be that way. I could not begin to fully detail in this project all of the problems with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 2025, but in this project, I was able to firmly set out, with a clear philosophical method, why drill is morally and aesthetically bankrupt.

Fanonian immanence follows from my use of Sontag's war photography analysis to look at drill. All the things discussed above contribute to the immanence of black consciousness. There are forces that impress on us that do not just affect our moods but lead to personal change in the way one is perceived, but also the way one perceives oneself. The potentiality that other men may have is not afforded to the black man; he simply is. This is the 'immanence of black consciousness': to be denied personhood, containing all the flexibility and lack of rigidity each human being possesses and having that replaced with a racist idea of what one is, placed onto the person by external forces.

This all combines to create drill and makes the aesthetic flaw of the art form apparent: it is intrinsically tied to pain and suffering. Drill is an art form which is inseparable from some of the most twisted and disturbing elements of British culture, areas which many are reticent to shine a light on. Its artistic merit is derived from playing into vulgar, degrading, and harmful ideas about people. In perpetuating them, the artist hopes to gain power, but this is not enough. We should not accept that this is good art; it is not. It is art that makes moral claims and thus stands or falls on the veracity of those claims. The claims have no veracity. It is not true that black people are particularly violent or dangerous people, and it is also untrue that cruel, sadistic violence and murder are admirable. It is not (or should not be) attractive, seductive, or appealing. It is a lie that it is the truth – this music does not merely accurately describe a specific environment and set of lived experiences, it incentivises and moralises based on them. It encourages listeners to aspire to be something nasty (if they are susceptible to the messaging in the music) or to view certain people's humanity as less than or compromised, or even more disturbingly, it encourages both at once.

Reflecting on the art form drill over the course of a long-form essay has been both enriching and disturbing. There is a certain satisfaction that comes from

systematically examining one's own cultural context. However, it is also a deeply disturbing enterprise. Listening to this music and the conversations that surround it have been both illuminating and depressing. As I have journeyed through this year, I have had multiple conversations about this project with people (both in an academic context and an everyday one when discussing what I do with my time with people from different areas of my life). As demonstrated in this essay, I have not encountered a sound defence of drill as having aesthetic or moral value. I have heard defences of it, but they have just been very poor.

The assumptions that must be attached to the enjoyment of drill are at once alarming and make sense. There are those who purport to enjoy music merely for the sound. They then must ignore all the lyrical content of what they are listening to, but by listening to it, they increase its popularity, and they feed its lyrical content to themselves, regardless of whether they deliberately imbibe its contents or not. It also means that they are comfortable looking past the denigration of the lives of black men and boys. These same people may feel very uncomfortable if I asked them about music that portrays rape of women as being funny (hinting at the fact that they actually view different things as beyond the pale and others as acceptable). They may not be able to see past *that* in their music. This leads to the point that, regardless of whether or not the listener ignores the intensely denigrating content, they must, at some level, accept it.

Admittedly, drill is a symptom of an ill culture and not a cause of our sick state of affairs. However, this does not mean that we should leave it to fester. I want to be clear that I am not suggesting any kind of censorship. Legally, people are free to say whatever they wish, provided it is not hate speech or an incitement of violence. These existing legal issues already pose a challenge to drill. I make no secret of the fact that I personally believe that we would all be better off if drill did not exist, but I am not saying that it should be banned. What I am saying is this: we should carefully, critically examine why we like what we like, why we are indifferent to what we are indifferent to, and why we dislike what we dislike. When we do this with drill, we expose some very disturbing trends. Hopefully, this essay did something to expose the complicity within our British cultural context with denigrating black men and boys, both by ourselves and by the powers that be in these spaces.

As I stated at the beginning of this essay, I approached this topic from a natural law standpoint. I am a Christian and believe that each person is made in the image and likeness of God, and as image-bearers of God, each person and people group should be afforded the dignity that is owed to them. Drill does not do this. It supersedes the inherent dignity and worth of the human person and supplants it with the value of a cheap commodity. Human life becomes something that can be extinguished as part of cheap sport or in petty conflict. There is seemingly no moral element to the proceedings. The only scales that are tipped are those of power, not of justice. The strong eat and the weak starve within the narratives that we are presented with as being normative, and this is not presented as being wrong, but as the rightful way of the world.

This essay opens up further areas of study for my future research. I have explored artistic expressions of blackness, particularly through the minstrelsy art form drill in this essay, but there are other expressions of blackness in media and lenses with which they can be viewed that I would like to explore further. In addition, I believe that there is room for further research into and publishing on moralistic aesthetics. In this essay, I have worked from my conviction that the morality of a piece of artwork and its aesthetic quality is inextricably linked. There is definitely room for my ideas regarding absolute morals with regard to aesthetic quality to be expanded on.

For this piece of work, I am thankful that I have been able to expand on my thinking this year. My hope moving forward would be that something of the philosophy that I am doing and have done would be able to move the dial somewhat with regard to people thinking about the media that they or we consume and the biases, prejudices, and positions that it exposes, encourages, or entrenches within us as a nation. Art is important. It is not just entertainment, but it reflects and shapes who we are as people. Our values, beliefs, hopes, and dreams are all laid bare in the cultural touchstones of our time. If these cultural touchstones subtly or, in the case of drill, unsubtly show morally abhorrent ideas, we must examine them. To me, philosophy is not the mere ponderings of men and women in ivory towers, but also something of value to society that can challenge the way that we operate and offer better alternatives. The encouragement I can give with this piece of work is to view individual people as full-fledged human beings, deserving of human dignity. Viewing

people in such a way can sound trite and obvious, but as demonstrated in this essay, sadly, to many, it is not obvious.

Works Cited

To access a Spotify playlist with all the drill songs referred to in this essay, please use the following link: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1yRQQrm4WEp9Hdi5jiKry1?si=f9340dc26d094955

To access a Spotify playlist with all the non-drill songs referred to in this essay, please use the following link: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5lmYcHDbkF47PNQ3288o9U?si=7037debb7f96467f

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