**Transcribed Presentations from ‘The Art of Criminal Justice’ (University of Sheffield, 10 November 2021)**

# **Theatre of the Oppressed, Youth Resistance and Armed Conflict (Dr Roxana Willis)**

Many thanks to Arushi and the co-organisers for arranging such an innovative and cutting-edge series and for inviting me to be part of this. As a brief introduction my research lies at the intersection of criminology, criminal law and legal anthropology. And I am presently based at the University of Freiburg. My current project shines a light on the conflict in Anglophone Cameroon, which is one of the most under-reported in the world. As part of this work, I am looking beyond text-based research and exploring how participatory methods can help to empower underrepresented groups in the research process. One of several theoretical inspirations behind this approach is Priyamvada Gopal’s work. In her recent monograph, *Insurgent Empire*, Gopal includes a range of resources beyond text. Gopal shows how moments of resistance and uprising are crucial in the development of ideas and knowledge production. Extending this thought, I’m exploring the potential for Theatre of the Oppressed, to create a space where less powerful can express themselves and take a leading role in research. By the end of this talk, we’ll know more about Theatre of the Oppressed. For now, I’ll just note, it’s both a philosophy and practice developed by August Boal, the late Brazilian theatre practitioner, drama theorist, and political activist.

The talk is structured in two parts. The first part, I introduce Theatre of the Oppressed by sharing some of the moments I learnt about the method. And in the second part of the talk, I focus on ongoing research project I am currently developing in the conflicted regions of Cameroon.

I first learnt about Theatre of the Oppressed from La Liberté in Cameroon. La Liberté is a youth arts group which aims to support young people to affect change in their communities through theatre and the arts. The group is engaged in a wide range of projects from community theatre, spoken word poetry, film-making, developing local narratives, and more. I met La Liberté when I worked in Cameroon for two years in human rights’ law. The group supported our teaching in the law clinic by playing clients who needed help for the students to then respond to.

I stayed in touch with La Liberté when I returned to the UK during the doctorate. We worked together to set up a community arts’ project with youth actors in Cameroon and students in Oxford. This is when I first learnt about theatre of the oppressed. La Liberté were using a Theatre of the Oppressed method called ‘forum theatre’, which is an interactive kind of drama involving the creation of plays. But unlike traditional plays, a forum theatre play ends with a conflict or a problem. The play is then reperformed, but this time an audience member can stop the performance and replace one of the characters in the play to try and change the outcome. Seeing the method for the first time, I was eager to learn more about it. In particular I hoped to develop a similar project in India, exploring mental health and the stigma around mental illness. I was reading about forum theatre on Wikipedia and learnt that there is a world-leading group based in Bangalore, the Centre for Community Dialogue and Change (CCDC). I sent an email to CCDC and was delighted to soon hear back from Doctor Radha Ramaswamy, an outstanding Theatre of the Oppressed theatre. Radha and the CCDC were already working in the area of mental health and were interested to develop a collaborative project. I travelled to India with a small group of oxford students, to work with Radha and a team of incredible actors. Originally, I didn’t plan to take part in the drama exercises, as this really wasn’t my thing and I saw myself more as an organiser, someone behind the scenes. But Radha encouraged me to take part which was a transformative experience, and crucial for me to appreciate the potential of the practice. Following training in Theatre of the Oppressed, Radha directed a play on post-natal depression called ‘Megha’s Story’. We then took the play to twelve different communities in India, which included schools, medical colleges, communities living in slum dwellings, communities living with leprosy, police officers in Goa, and a stage performance for policy-makers in Delhi.

The way Radha taught and applied Theatre of the Oppressed was very different from how I’d seen it implemented before, especially by a leading forum theatre group in the UK. From Rada’s teachings, I realised that Theatre of the Oppressed is a philosophy, a way of being in the world which resonates with you. Radha’s approach is sensitive to implications of power and power imbalance and it’s in these moments that resistance is encouraged: those who normally must stay quiet and experience the force of power and symbolic violence have a chance to shine a light on how these moments occur, articulate the injustices and explore ways to overcome them.

As you may have picked up on with the reference to symbolic violence, my analysis of the practice is partly informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s work on power and social class. What the Theatre of the Oppressed allows us to do is to challenge the *doxa* that is, to challenge that presumes natural order of things and to actively resist what’s claimed to be mere common sense. By pointing out the moment of injustice and oppression, instead of the oppressed person internalising feelings of shame and humiliation – which is how symbolic violence occurs – this violence can be challenged. An important part of Theatre of the Oppressed then, is working within local communities so that collective action and social change becomes possible.

When Theatre of the Oppressed is delivered well, in a way that is responsive to inequality and power, moments of magic sometimes occur. These might be moments when an oppressed person stands up and speaks out against oppression. Sometimes there can be a snowball effect when others also start speaking up. What was once silenced and endured by the lone individual suddenly becomes a problem borne and shared by the collective. In these moments there can be an energy in the room, a crack appears in the presumed natural order and the push for change begins.

Up to this point, my experience with Theatre of the Oppressed was mainly part of extra-curricular social work, but I was keen to explore the potential for the philosophy in practice to inform the next stage of my research. First, I invited Rada and several of the CCDC members to work with me on a small community Theatre of the Oppressed project in the UK and during this time we worked with young people excluded from mainstream education. This gave me a taste of how the method might work with children in school. I incorporated the Theatre of the Oppressed into a British Academy funded postdoctoral project which involved working with children in a range of UK schools. The aim of the research was to examine how class and race affect children’s experience of welfare and punishment. I worked with Year 9 students, ages 12 to 13 in three schools, spending approximately one term in each school. In order to gage social class I worked with a high performing state school, a low performing state school and a private school. I then developed and delivered a series of Theatre of the Oppressed workshops which included games and an opportunity for young people to develop their own forum theatre plays about any concern or problem that they were trying to cope with. 55 plays were created in total, and many diverse issues were raised. I’m still in the process of writing up the research findings. One of the challenges of incorporating Theatre of the Oppressed in research is, it requires a lot of time. It takes time to conduct the workshops, to record the data in the form of fieldnotes, and to then analyse the findings. And because its inductive research, the unstructured (…) it can often generate a rich range of issues that come up but then it requires even more time to do justice to them.

I’ve added an additional slide to the ones I submitted last week. This slide is to provide a brief historical introduction to the anglophone conflict in Cameroon. What I’ve decided to do today is to focus on some findings from this project which is still ongoing rather than talk about my UK research. Cameroon is a country on the west coast of Africa. It was an area heavily hit by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. And then following the abolition of the trade, part of modern-day Cameroon became an area where persons freed from slavery were supported to return. Cameroon then experienced several layers of colonisation: first by Germany, and then following the first world war, Cameroon was divided between the French and British colonial forces. Archival research by Anastasia Nzume indicates that the British government was prepared to give complete control of Cameroon to France in return to greater control in other areas of strategic interest. However, when France proposed to take the lion’s share of the country during negotiations, leaving a minority area to Britain, the British accepted. A whole host of francophone institutions were implemented in the francophone regions, and British institutions in the anglophone regions. This includes different languages, legal systems, education systems, and more. When Cameroon achieved independence in 1960, people in the anglophone regions were given a vote on whether to gain independence by joining the newly independent state of Cameroon or by joining Nigeria. The two southern anglophone regions opted to join Cameroon. A federal system of governance was initially in place, however this was abolished by the former president Ahmadou Ahidjo in 1972. The autonomy of the anglophone regions has been increasingly encroached on by the majority state ever since. This has been ruled by president Biya since 1975. Bier is the longest serving, non-royal head of state in the world.

By 2016, issues in the minority regions of Cameroon reached breaking point: francophone judges unfamiliar with the common law were appointed to replace anglophone judges and teaches unfamiliar with the anglophone curriculum were appointed to replace anglophone teachers. There were even reports of judges unable to speak English delivering rulings n the courts, seemingly based on decisions of who gave the best visual performance. In protest, anglophone lawyers left the courts in their wigs and gowns to stand up against marginalisation. they were soon joined by teachers and then by other civilians. Despite carrying peace branches, the Cameroonian government responded to the civilian protests with fatal level of force. Conflict has escalated in the anglophone regions ever since.

Credible reports of gross human rights violations have been documented, this includes school shootings, village massacres and mass rapes. Despite several governments being closely tied to the Cameroonian state and military, including the UK, US, France and Germany, the response to the conflict has been notably minimal. To date, my research group has completed two reports on the conflict, one focussing on human rights abuses and the second an empirical piece of work which elevates the experiences of civilians trapped in the conflict.

Concerned about the effects of the conflict on young people in particular, La Liberté proposed to develop a Theatre of the Oppressed project so that youth could speak out about what was happening. Cuts to development funding by the UK government and travel restrictions resulting from the covid-19 pandemic created an unexpected opportunity for CCDC and La Liberté to work together. We opted to deliver a hybrid programme to share skills. The Cameroonian team consisting of early-career researchers and actors met together in Cameroon. Radha Ramaswamy and Ravi Ramaswamy from CCDC led a training programme remotely from India. And researchers from Cameroon, the UK, Canada and the US delivered a series of remote lectures on ethics and research methods. In this way, we created a workshop programme tailored to the specific challenges young people in Cameroon are exposed to. I was actually very surprised at how successful the model worked.

While there were inevitable limitations, I didn’t expect that the training itself would produce so called magic moments. The training was profoundly moving. Our Cameroonian team had lived through several years of conflict without an outlet to share their experiences. The emotion that filled the training space and the determination of the team to run the project no matter the difficulties that lay ahead was humbling.

To date, the Cameroonian team has delivered four week-long workshops with young people affected by the conflict in Cameroon. and my role has been providing mentoring feedback ad logistical support from afar. We have just started to analyse the fieldwork data from the workshops but as a flavour of the findings, I have borrowed a snippet from Tibi Chelsea’s fieldnotes. Tibi is a graduate student in Cameroon who has excelled in the project and has proven to be a very promising researcher. I’ll now read two of Tibi’s observations from still image exercises. Tibi writes:

“His image looked like a monster with claws on the fingers ready for an attack. He explained that it meant our unity is like a monster that brings us much pain.”

“In her image, her hands were closed, and her head bowed. I had interpreted this to mean prayer, but she explained otherwise. To her, her closed hands demonstrated that dreams and passions of young people have been shielded or covered as a result of the Anglophone Conflict.”

The work has shown great potential, however this type of hands-on research also raises what Guillemin and Gillam call ‘ethically important moments’. These are points during the research process which require researchers to reflect on deeper ethical issues. There were several ethically important moments during the workshop, a few of which are mentioned here. Working in conflict setting is challenging and we encountered several security issues. In one workshop a military officer managed to infiltrate the group which posed potential risks to participants. This led us to implement tighter security in participants in the following workshops. Another workshop was directly affected by an upsurge in violence: four corpses of young men appeared at a roundabout close to where the workshop was planned. The next day a coffin appeared in the same place with witchcraft display. This then led to an extended ghost town, which is when armed separatist groups demand that everyone stays at home and if someone moves on this day then they risk being killed. This required us to halt the programme and assess whether and how to continue the work. the most difficult issue that arose during the workshops was when a participant shared sensitive information which risked serious repercussions. She revealed that her sister had been raped by a military officer and was soon to deliver a baby. This information reached an armed separatist group who then contacted the girl to find out what had happened. This is a very tricky issue which we’ll now need to keep following so we’ve attempted to mitigate the fallout by supporting the girl with a local mentor and we’re maintaining contact. Although we advise participants at the start of the workshops to limit what they share, and to not criminally implicate themselves, the sense of closeness created in the theatre workshop, where people are supported to talk freely, is susceptible to oversharing. I suspect this is compounded when there is a power imbalance between me as the lead researcher in the UK and our early career researchers on the ground who may want to show that they can provide good and interesting data. I think this is an area where the remote training was limited; it would have been helpful to spend longer with the team and talk more about power and decolonial approaches to research.

Power is a core theme that runs throughout this work. Power is at the heart of Theatre of the Oppressed and I’ve come to realise that not everyone is ideally suited to the practice. Some people are acutely aware of power imbalance and seem to respond quite naturally to diffusing it, whereas others don’t always see it. Therefore, researchers might not necessarily be the best placed to deliver Theatre of the Oppressed and sometimes the aims of research can conflict with the aims of the practice, which is to support communities to effect change. Because of the potential for this method to produce lots of ‘ethically important moments’, it requires a lot of time, preparation, and training. Therefore, it’s a far from easy method to employ.

I also feel uneasy about undermining the practice of Theatre of the Oppressed by imposing research goals and requirements and using it in an instrumental way. On the one hand, the ethical process that researchers are required to go through is an important means to mitigate risks, and insure participants are fully-informed about the work, but on the other hand, it also introduces a lot of paper and formality which might detract from the practice. There is certainly a balance to be struck and I am still discovering where this lies. Relatedly, when written outputs are prioritised, certain groups are afforded the power to interpret and communicate the findings. A solution to this problem was actually put forward by our team in Cameroon: the youth actors who proposed the project in the first place also requested to produce a film about the research outputs, which we’re delighted to support. Another novel way to communicate the research findings surfaced during the workshops and our early-career research Tibi Chelsea is currently in the process a co-creating a series of spoken-word poems. This is one of the many beauties of Theatre of the Oppressed method: it opens the door for new voices and ideas to shine through. Therefore, although there are challenges with the Theatre of the Oppressed as a research method, as a philosophy and a practice Theatre of the Oppressed is very special and could have an important role to play in future social change. In terms of research, there’s certainly potential with this practice, but there is still a lot to be explored, critiqued, and improved. Hopefully this is the beginning of many more learnings to come.

Thank you.

# **“Is it even art?”: Rap Music in Court (Dr Lambros Fatsis)**

Thank you very much and thank you for the invite, it’s really really great to be here and among esteemed colleagues and I also want to extend a big big thank you to our BSL interpreters.

So what I wanted to talk about today is how and why rap music in general and drill music in particular ends up as evidence in court. And in so doing what I plan to do, or aim and hope to do, is expose the ideological, cultural and political forces that identify an entire music genre as a suspect. And what I want to argue is that the criminalisation of drill music can only be understood if we understand criminal justice disciplines as cultural institutions. Now I understand that this may sound fairly provocative – and disorienting even – but I want to propose a preliminary structure for my presentation to help us guide us in those things to the best of my ability. So I will start by discussing the various tactics of police prosecutors and judges’ views against drill, then move on to address the stereotypes that rationalise, normalise and legitimise such tactics, and end with a discussion on what this tells us about what criminal justice systems are, what they do, who they do it to, and who they do it for. And what I am obviously suggesting is that they are steeped into, and blind to, the institutional racism that informs the logic, decision-making processes, and discriminatory outcomes.

So starting with a few of the tactics that we see used against drill music, these are very much performed by the government Serious Violence Strategy, as well as by how prosecution service legal guidelines. And both those institutional bodies are assured that there is a link between drill music and violent crime, despite the lack of any concrete evidence that can prove any such things beyond presupposition correlation in isolated incidents. Yet this doesn’t seem to stop the states’ legal punishment system from pursuing and processing drill rappers as terror suspects under the Terrorism Act 2000. But drill rappers are also targeted by, threatened with, and subjected to, Criminal Behaviour Orders, Gang Injunctions, suspended prison sentences, and increasing stop-and-search, now supercharged by Knife Crime Prevention Orders, Serious Violence Reduction Orders, which drastically expand suspicion-based stop-and-search to particularly Section 60 stop-and-searches, and also reintroducing new forms of joined enterprise charges. Were this not enough, drillers are also banned from entire postcodes and forbidden to use certain words or refer to specific people and places in their music. They are also prohibited from contacting or associating with certain people, wearing hoods, using social media or unregistered mobile phone, and they even have their videos removed from YouTube.

In court, drill rappers have their music admitted as evidence of bad character, involvement in joint enterprise, serious use of violence and gang membership, or, as confessions to an offence, an expression of intent to commit an offence. In the absence of hard evidence with which to justify such charges, the nagging question remains: how and why do such accusations lead to successful convictions in court? And this is where racist ideology, culture, and politics come in to fill the blanks.

So let us turn to the stereotypes that stand in for evidence in court proceedings. In the major stereotype that is unmentioned here up and to this point, but actually informs such decisions and such court of justice tactics, is essentially the assumption that black culture is criminogenic or pathogenic, and therefore is inadmissible as part. Excluding it from protections that are afforded to artistic freedom, yet interpreted instead in a legalistic rather than an artistic context. So to bring charges, prosecutors make the case by remaining insensitive to, and ignorant of, the fact that rap material is literary, performative and artistic, rather than literal, actual or real. They also remain indifferent to the fact that rap evidence is rich in prejudicial value, but lacks sufficient evidential weight. And they are also unwilling to consider the possibility that such material is inadmissible in court on the grounds that it is selectively discriminatory. To say nothing of the judges’ reluctance to exclude such material on the basis of these arguments, as well as established legal routes for doing so. And some of those include the use of residual exclusionary discretion, under Section 78 of PACE 1984, Article 10 Human Rights Act of freedom of expression, or indeed Article 8, 11, 14 and potentially Article 6 all of which grant rights to fair trial.

Now, does this mean that drill music is not violent? No. But t does mean that one drill can be violent, this is not what all drill is, and this is not all that drill is, as is the case with many other music genres or forms of artistic expression. Be they seventeenth century English folk music, and murder ballads in particular, opera librettos, or Hollywood gangster movies. So the question is not such much whether drill is violent, but how it is violent? Is violence in drill real? Or is it performative? Is it an expression of criminal intent, or a bid for commercial success? Does drill celebrate violence, or does it comment on it? Yes, it is true that violence has long been an essential theme in the aesthetic vocabulary of some rap sub-genres, especially in 1990s gangster rap and its offshoots including drill music today. Such graphic imagery does depict criminal lifestyles where references to firearms, knives, drugs and gang violence are common, as are lurid tales of fictional, larger-than-life personas could tell the story in the first person and pose as unabashedly violent. Mistaken for literal threats of violence rather than confrontational boasts that reflect the artistic conventions of the genre all this is seen as evidence of criminal wrongdoing. As such, rap lyrics are translated into autobiographical confessions, who have already committed offenses or expressions of intent or wrongdoing for offenses about to be committed. Where they could of course be seen, as I think they should, as first-person narratives that may be partly or purely performative fictional, hyperbolic or fabricated even as is the case with other music lyrics or literary works. Acknowledging the artistic nature of violent rap lyrics does not justify, excuse or encourage its enjoyment with relish. Nor does it justify the hostile and discriminatory, illiberal and unjust ways in which it is criminalised through what my colleague Johnathan Ilan calls ‘strictly literate, inaccurate and ultimately counterproductive tactics’. It simply offers a contextual reading of violence in rap, and by context I mean the artistic conventions of rap culture, not the punitive habits of law enforcement institutions. Denying the artistic status of drill therefore, on the basis that it is too crude and too violent to qualify as an expression of creative cultural production – according to what and whose standards criteria and norms I wonder? – what is obscured, or rather revealed, is that the selective criminalisation of rap for some of its socially harmful, political dubious, and aesthetically repugnant content, does violence to factual accuracy, black cultural literacy or political education into criminal injustice. As I said of institutions, whose mission function and role is cultural. What they do is not so much apprehend suspects, but define who, and what is out of tune, out of base, and out of order aesthetically, culturally and politically.

This is why I want to end my talk in turn with a reading, a close reading, of the criminal justice system as a cultural ensemble of state institutions that orchestrate social, cultural and political life through regulation and social control, punishing those who do not, could not, and should not belong. In so doing, I want to situate the criminalisation of drill music in its broader socio-economic context to argue that it is race, and blackness that is policed when forms of black cultural expression are policed. Accustomed though we are to thinking about policing, prosecution, sentencing and imprisonment as criminal justice institutions or processes, thinking about what and who they suspect, target, sentence and incarcerate attunes us to an understanding of them as fundamentally cultural institutions. Institutions that legislate into being dominant ideas, fears, fantasies, images imageries, and imaginaries of what culture looks like as a defining feature of the nation. But these views are not random views from nowhere. They have a specific social and political history, that helps us understand how we came to have the very criminal justice institutions that we currently have, why they were made or instituted this way, by whom and for what. In this section I will be using quotes from Stuart Hall and his colleagues’ *Policing in Crisis,* as well as Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* so I will be identifying quotes with my fingers as air quotes so that I don’t keep on saying quote and unquote every time, and I’m happy to share relevant publications of mine where those particular quotes appear if need be.

So just as crime is a social phenomenon that is inseparable from the legal and political order of the state, the law is not just a repository of rules which define and regulate the behaviour of citizens, but an artefact of nationalist ideology, which orders classifies and manages people on the basis of and in relation to a national imaginary of belonging which is painted white. Crime therefore is not just a threat to state power, but an afront to national sovereignty, harmony, cohesion and togetherness. All of which are racially defined as white. Legality therefore is linked to national identity and criminality becomes synonymous with black externality and alienness, testing the limits of the law and national belonging too. The black presence is thus constructed as a problem to be managed through authoritarian state intervention in the field of policing and criminal justice invoking an appeal to the British nation in terms of a common racial sensibility. Ideas and social images of crime therefore are embodied in legal and political practices but also demonstrate how the law embodied in the police erects a barrier, not just of respectability, but of racial culture and ethnicity too.

Put differently and perhaps more simply too, without any more confusing air quotes, the criminalisation of drill aids our understanding of how the law is used as an instrument for maintaining state power and policing national belonging. What renders drill suspect therefore is not its violent character but rather the way it is perceived as aesthetically out of tune, culturally out of place, and politically out of order. As ‘sonic dirt’ or ‘detestable noise’ as Friedrich Hegel put it – obviously not about drill music but about afro-diasporic music in his own time the nineteenth century – so as sonic dirt that needs to be eliminated rather than music that needs to be appreciated. So black music symbolises an unwanted presence through the way that it is treated as unbelonging. In this context, the criminal justice system performs the role of the arbiter of aesthetics, culture, or acceptable politics as if these are issues to be settled in court rather than in the broader sort of, you know, cultural, social and political realm. Police, prosecutors and judges therefore become definers of culture in order to preserve order. As a result, order maintenance assumed the guise of cultural evaluation to designate political belonging by establishing who and what fits the frame of white mainstream culture and what measures can and should be taken to set apart anything that deviates from the conventional white cultural mainstream in an uncomfortably conspicuous way.

In the hope that I haven’t lost you or disappeared deep into race theory, I want to conclude by summing up much of what I have been saying, as an invitation really to ask ourselves whether any art form is powerful enough to influence or indeed determine fluctuations in time, and whether it is possible for just one art form to be responsible for most or all the violence that is reported to be in rise. Similarly, I want to provoke us to think of the criminalisation of drill music as a fundamentally political matter, and one that cannot be fixed by implementing or introducing this or that piece of legislation. Rather, I want us to recognise the state’s war against drill through its legal and penal institutions, as an expression of racial and social injustice. That is not a purely criminal justice issue, if at all, but becomes one when it is not recognised as a fundamentally socio-political matter. I want to end therefore by claiming that the criminalisation of drill is an illustrative example of how race is policed through crime, and a vivid illustration of how embedded institutional racism is in the legal punishment system that makes it possible to have tailor-made legislation against just one music genre. So I hope that you have found what I have said sufficiently useful or infuriating enough for us to talk about it more during the Q&A session that follows.

So thank you all once again for listening, being here, attending and indeed, you know, thanking the interpreters once again for, you know, the patience and all the hard work as well.

# **The art of innovation? Effecting change in police custody through theatre and animation (Dr Layla Skinns and** **Charlie Barnes)**

*The transcript for this talk is available on request. Please contact* [*l.skinns@sheffield.ac.uk*](mailto:l.skinns@sheffield.ac.uk) *if you would like access to this document.*

*Note from the organisers: We are grateful to Catherine Pocock for transcribing these presentations.*