

Making Crimes Out Of Rhymes: UK Drill and The Racialised Governance of Black Cultural Expression in Post-Windrush Britain

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Abstract

The criminalisation of UK drill music marks a qualitative shift in the policing of Black British cultural expression: lyrics are being admitted as criminal evidence and performances constitute grounds for prison sentences, despite no empirical link between drill and violent crime. This article asks what drill's systematic criminalisation, conducted without evidential basis, reveals about racialised governance of Black cultural expression in post-Windrush Britain. It contributes to debates on race, citizenship, and cultural censorship in contemporary Britain. Through Critical Discourse Studies and genealogical method, it traces a sonic lineage from early Jamaican sound systems to drill, arguing that drill's policing constitutes a juridical criminalisation sustained through a systematic omission of racial language. It concludes that drill has functioned as a scapegoat, and develops the *apparent citizenship contradiction*, an original concept naming the coexistence of formal legal equality and racialised governance, as the mechanism through which institutional discrimination is rendered deniable.

Introduction

“I don’t think it’s possible to understand...the policing of Black or Afro-diasporic music genres, whether we’re talking about UK drill today or...other music’s of the African diaspora...as separate from the history of policing and police racism itself, and indeed criminal injustice” (Fatsis, 2026, 03:28).

Drill is a rap music genre that originated in Chicago in the early 2010s, distinct from other hip-hop forms in its combative energy, preoccupation with gang-conflict and frank portrayal of urban life (Davies, 2021). The genre crossed the Atlantic soon after its inception and as UK drill artist Loski noted “Chicago’s drill music had a big influence...people in Brixton started doing it” (Apple Music, 2020). UK drill, hereafter referred to as simply ‘drill’, will be the focus of this research. In 2018, drill artists AM and Skengdo became the first in British legal history to receive a prison sentence for performing a song, simply titled ‘Attempted 1.0’ (Hancox, 2019). The fact that the performance of a song could amount to grounds for incarceration marks a qualitative shift in how drill music is being policed. UCL’s Department of Security and Crime concluded that there is ‘no meaningful relationship between drill music and real-life violence when compared to three kinds of police-recorded violent crime data in London’ (Kleinberg and McFarlane, 2020 in Oliver, 2023, p.9), and the most extensive review of cases in which rap music has been used as evidence itself concedes that ‘this topic urgently needs scrutiny and data’ (Quinn et al., 2024, p.5). This research responds to that necessity by moving beyond what quantitative data alone can offer.

Drill music has notably violent lyricism. In the absence of evidential basis for a causal relationship; however, drill has been institutionally constructed as directly criminogenic and resultantly, many drill artists continue to be prosecuted on this basis. The political question this article asks is, what does the systematic criminalisation of drill music as a Black British cultural expression, conducted without evidential grounds, reveal about the racialised governance of Black cultural expression in Britain today?

The growing body of academic research about the policing of drill has addressed the inseparability of Black cultural expression and institutional racism, with key authors such as Lambros Fatsis (2019; 2023) tracing this lineage back to the colonial era. This project takes inspiration from that scholarship but chooses to trace the genealogy from an intentionally different starting point, beginning with the post-Windrush era's police raids of the 1960s, through the racialised administrative criteria of Form 696, to today's gang injunctions and prosecutorial practices that govern drill. These represent intensifications of the same racialised rationale that positions Black British cultural expressions as societal threat. Moreover, this pattern runs through Black British music's sonic genealogy. Grime, like drill (often named its successor), has been subject to numerous forms of policing (Sanghavi, 2025), and grime's sonic genealogy traces back to the Jamaican sound systems and dances Windrush migrants brought with them to Britain (White, 2020). As Oliver describes drill's 'bounce, foreboding feel and deliciously distorted sound design... [is] Jamaican-influenced British grit a la grime...' (2023, p.4). The post-Windrush period is therefore an analytically pertinent frame, not because every drill artist is of Caribbean heritage, but because drill's cultural and sonic lineage trace directly back to the Jamaican sound systems brought by

Commonwealth migrants. This is not a study of whether drill causes crime, rather it is an addition of vital and critical research to the field, on how drill has been constructed as criminogenic and what that reveals about racialised governance of Black cultural expression in Britain.

Furthermore, juridical criminalisation and the *apparent citizenship contradiction* are two concepts central to this research. Juridical criminalisation is understood as the qualitative shift by which the discursive construction of drill as a social threat becomes inscribed into legal apparatuses, so that rap lyrics are admitted as criminal evidence and performances constitute grounds for incarceration. Drill's juridical criminalisation is representative of a racialised cultural governance, defined in this research as a compound analytical concept drawing on Stuart Hall's (1997) theorisation of how institutions produce racialised categories through discourse, Paul Gilroy's (1987) argument that the state positions Black culture as incompatible with British national identity, and Lambros Fatsis's (2019) concept of racial neoliberalism. This captures the state's use of administrative, legal and discursive mechanisms to monitor, restrict and criminalise Black cultural expression through neutral-sounding procedures that encode racial criteria rather than explicit racial language. From 1948 onwards, Commonwealth citizens arrived as British subjects entitled to formal legal equality, yet as Gilroy (1987) emphasises, Black Britons were simultaneously positioned as incompatible with British nationhood. This tension distinguishes the post-Windrush period analytically from the colonial era, where racialised governance operated within the openly racialised logic of empire and did not require procedural concealment. This article develops the *apparent citizenship contradiction*, to name the coexistence of formal legal equality and racialised cultural governance through which the policing of drill is practised whilst remaining institutionally deniable.

To analyse this process, this project adopts Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and genealogical method, conducting an in-depth analysis across five primary sources: the AM and Skengdo gang injunction, Serious Violence Strategy (2018), Mayor's Question Time exchanges, Krept and Konan's *Ban Drill*, and Drillminister's *Political Drillin*.

Literature Review

This chapter will first analyse the existing scholarship on the policing of drill music in a wider context of the governance of Black cultural expression in Britain. Then, it considers the emerging scholarship on the policing of drill, evaluating literature surrounding cultural censorship, legislation and restrictive policing practices (Fatsis, 2019; Gilroy, 1987; Hall, 1997) that this research argues positions drill as the latest, intensified iteration of racialised cultural governance.

Policing Black Cultural Expression in Britain

The years following the 1948 migration of the Windrush generation were marked by a profound racial paradox: Commonwealth migrants were actively encouraged to migrate to Britain to aid post-war labour shortages yet were met with considerable racial hostility upon arrival (White, 2020; McGraw, 2018). In response to this exclusion, the Black British community recreated cultural traditions as a way of ameliorating their new life in Britain, and Caribbean migrants brought their reggae sound system culture, house parties and dances to British urban life (Sanghavi, 2025; Ward, 2018; McGraw, 2018). These events enabled Black British citizens to create spaces of social refuge, belonging and cultural continuity with a racialised social environment (Back 1988; Ward, 2018).

However, as these events of Black cultural expression became increasingly prevalent in British cities, the institutional response and narratives began to progressively reframe their practices as spaces of disorder and potential social threat rather than as simply entertainment. In the early 1960s, British

police embarked on regular raids of so-called ‘typical West Indian parties’ commonly referred to as ‘shebeens’ (McGraw, 2018, p.368); they were frequently subject to routine police surveillance and intervention under provisions like the Licensing Act 1953 that was able to penalise alleged breaches of unlicensed alcohol sales (Ward 2018; McGraw, 2018). Under the guise of upholding legislation for illegal alcohol sales and noise complaints, patrolmen were able to justify arrests for those merely entering and exiting the shebeens (McGraw, 2018). This exemplifies the deeper prejudice Black British migrants faced, revealing racialised assumptions that positioned their cultural norms as inherently suspect and disorderly.

Moving on to theorists of race and representation will facilitate further depth of understanding how such assumptions came to be embedded within institutional practices. The influential work of Stuart Hall explains that culture permeates all aspects of social life and meaning is produced through systems of representation that shape how people, practices, and identities are understood in society (Hall, 1997). These meanings are not neutral, they inform the social norms, rules, and conventions that dictate how society is ordered and governed (Hall, 1997). For these meanings to be mobilised, language and discourse are instrumental mechanisms through which meaning can be produced, circulated, and maintained in society, so institutions seeking power and governance over the public make use of these key mechanisms to regulate and control (Hall, 1997). When we apply this to the context of Black British music, Hall’s framework begins to illustrate how Black cultural expression has been historically constructed through institutional discourse as inherently criminogenic and as a result, in need of regulation.

This portrayal of Black gatherings as sites of social disorder and potential violence therefore should be understood as indicative of the processes through which cultural practices come to be framed as socially threatening. Rather than assuming the significant policing of Black gatherings reflected a reality of anti-social behaviour at the time, this research encourages the reader to consider why these spaces associated with Black cultural expression have been repeatedly interpreted through institutional frameworks of suspicion and disorder.

Constructing Black Cultural Expression as Threat

Having established how early Black cultural gatherings in Britain were subject to policing and institutional suspicion, this section examines why such interpretations emerged and how meanings are produced and circulated. This requires engagement with broader theoretical perspectives on culture, representation, and moral panic. We can trace the sonic genealogy of grime and drill back to the sound system traditions and musical practices introduced by the Caribbean migrants (White, 2020; McGraw, 2018; Sanghavi, 2025). These Black British genres are cultural productions that have been repeatedly interpreted through narratives of deviance and criminality. What follows seeks to explain how Black cultural expression through music becomes criminalised through racialised narratives that frame cultural forms as socially threatening and shape hostile institutional responses.

Many scholars of cultural studies, like Gilroy (1987), have continually argued that the production of culture operates at the intersection of lived experiences and broader societal structures. In his

eminent book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, he conceptualises culture as the social sphere through which everyday lived experiences become articulated within, and shaped by, the systematic structures of power (Gilroy, 1987). The lived experiences of residents of social housing in grime lyrics work to curate a sense of belonging that inspires the artists and resonates with the listeners (White, 2020). Gilroy credits Hall's influential work describing the role of meanings in informing societal norms and order through developing his own theorisations that whilst culture is expressive, it has important material consequences: 'meanings are sources of the individual and collective actions which give culture its materiality' (Gilroy, 1987, p.17). Together these scholars aid this research in explaining why grime and drill are reflections of the Black British lived experience, and cultural productions that actively interact with structural forces of race, class and institutional power.

This is captured starkly by Gilroy (1987, p.60) as he notes that Black cultures have been framed as 'alien' introductions into Britain, with British nationhood and national cultures positioned as something incompatible with the possibility of authentically accommodating Black Brits and their cultural expression. This is articulated by Oliver (1990) as a discursive assumption that Black music is outside of the traditional, conservative understanding of Britain being fundamentally White because it is made by migrants who are inseparable from their 'Blackness'. This assumption exemplifies why the shebeens and cultural expressions of the first-generation Windrush migrants were targeted as outside of the (fundamentally white) British social order. It is from this understanding of racialised perceptions of Black cultural forms that this research seeks to interpret and challenge the intensification of policing drill music today.

The Juridical Turn

The preceding sections have established that Black sound in Britain has been subject to racialised governance since the significant influx of Black migrants post-Windrush, mobilised through informal suspicion, licensing legislation and institutional narratives of disorder. Next, this section analyses emerging scholarship on the policing of drill music to reveal that this racialised governance is not only continuous, but has undergone a qualitative transformation as the policing of drill demonstrates that musical expression has itself become an object of jurisdiction, regulated as beyond culturally suspect, and to be in fact legally criminalising.

Emerging from the inner-city communities of South London in the early 2010s, drill music gives unfiltered expression to the lived realities of urban poverty, gang violence and social exclusion (Sanghavi, 2025; Fatsis, 2019). However, instead of being perceived as a cultural form rooted in this socioeconomic deprivation, the genre has been institutionally framed as a catalyst for violent crime. Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick, the Met's gang-crime chief Commander Jim Stokley and the government's Home Office were unanimous in characterising drill as a genre that 'glamorise[s] gang or drug-selling life, taunt[s] rivals and normalise[s] weapons carrying' (HM Government, 2018, cited in Fatsis, 2019). This concerning government characterisation manifests in other ways, for example via the 2021 Policy Exchange Report describing drill as a 'call to violence' (Falkner, 2021, p. 53), allowing such claims to be circulated with an air of legitimacy despite the omission of strong empirical evidence to establish the supposed causal relationship between drill music and criminal behaviour; an open letter signed by forty-nine experts contested the report as 'factually inaccurate, misleading and

politically dangerous' (Sanghavi, 2025, p.193). Hall (1997) describes that societal interpretations of cultural forms derive from the collective vocabularies which have already absorbed racialised meanings, revealing the logic from which racialised discursive practices are derived. This means Black British cultural expressions, from sound systems to grime events to drill tracks, can be pre-emptively interpreted through an institutional lens already primed for suspicion.

However, the critical distinction between the policing of drill and earlier sounds in this genealogy is the intensity of institutional suspicion that became operationalised through specific legal mechanisms. Between 2015 and 2019, Operation Domain was enacted to facilitate systematic requests to remove drill music videos from social media platforms and other streaming services (Sanghavi, 2025). More recently, from June 2021 to May 2022, every Metropolitan Police request to remove music videos targeted drill, with almost 87 percent effectively withdrawn (ibid). A landmark moment, analysed later in detail, occurred in 2018 when drill artists AM and Skengdo (Terrell Doley and Joshua Malinga) were issued a nine-month prison sentence for performing a song. This was the first time the performance of a song itself was treated as a breach of a gang injunction (Sanghavi, 2025; Fatsis, 2019). 65 signatories from human rights organisations, musicians, academics and lawyers critiqued the sentence as an affront to civil liberties, noting that few renowned music artists could survive such limitations (Fatsis, 2019). This legislative restriction of AM and Skengdo's performance is a pertinent indication of the juridical turn in policing drill music, and a salient moment demonstrating that the music itself had become illicit, and sufficient evidence according to the British government's positioning of criminality.

Building on this, an important ally in the existing literature is Quinn et al.'s (2024) quantitative review of cases involving rap music evidence whose findings reveal the racial disproportionality of a prosecutorial pattern criminalising Black sound. Examining 68 cases involving 252 defendants where rap videos and lyrics were consistently used as evidence for gang affiliation without sufficient regulation or monitoring of how such evidence was employed, it found that two thirds were Black and 80 percent had more than one defendant (Quinn et al., 2024). More recent research found a threefold increase in the yearly rate of appeal cases involving rap and drill evidence between 2005-2018 and 2019-2025 (Taylor, 2025), which provides supporting evidence of an accelerating pattern of racialised governance. Moreover, the apparatus through which drill policing has faced a juridical turn has expanded and intensified, initiating active legislative debate: at the start of this year Baroness Chakrabarti, supported by Baroness Doreen Lawrence, tabled an amendment to the Victims and Courts Bill and sought to restrict the government's admissibility of artistic expression as criminal evidence (UK Parliament, 2026). However, it was not moved to a vote leaving the discriminatory law unchanged (ibid). The dismissal of this attempt to reform the legislation speaks to the scale of the intensification of the institutional shift.

The most substantiated theoretical account is offered by Fatsis (2019) who argues that drill's criminalisation constitutes a form of racial neoliberalism in which the state repositions responsibility for the socioeconomic conditions onto the cultural expressions of those who inhabit it. Instead of confronting the structural inequalities detailed in drill lyrics, the neoliberal state criminalises the depictions themselves, articulating drill artists as 'Black folk devils' (Cohen, 1972; Hall et al., 1978; Williams, 2014) whose cultural expressions threaten societal order and public

safety (Fatsis, 2019). This is potent analytical work that this research builds directly upon, though it has limitations. Racial neoliberalism explains the ideological logic of drill's criminalisation but does not fully consider the discursive mechanisms through which that logic becomes institutionalised. Therefore, this research makes a complementary yet individual argument that the policing of drill reflects racial neoliberal ideologies whilst representing a juridical crystallisation of the longer genealogy this chapter has traced. Having arrived at today's manifestation of the racialised governance of Black sound, it is evident that drill has become embedded in law, precedent, and prosecutorial practice in qualitatively new ways.

Theoretical Framework

Discourse does not reflect social reality, it produces it. Four theoretical lenses ground this interpretivist position: Hall (1997) on representation and discourse, Gilroy (1987) on culture and racial formation, conceptions of racial neoliberalism taken from Fatsis (2019), and *the apparent citizenship contradiction* this article develops to examine the coexistence of formal legal equality and the racialised cultural governance which has been a key means through which drill has been policed.

Hall's theorisation of representation is the foundational interpretive tool. This research utilises Hall's key insight that institutions are active participants in the construction of meaning and mobilise discourse in the production of categories through which society is governed (Hall, 1997). Hall's (1997) framework directs this research to examine how the language policing drill does not have neutral meaning; it is the instrumental mechanism through which the genre has become positioned as a social threat. To address the primary sources used in this project, this research will

also make use of Hall's (1997) further argument that institutional readings draw on collective vocabularies already permeated by racialised assumptions. This saturation of racialised beliefs pre-emptively constructs drill as criminogenic, concealing its criminalisation as justifiable.

Building on Hall's conceptual foundation, Gilroy's work provides the second lens, establishing the structural and cultural consequences of drill being governed. Gilroy (1987) insists that Black cultural production is indivisible from the structural conditions of race and class. This underscores why this project maintains that drill cannot be read merely for its aesthetic form; it is a site where lived experience and structural power actively interact. This is vital to appreciate as it is the genre's articulation of deprivation, racialised policing, and social exclusion that institutional discourse suppresses by typifying drill as criminogenic. Gilroy's work also frames the analytical scaffolding for this project's genealogical approach: a sonic lineage from sound systems through grime to drill, understood as a pattern of cultural forms linked by specific racialised historical connections that can be traced and interrogated.

To elaborate on *why* institutional discourse takes this form, this research uses Fatsis (2019) explanation of racial neoliberalism to direct this study in asking not only how drill is constructed as threatening, but whose interests that constructions serve in sustaining the policing of Black cultural expression. The answer provided by the concept of racial neoliberalism is that the state's criminalisation of drill functions to displace the responsibility for the structural socioeconomic conditions, from the government onto the cultural expressions of those who inhabit them. This

works to enable punitive policing to appear as a legitimate response to disorder, rather than a racialised governance of Black sound. In the analysis, this framework will be applied to reveal how the language of policy documents, media narratives and parliamentary debate positions drill as the problem to be policed, obscuring the structural inequalities that drill articulates and a key mechanism through which the juridical criminalisation of the genre is rendered institutionally deniable.

Together these three lenses explain the political logic, discursive mechanisms and cultural consequences of drill's criminalisation. What remains is the specific historical condition revealed by *the apparent citizenship contradiction*, which this research argues is an analytical distinction that exposes the intensification of policing drill as the latest iteration of racialised cultural governance in Britain. The *apparent citizenship contradiction* names the coexistence of formal legal equality and racialised cultural governance, enabling this research to argue that the institutional framing of Black cultural expression as threatening is sustained through the procedural neutrality and stated absence of evidence that facilitate racialised governance continuing unremarked.

Methodology

The object of this study is therefore the institutional language through which drill has been constructed as criminogenic, with parliamentary debate, policy documents, media narratives and court orders approached as discursive texts that actively produce the social world they purport to describe. This epistemological position is grounded in Fairclough's (1992) insistence that form and

content are inseparable, which translates to how institutional sources narrating drill are indivisible from their legislative consequences. CDS has been selected because, as summarised by Fairclough and Wodak (1997 in van Dijk, 2015), it recognises that power relations are discursive, that society is constituted by discourse and culture, that discourse does ideological work, and importantly that discourse is historical. Fairclough embeds his analysis in the Foucauldian framework (Zupnik, 1991) as he recognises how accepted discourses in society reflect the power structures (Fairclough 1992; Hall, 1997). This derivation further justifies the genealogical method this project employs. Fairclough (1992) and van Dijk (2015) exemplify that the most powerful discursive operations are those that appear neutral and objective whilst encoding racialised effect. CDS is therefore the appropriate framework for exposing the mechanisms through which formal legal equality and racialised cultural governance are sustained simultaneously without the government needing to name the tension.

Adapting Foucault's genealogical focus, this research follows his method to trace the historical pattern of racialised governance in Britain from the policing of sound systems through the bureaucratisation of Black music by Form 696 to the juridical criminalisation of drill. The sonic lineage connecting drill, as the successor of grime (Sanghavi, 2025) to the Jamaican sound systems Windrush migrants brought to Britain is theorised here through Hall's (1997) work on representation, positing a trend of similar cultural forms connected by racialised historical conditions that can be questioned and traced.

“A primary focus of CDA is on the effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs...Critical analysis aims to produce interpretations and explanations of areas of social life which both identify the causes of social wrongs and produce knowledge which could (in the right conditions) contribute to righting or mitigating them” (Fairclough, 2013, p.8).

This research is committed to precisely that, building on the pertinent quantitative findings from Quinn et al.’s (2024) review to offer a qualitative, discursive explanation that statistical data cannot provide.

The schema in ‘Figure 22.1’ below illustrates how powerful groups and institutions control communicative events and their discourse structures, which resultantly shape the social attitudes, ideologies, and sociocultural knowledge of recipients (van Dijk, 2015, p.474). This analytical process functions at two levels simultaneously, exemplifying the discursive reproduction of power. This is the mechanism this research utilises to analyse its sources as evidence for how institutional language constructs drill as threatening in ways that sediment into laws, policies, and prosecutorial practice.

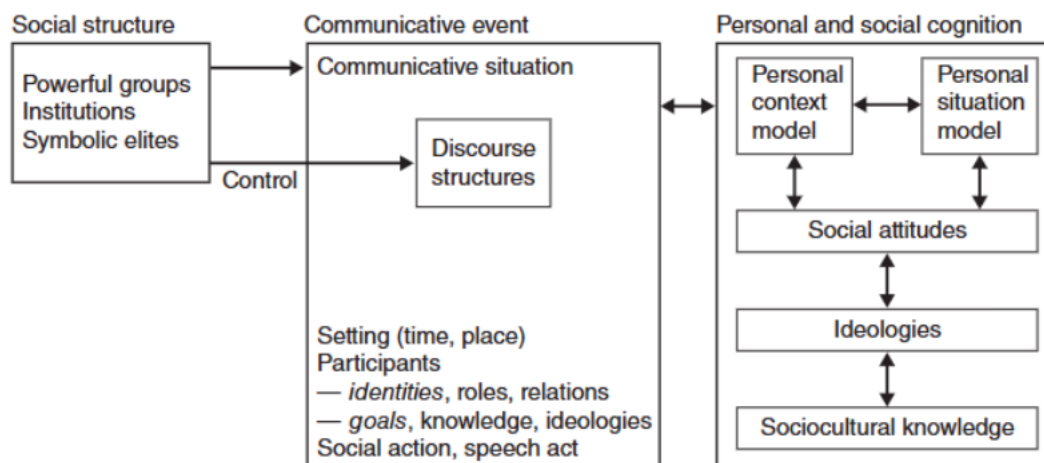


Figure 22.1 Schema of the discursive reproduction of power.

Utilising the findings of this schema structure in combination with Fairclough's (1992) framework, this research is able to analyse each source on the micro-level, evaluating microscopic grammatical structures, particular word choices and varieties of conversation genres. These discursive features discreetly shape our social realities, identities and political beliefs as a site of proactive meaning-making, rather than objective institutional record (ibid). Therefore, this research addresses what Fairclough (1992) identifies as a selection of choices through which language operates, endorsing his view that the words institutions adopt and the genres they borrow from actively construct the reality they *appear* to simply describe. Moreover, at the macro-level which focuses on how texts draw on broader discourse (Fairclough, 1992), van Dijk's framework of elite discourse and power indicates why institutional sources hold such a significant discursive authority. A crucial point van Dijk makes is that:

“Implications and presuppositions are powerful semantic properties of discourse that aim to obliquely assert ‘facts’ that may not be true, as when politicians and the media refer to the violence of demonstrators or the criminality of minorities” (2015, p.473).

These are key mechanisms through which racialised criteria are mobilised in the five sources this research will analyse, proving how they can operate without being explicitly named (van Dijk, 2015). Van Dijk's work bridges the space between these two levels by explicating how 'racist speech in parliament is a discourse at the interactional micro-level...but at the same time it may enact or be a constituent part of legislation or the reproduction of racism at the macro-level' (2015, p.468). This combined framework proves itself methodologically fitting for this project as it is capable of simultaneously conducting close textual analysis whilst making broader claims about racialised governance. Together, Fairclough's linguistic clarity and van Dijk's analysis of structural power allow this research to interrogate how institutional, political language produces the racialised construction of drill as a social threat to be policed.

Analysis

Drawing from Fairclough's (1992) insistence that form and content are inseparable, and van Dijk's (2015) framework of elite discourse and power, this chapter analyses five sources: AM and Skengdo's gang injunction as a definitive juridical crystallisation of the discursive processes this analysis traces; the Serious Violence Strategy (2018) as a foundational policy text which constructs drill and violence as a causal mechanism at the level of government discourse; Mayor's Question Time (MQT) exchanges revealing how that construction is operationalised through political narratives; Krept & Konan's counter-discourse and finally, Drillminister's *Political Drillin* as the analytical pinnacle that dismantles the causation logic underpinning drill's criminalisation.

Juridical Crystallisation: The AM and Skengdo Injunction

Commencing with the notable case of drill artists AM and Skengdo, at the end of 2018 the duo had just sold out their second UK tour when the police made legal history by using footage of them performing their song "Attempted 1.0" to enact a nine-month suspension sentence for breaching a gang injunction forbidding them from mentioning rival South London MCs (McQuaid, 2019a). This exemplar is the most direct instance in which the discursive construction of drill as criminogenic achieves consequential institutional effect, the performance of music itself became a penalisable criminal act. The fact that this can be articulated as a legal outcome is itself analytically notable, as this possibility was produced by the accumulation of racialised institutional discourse that will be traced in this chapter.

Under the Policing and Crime Act 2009, gang injunctions have been deployed alongside Criminal Behaviour Orders (CBOs) to control the activity of drill artists (Sanghavi, 2025) by putting restrictions on their lyrics, performances and movement across specified postcodes. The statutory guidance accompanying the Act details that its definition of gang-related violence is ‘intentionally broad and wide-ranging’ to allow application across a variety of local contexts (Home Office, 2016, p.7). However, this research interprets that breadth with further scrutiny to expose that analytically, it enables the extension of gang-related logic into Black cultural production of drill, hence facilitating the footage of AM and Skengdo performing “Attempted 1.0” to be sufficient evidence of the gang injunction breach. BBC News (2019) reported that the court found violence in drill music *can*, and in this instance *did* amount to gang-related violence. This legal decision of causality is important because it demonstrates the juridical turn where an explicit violent act does not have to have occurred as instead the music renders itself constitutive of violence.

In an interview, AM stated that the police ‘twanged the law in a way that can work against us’, adding that the injunction was still being legally contested when it was treated as having been breached, as enforcement ‘ended up using a [Croydon] county court to deliver sentences which would normally have to be proved in a criminal court’ (McQuaid, 2019a). Observing this through an interpretivist lens, this research emphasises that using a county court, for what should be proven in criminal court, reveals a juridical process that is not maintaining a neutral application of law. Furthermore, the injunction still being legally contested whilst it was treated as having been breached suggests that the police are enacting what van Dijk (2015) would identify as a

presupposition of criminal offence based on (the artists') cultural identity, an action facilitated by the power of elite discourse and discursive operations that appear neutral and objective but encode racialised effects (van Dijk, 2015; Fairclough, 1992).

The Metropolitan Police publicised the outcome of this case as a 'victory' in their plight against inner city violence (McQuaid, 2019b), amplifying the media attention and escalating the situation which positioned AM and Skengdo not just as defendants, but public symbols of the threat drill music poses to societal order. This dynamic is captured by Fatsis' (2019) application of Williams' (2014) "Black folk devil": in a racial neoliberal order, agencies of law enforcement are enrolled to police the victims of structural disadvantages as the enemy, with drill artists consequently cast as responsible for urban crime and disorder. Within this framework, this research indicates how the British government deflects accountability through political discourse that redirects blame for its own anti-welfare policies onto those living within them.

This first source exemplifies how the legal outcome of AM and Skengdo's case is a juridical criminalisation of drill that formalises discursive constructions of the genre as a threat in British law, whilst simultaneously broadcasting them outwards as societal truth.

Constructing Causal Threat in Government Policy

HM Government's Serious Violence Strategy (2018), hereafter 'The Strategy', is a pertinent source to include in this analysis because it provides the governmental discursive structure within which drill's criminalisation accelerates. However, crucially, drill is not explicitly named within The Strategy. The omission of naming drill represents a significant analytical point: The Strategy's (2018, p.31) language about social media "glamorising weapons and gang life" and content that "incites violence" (ibid) operates as a discursive framework that other institutional actors (politicians, police commissioners, prosecutors) then apply to drill. This example indicates how discourse can be a passive mechanism that conceals the negative actions of the state (van Dijk, 2015), as through this research's interpretivist approach, it becomes evident that The Strategy is a legitimising architecture through which governmental text can validate the appearance of a causal connection between drill and crime by criminalising online content, gang culture and violence within official policy language. The insistence of a causal relationship between drill and violence is presupposed by The Strategy thus it does not need to identify drill as Black music for the logic described by van Dijk to function, as he explains that at the level of government discourse, a relationship that remains empirically contested is considered settled when sufficient weight of institutional voices have converged around it (2015). The collective vocabularies already saturated with racialised meanings are what the institutional readings draw from (Hall 1997).

In Fairclough's (1992) terms, The Strategy accomplishes a genre-mixing move by assimilating cultural commentary about music into the procedural framework of a crime prevention strategy. This positions the connection between online content, gang culture and violence within official

policy language before it is established empirically. Consequently, the genre arrives ‘pre-coded’ by what Hall (1997) noted are vocabularies saturated with racialised meanings, and that pre-coding is what makes the absence of explicit racial language consistent with the production of racialised effects.

Policing Drill Through Procedural Neutrality

Form 696 establishes the institutional logic that was inherited by many subsequent instruments that govern policing drill. In 2008 the Metropolitan Police introduced the Promotion Event Risk Assessment Form 696 which required promoters and licensees to pinpoint and mitigate the risks of serious violent crime at music events. The form required event promoters to identify the genre(s) of music being performed and the ethnic makeup of their expected audiences (Fatsis, 2019). Originally the form listed bashment, RnB and garage as example genres. However, this was amended in 2009 when the explicit list was removed and instead required any event primarily featuring DJs or MCs performing to a recorded backing track to complete the assessment: in application this description overwhelmingly applied to grime, garage and bashment genres whose artists used this performance structure and audiences were predominantly young Black Brits (Fatsis, 2019; BBC News, 2017). Despite the form not explicitly naming race, this research’s use of Fairclough’s (1992) concept of a selection of language choices reveals that the selection of music genres and audience demographic as the relevant categories for risk assessment was a decision that encoded racialised criteria of suspicion into administrative procedures. In 2017 Form 696 was discontinued; Conservative MP Matt Hancock was an ‘unexpected but influential ally’ in this process, tweeting that the Metropolitan Police had “seen sense & scrapped

the discriminatory #form696.” (Gayle, 2017). However, through van Dijk’s (2015) framework, this research exposes how institutional discourse operates through passive constructions that conceal negative actions of state agents. The form was withdrawn but the racialised rationale it institutionalised was not disrupted; as Fatsis (2019) observes, this framing facilitates discrimination as subjective perception rather than institutional fact. It is this rationality, traced here genealogically through the Foucauldian lens, which mutates and resurfaces across new regulations policing drill.

This logic re-emerged, intensified and was further encoded in Operation Domain, a cataloguing of drill music videos and lyrics that the Metropolitan Police view as intelligence, associating content to gang-related serious violence and validating removal requests to YouTube and other platforms (London Assembly, 2025). As of June 2025, the Operation (now renamed the Online Harm Referral Team) remains active. When queried by the London Assembly to specify the criteria through which lyrics are determined as linked to serious violence, the Metropolitan Police cite ‘persons within content suspected of association with a gang/organised crime network’ and ‘inflammatory language considered to provoke real world violence’ (London Assembly, 2025). This vague criterion is analytically expository as it requires no proven association or act of violence, demonstrating what is noted in CDS as guilt being presupposed through proximity and cultural membership as opposed to individual culpability (van Dijk, 2015).

The exchanges within the MQT consolidate this analysis: in response to questioning the policy governing removal requests, the Metropolitan Police state that the approach is to ‘remove any genre

of music if there is a threat to violence' (London Assembly, 2020a). The continuation of race-neutral language allows this genre-neutral criterion to perform neutrality while encoding a discriminatory standard of application. These passive constructions and genre-neutral discourse mask racialised operations behind the grammar of procedural objectivity (van Dijk, 2015). No response in the MQT exchanges need to say race or Black for this to function, which is exactly what this methodological approach of Fairclough and van Dijk's framework is designed to expose.

An additional MQT answer affirms this analytical revelation in its starkest form. When asked how many convictions of drill artists for violent crime or gang-related offences had been recorded since 2016, the Metropolitan Police responded that this data was not held and then appended that 'there is no evidence to suggest that certain genres of music are directly responsible for criminal activity' (London Assembly, 2019). This is contradictory to the court's conclusion that drill music can amount to gang-related violence (BBC News, 2019), and as the Police lack the data to substantiate its targeting of the genre, they also concede the evidential basis for that targeting by saying it does not exist.

Campaigners from the group Art Not Evidence have urged ministers to make music lyrics inadmissible in court, contesting that the practice of presenting lyrics as evidence of gang affiliation disproportionately affects young Black men and criminalises creativity (Bakare, 2026). This impugns the MQT response where the Police stated that 'there are no offences in relation to

the ‘Publication of Drill Music’ (London Assembly, 2020b). The absence of explicitly racialised criteria in institutional discourse is how the juridical criminalisation of policing drill music is sustained. The Metropolitan Police’s concession that no genre of music directly causes criminal activity (London Assembly, 2019), made simultaneously alongside the systematic treatment of drill content as criminal evidence, is the mechanism which insulates this criminalising practice of Black cultural expression from institutional accountability.

Counter-Discourse in Parliament

Drill artists Krept (Casyo Johnson) and Konan (Karl Wilson) are just two of many who are subject to this criminalising apparatus that operates through racialised criteria. In June 2019, they released *Ban Drill* (Krept and Konan, 2019), a song/short film that accumulated over one million views within days of posting on YouTube. *Ban Drill* illustrates the consequences of prohibiting drill music, depicting a story about a young artist using music as an outlet away from a life of crime who is stifled by the legislation that is censoring and criminalising young Black artists. *Ban Drill* was released alongside Krept and Konan’s Change.org petition against the criminalisation of drill music (Bakare, 2019) and the film ends with a strong lyrical message from the protagonist having just been stabbed; “feds [police] ask who’s responsible, I just kept it real, I said “whoever banned drill” (Krept and Konan, 2019, 08:00). In light of this petition, Diane Abbott MP invited Krept and Konan, AM and Skengdo and other relevant figures to the Houses of Parliament to discuss the impact and challenge the censorship and criminalisation of drill (Keith, 2019; Ward, 2019).

The discursive flow traced in the previous examples of this chapter mirrored van Dijk's (2015) schema of the discursive reproduction of power (Figure 22.1). Here, that flow operates in reverse as the 'sociocultural knowledge' Krept and Konan sparked through gaining media attention and petitionary social action made its way into institutional discussions. Abbott had already spoken in parliamentary debate about tackling youth violence, contesting that 'drill music is not a "cause" of violence but a "reflection of these young people's lives"' (BBC News, 2018), similarly explained in Krept and Konan's interview with Good Morning Britain (2019) where Konan said they're "rapping about their reality because this [making drill music] is a situation that can help change their lives". The support of Abbott partially displaces the control of a political narrative that positions drill music as threatening. As van Dijk's (2015) findings emphasise, politicians and media's assertions are taken as 'facts' even when they may not be true; however, Abbott's inclusion of drill artists' own experiences helps to dismantle this powerful semantic property of institutional discourse.

In Parliament, Konan emphasised drill is being used as a scapegoat (Ward, 2019). The methodological approach of this research helps to expose that 'rap musicians can become racialised scapegoats for (such) crime despite a lack of causal evidence' (Sanghavi, 2025, p.193), because the state discharges its welfare responsibilities for stringent policies that enlist law enforcement agencies to police the victims of the neoliberal social order as state enemies, with drill artists positioned as the 'Black folk devil[s]' (Fatsis, 2019, p.1301). The concept of folk devil (Cohen, 1972; Hall et al., 1978; Williams, 2014) articulates how drill artists become antagonists of the government narrative for rises in violent crime and social disorder.

Krept's insistence to the House that violence pre-existed drill (Ward, 2019), and popular drill artist Digga D's similar claim that violence will always occur with or without drill (Sanghavi, 2025), are justifiable assertions disregarded when the government maintains there can be a causal relationship between drill and gang-related violence (BBC News, 2019). Quinn et al (2024) quantitative report denies a causal chain; this qualitative analysis explains the validity of that denial by detailing how the discourse surrounding Black British cultural expressions facilitates an intensification and institutionalisation of policing drill music, because the presupposed identity associated with 'Blackness' (Oliver, 1990) and criminality depicts a continuous racialised logic targeting Black music.

Political Drillin: Discursively Dismantling the Criminalisation Logic

Political Drillin is the starkest exemplar of drill's framing. Where institutional discourse has constructed the genre as causal of criminal behaviour, DrillMinister's song performs that same construction from within the genre itself. By sampling violent rhetoric drawn directly from parliamentary speech and setting it to a drill beat, the song exposes that institutional discourse can be used to produce a song with the same violent characteristics that drill artists are penalised for releasing. The consequence of this revelation is what this research has embarked on exposing: that the criminalisation of drill music is not a direct response to the violence within the language, but to the accumulation of racialised stereotypes through which 'Blackness' itself has been constructed as threatening in British culture. Therefore, this research is underlining that 'Blackness' is not an inherent property of drill artists being criminalised, rather that it is a category which has been actively produced through racialised institutional discourse. This is consistent with Hall's (1997)

foundational argument that institutions generate the categories through which they govern, rather than in response to the threats that exist independently of that production. The genealogical method employed throughout this research has traced that institutionally produced construction of 'Blackness' as threatening, and it is in *Political Drillin* that this cumulative logic is most starkly exposed.

Political Drillin sets the rhetoric of parliamentary discourse to a drill beat, formulating lyrics from quotes like Chancellor George Osborne's statement that he would not rest until a political adversary was "chopped up in my bags in my freezer" and MP Jess Phillips's declaration that she "won't knife you in the back, I will knife you in the front" (Link_Up TV, 2018). This inventive lyricism allows Drillminister to infer that the government's targeting of drill is not premised on the violent lyrical content itself but the artists producing it. Fairclough (1992) explains that selections of words are associated with their relevant genre of discourse, and through this lens Drillminister's clever lyricism reveals the contradiction within institutional narratives that claim drill music is 'glamorising violent crime' (Home Office news team, 2018). By making a drill song using the words of violent political language, Drillminister exposes that the characteristics of drill that deem it criminogenic and worthy of censorship according to the institutional forces, can be maintained through politicians' vicious discourse. This emphasises that the vessel of drill music is not inherently criminal, it is the state that racialises the artists who create it.

Political Drillin is the analytical pinnacle this chapter has built towards because it performs the refusal of drill's interpretation as uniquely criminogenic, demonstrating that the institutional boundary drawn around the genre is not simply drawn because of a causal relationship between drill music and violence. This exposes the racialised governance around drill music that has been continually fixated on restricting Black British cultural expressions. The Metropolitan Police's own concession that "there is no evidence to suggest that certain genres of music are directly responsible for criminal activity" (London Assembly, 2019), analysed alongside this drill song, is more than a bureaucratic technicality, it reveals itself as discursive contradiction that the government currently sustains. *Political Drillin* makes it discursively undeniable that the absence of evidential basis isn't incidental to drill's targeting, but constitutive of how that targeting operates. The concept of juridical criminalisation this research has examined, a process through which discursive constructions of Black cultural expression as threatening have become inscribed into British legal apparatuses, finds in *Political Drillin* its most direct, expository exemplar.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the juridical criminalisation of drill music represents the intensification of a racialised cultural governance sustained through the British government's systematic omission of racial language while encoding racial criteria through neutral-sounding administrative, legal and discursive mechanisms. Existing scholarship traces this pattern to the colonial era, but this research argues that the formal legal equality granted to Commonwealth migrants arriving as British subjects post-Windrush makes that period a more analytically revealing starting point. The

persistence of racialised governance despite that citizenship promise constitutes a structural betrayal of British citizenship's own guarantees.

Scholarly work presented a strong foundation for this argument, though much of it had not yet accounted for the analytical power of the specific historical condition this article defined as the *apparent citizenship contradiction*: the coexistence of formal legal equality and racialised governance sustained through the systematic omission of racial language, which is a key means by which racialised governance can be practised whilst remaining institutionally deniable. The term apparent is deliberate, signalling both that the contradiction is observable in the lived conditions of Black Brits, and that it is institutionally framed as procedural rather than the structural discrimination this research argues it constitutes. The genealogy traced here explains why the discourse analysis examples took on their racialised forms. Once citizenship was formally promised post-Windrush, racialised governance could not remain as overt as it did in colonial times, so it migrated to the neutral procedural architecture of laws and policy practices. The omission of racial language became the mechanism through which the policing of this 'new sprig in a family tree of Black music' (Oliver, 2023, p.2) was institutionalised and intensified.

Adopting a critical, constructionist framework, this research looked beyond literal interpretations of institutional language to explain the political logic, discursive mechanisms and cultural consequences of drill's criminalisation. The analysis demonstrated how the construction of Black cultural expression as a social threat progressively migrated from overt policing into legislative

practices, reaching its analytical pinnacle in Drillminister's *Political Drillin*, which dismantled the causation logic sustaining drill's criminalisation. Drill may be a genre with undeniably violent lyricism, but as empirical data has consistently shown, it is not directly responsible for violent crime. It has instead functioned as a scapegoat (Ward 2019; Sanghavi, 2025), constructed through the historically accumulated racialised assumptions through which 'Blackness' itself has been institutionally produced as threatening (Hall, 1997; Oliver, 1990).

This article made two pertinent contributions. Firstly, it offered an empirical evaluation by tracing how the racialised governance of Black sound in Britain has been sustained across the post-Windrush period through procedurally neutral mechanisms, culminating in the juridical criminalisation of drill today. Secondly, it presented a conceptual contribution through the *apparent citizenship contradiction*, an analytical lens that names the coexistence of formal legal equality and racialised governance as the condition through which institutional discrimination has been continually rendered deniable. Together these contributions intervene in the literature on the policing of drill, an ongoing operation within British legislation that has direct consequences for the young Black artists currently being prosecuted for their creative expression. The fact that the government can simultaneously promise equal citizenship and criminalise the cultural expressions of those it made that promise to, is not a failure of the system but the mechanism through which racialised governance has been sustained, intensified and rendered institutionally deniable across the post-Windrush period this research has traced.

This thesis does not, however, exhaust the analytical reach of the framework it develops. Future research could productively extend the *apparent citizenship contradiction* beyond the cultural domain to the 2018 Windrush Scandal, when many of the Caribbean migrants this research focuses on were wrongly detained and deported on the basis of documentary requirements that, like Form 696 and the gang injunction criteria analysed here, were enacted through an analogous race-neutral procedural logic. Reading the policing of drill alongside the Windrush Scandal would investigate whether the framework developed through this research can illuminate how post-Windrush Britain governs ‘Blackness’ across cultural and legal-administrative domains simultaneously. The juridical criminalisation of drill should not be finalised at the endpoint of this analysis, instead it is a revealing site within a salient wider field of racialised governance that this analysis invites further scholarship to interrogate.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: 'Ban Drill' by Krept and Konan

[Verse 1: Krept]

Yeah

Banning drill, you're making the situation worse

Might as well give them life, or put them in a hearse

'Cuh he could've been rapping

But now he's still packing

A big gun for when his oppositions come clapping

It's a lose-lose for him

I'mma keep it real, he get shot, he going pale

He shoots him, he going jail

Where we're from, you know how hard it is to better yourself

Upper class won't understand 'cuh you inherited wealth

No opportunities, this is our community

Maybe you should help here, instead of all the scrutiny

There's a knock-on effect for this shit you wanna ban

Let me paint you a picture so you dummies understand

[Verse 2: Konan]

Hi my name is Jaden, everybody calls me Jay

I'm fifteen I'm from a poor block round the way
My mum tries her best to put food on my plate
My life's okay, I go to school everyday
Sometimes I gotta go to school with no lunch money
But I get it, she ain't got it, I still love mummy
But now she got a extra job
It's not great though, but I guess it's extra gwop
Look, mummy weren't home, I started staying out late
I started hanging out with people from my estate
They all had fresh clothes, everybody looking paid
They all sell drugs, said they'll teach me the way
Started trapping on them man now, I swear
Yeah I'm fifteen, with a couple thousand to spare
Feds raided my house and found all of the gear
Got nicked, went jail, but I'll be out in a year
When I came out of jail, all my friends had beef
So I guess I'm involved, that's the rule of the streets
That's how it goes where I'm from
You touch him, you touch me
And these are my friends but it's a gang to police
Why'd I get involved, guess I'm young and I'm dumb
Out of jail couple months, already bought me a gun

Juncture, Volume 9 (2)
August, 2026

I'm a good kid at heart, but the beef keeps spiralling

I guess I'm a product of my environment

[Interlude: Konan & *Policeman*]

Ah fuck, is that feds?

Don't move, armed police, armed police, put your hands on the steering wheel now

[Verse 3: Konan]

I got nicked again, 'cause I gripped a skeng

I started rapping in jail, so I gripped the pen

Every single nigga in the jail rates the bars

And when I land road, they said that I gotta go hard

I keep writing the verse, while I'm riding this bird

Tryna get my appeal, now I'm out on the third

Then I started selling spice, the whole jail got word

Then I came from education and my cell got searched

Got caught with a phone, I've just come from the block

New kid in the jail, but he's one of the opps

Already got the drop, it's only been a couple hours

When he comes in the wing, then we get him in the showers

And I won't even learn, but I'mma get him for the bros

'Cause I know they'd do the same thing if I was on the roads

Don't worry 'bout the govs 'cause they'll turn a blind eye

Juncture, Volume 9 (2)
August, 2026

All my bros heard the news, know it's on the timeline

Years go by and I'm only getting older

Getting less letters, visits get slower

Music on my mind, my release getting closer

Swear I can't wait 'til it's over

[Interlude]

[Verse 4: Krept]

Now I'm back on road, I put the trap on hold

I'mma focus on the rap 'cuh man can blow

We started dropping these bangers, these tracks were cold

Now I'm watching my fanbase grow

They took my videos down, said it's too violent

I can't do a show, it's getting stopped by Trident

It's slowing down my income, they're tryna ban drill

Now my bus' dying, it's hard to get a deal

I dunno how to feel, I got away from the streets

'Cause this rap shit helped keep me away from the beef

Now money's low, I gotta get back on my feet

Now I'm back selling drugs 'cause a nigga gotta eat

I'm back trapping day-to-day, I got a baby on the way

I told my girl "be patient, I promise that I'll make a change

Juncture, Volume 9 (2)
August, 2026

Babe you know I tried this rappin' shit but the feds got me back in shit"

Now I'm chilling on the block, y'know, licking out them shots

Save as much money so I can eventually stop

But I gotta be on point 'cause the beef's still on top

Too late 'cause them niggas got the drop

There's a car pulling up, ah fam I'm fucked

I'mma try run but they caught up

Can feel the knife sharp in my gut

My body collapsed, it's hard to get up

"Wagwan fam, remember me from the can?"

Shoulda stuck to rapping" - they said it as they ran

But little did they know that was all part of the plan

Holding my stomach, blood on my hands

Paramedics trying, I know I'm slowly dying

They're tryna keep me breathing, my mum's here crying

I can see the pain, she prayed for me still

I can feel my heart coming to a standstill

Feds asked who's responsible, I just kept it real

I said "Whoever banned drill"

[Flatline tone]

Appendix 2: 'Political Drillin' by Drillminister

[Intro]

The day it becomes you are hurting us more than you are helping us

I won't knife you in the back, I'll knife you in the front

Team-A!

[Verse]

The moment is coming

When the knife gets heated (twist)

Stuck in the front front front front and twisted

She'll be dead soon

Gyal stop breathing

Flowers at the grave

And you're hubby and grandma, grieving

Man run tings

Call me Julius Caesar

Opp block posting

Trackies and sliders, reefer

This girl try say that she runs cunch like I'm any little geezer

I will not rest until she's chopped up in bags in the freezer

That's political drilling

Counting cheese, blowing on trees

Till my party's winning
She's a dead woman walking (walking)
Caught her by downing (downing)
Get on your knees bitch (bitch)
She weren't doing no talking (talking)
Man's talking about war
Man's talking about trade
Man's talking bout whoring (boom bow)
Man's talking bout money
Cah' the roads are hot
Fuck global warming
Got my YG's talking brexit
That's no more red light district
No more subtitles on Netflix
Manna light man on fire
And I ain't seen an opp in a good while (yeah)
But it ain't all doom and gloom (boom)
When we get to the nigga in the woodpile
The phone don't stop so the phone don't stop
Gotta re-it for the West Indies
Finesse these bands
Grind with gang

Juncture, Volume 9 (2)
August, 2026

No problem man, do it with ease

Never ever lacking that's voodoo (uh)

Bring her own noose to the two-two

Hit em' with the boom-blow

Hit em' with the boom-wham

Then I poke a man like Mewtwo (brrr)

Who the fuck do you think that you are?

How many times have we gone round to the opp block

And the curfew at quarter-to-four

Skrrt-bang, hop out the car (skrrrr)

Out here freezing my locks off

I roundly told her to fuck off (bow)

So she fucked off (bow)

I ain't taking no L's when it pops off (bow)

Saw em lacking with bro in TopShop

Then it's back to the blocks for the hotbox