

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Westminster		
Unit of Assessment: 32 Art and Design: Theory, History & Practice		
Title of case study: Bass Culture: Advancing understanding and recognition of Black British Music		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Mykaell S. Riley	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 09/2000+
Period when the claimed impact occurred: March 2016 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Mykaell S. Riley's <i>Bass Culture</i> is the first in-depth retrospective of Black British music, revolutionising understanding of its cultural significance to the nation and creating the following impacts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Riley's research played a significant role in the withdrawal of Form 696 by the London Metropolitan Police, resulting in the positive reduction of discriminatory restrictions against Black British performers; • his <i>Bass Culture 70/50</i> exhibition reached and inspired an underserved community, connecting them to their heritage and providing a model for other community-led projects; • his research-based knowledge has directly aided the Jamaican government in designing and delivering a rebranding strategy that emphasises their musical heritage, opening up new economic opportunities for the nation; • and his research has enriched UK cultural archives and influenced curatorial practice, particularly at the Museum of London. 		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Recognising that the British media has shaped British pop music as a statement and symbol of "Britishness" – and as a soft reminder of nation and empire – since the 1960s, Riley has sought to redress the historically defined position and status of Black British artists as marginal figures within this discourse.</p> <p>In output [1], Riley draws on his own experiences as a Black British musician of Jamaican heritage in order to contextualise the origins and re-emergence of Black British music in the 1970s and 80s against the racially-charged socio-political backdrop of the era [1]. This personal perspective provides a contextualised account of the struggles faced by Black British musicians seeking to establish their own sound and space within the UK, as distinct from the mixture of music (the radio of mainstream Britain and the heritage records of their parents) to which the children of migrants are exposed [1]. Riley explains the evolution of Black British music from these early roots all the way to contemporary grime, charting how such performers came to find their own distinct sound.</p> <p>Conceived and devised by Riley at a time when the genre was largely associated with criminality in the mainstream media, his <i>State of Play: Grime Report</i> [2] sought to highlight the significant cultural and economic contribution of grime to the UK and, in turn, to challenge the limitations imposed upon such grime performers by Form 696 – a risk assessment form issued by the Metropolitan Police that would require live venues to hire extra security to put on such shows, which would not always be possible due to associated costs. Riley partnered with Ticketmaster in order to obtain sales data on grime performances and designed a survey of 2,000 people on these topics, making this the first big data study focused on public attitudes towards grime music. The findings were such that it was clear that grime had now become perceived by the public as British popular music and, as such, the data lent weight to the need to remove Form 696, which was unduly hindering the further growth of the genre.</p> <p>As an insider to the Black British community, and an award-winning former music industry professional, Riley was able to gain unprecedented access to Black British artists. His three-year AHRC-funded (£533,032) <i>Bass Culture</i> project focussed on recording and disseminating these neglected voices. The documentation of these voices is of great significance given that the cultural legacy of a community is determined by how their contribution is recorded, and the legacy of the</p>		

Black British community and their musical contributions to the UK has largely been written by middle-class white male commentators with a third-party outsider perspective.

The *Bass Culture* project (May 2016 – Oct 2019) began with Riley's identification and recording of the testimony of seventy key interviewees whose careers could be located within the UK across the past six decades. Riley recorded their oral histories for the first time, enabling him to preserve the contributions of earlier generations of Black Britons before they pass away. As part of the network created, all interviewees and project partners were then invited to comment on how and where they would like to see the collected data disseminated, ensuring that this record of the cultural contributions of Black Britons would not be lost to academia but would be accessible to the community itself. The following three outputs were thus each designed to ensure such accessibility.

The *Bass Culture* website (<http://basscultureduk.com>) is the first online archive to record the historical contribution of Black British artists to broader UK culture [3]. The website is constructed on a multi-media basis – visitors “watch” videos, “listen” to music, and “look” at photography – and the compiled media is split into the following segments, which speak to both the expanse and rigour of the research: society (socio-political context), people (the artists), sounds (contextualising the music within broader UK culture), culture (how the music inspired fashion, dance, language and more), business (historical industry contributions by those facilitating the artists), and preservation.

Riley curated *Bass Culture 70/50*, a multi-media exhibition marking 70 years since the arrival of the Windrush generation and 50 years since the advent of British reggae, which was attended by 3,400 visitors between October 22nd and November 25th 2018 at Ambika P3, a 14,000 square ft contemporary art space [4]. Eschewing the traditional white cube gallery space, whose class connotations can be obstructive to the community of the project's focus, Riley exhibited his research findings on the multi-faceted influence of Jamaican culture on British sounds through a mixture of photography, painting, music, film, and interactive events (for instance, a catwalk show that drew on intergenerational fashions).

Finally, Riley collaborated with community filmmaking collective Fully Focused Productions to create *The Bass Culture Documentary* [5]. The film provided insights from the key musicians and industry professionals required to voice the creativity of the Black British community across five decades of new musical genres. Driven by the perspective of youth, the film starts in the present and journeys back to the late 1950s. Important to this film is the unbroken inter-generational explanation of the birth of the most significant Black British music genres since the 1970s. All of the interview material was cross-referenced with chart and sales data, industry expert analysis, and audience accounts.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Riley, M. 2014. *Bass Culture: an alternative sound track to Britishness*. in: Stratton, J. and Zuberi, N. (ed.) *Black Popular Music in Britain since 1945*. Farnham: Ashgate. pp. 101-114
- [2] Riley, M (Academic Consultant). 2017. [2017](#). *State of Play: Grime Report*. Ticketmaster. *The first big data study concerning grime music*.
- [3] *Bass Culture* website: <http://basscultureduk.com> *The first online archive to record the historical contribution of Black British artists to broader UK culture*.
- [4] Riley, M. (Curator). 2018. *Bass Culture 70/50*, exhibition at Ambika P3 (Oct 22nd – Nov 25th) *A multi-media experience whose partners included the AHRC, Black Cultural Archives, British Library, SOAS, Goldsmiths University, Urbanimage and Camera Press. 3,400 visitors across 4 weeks; an independent report on media reach estimates 14.6 million actual impressions*.
- [5] Riley, M and Fully Focused. 2019. *The Bass Culture Documentary*. 56 mins.

Funding

AHRC - *Bass Culture* (May 2016-Oct 2019) AH/N001826/1, P-I: Riley: £533,032

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Direct influence on law enforcement policy in London

Riley's research has directly influenced changes in law enforcement policy related to live music in London, with his *State of Play: Grime Report* [2] playing a **significant role in the withdrawal of Form 696 by the London Metropolitan Police**. Introduced by the Met in 2005, Form 696 was a

risk assessment form which promoters and licensees in 21 London boroughs would have to complete 14 days in advance of their event. Notably, the Form asked for a description of the style of music to be performed and the target audience, with the original version requesting details of ethnic groups likely to attend (removed from the Form in December 2008).

The disproportionate use of Form 696 against Black music genres, and specifically grime, had rendered it a form of racial discrimination [a]. The Form could result in the demand that promoters provide additional searching processes and additional security for venues, leading to their reluctance to host such shows and thus reducing the financial opportunities and career opportunities of Black British artists. For instance, grime artist “Giggs had his tour cancelled in 2010 following police advice” on the basis of this Form [a, b].

Riley’s work in this area attracted the attention of the then Senior Policy Adviser to Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), who confirms that they drew directly on output [2] in their campaign to have Form 696 scrapped: “We started a campaign to get rid of Form 696, very much Matt Hancock’s campaign, and Mykaell was one of the most trusted people” they approached as “his work is authentic and trusted, so I knew that seeking his advice on this was always going to be beneficial to our campaign” [c].

Emphasising that Riley’s role as “a critical friend” was particularly useful, they “consulted him” and he provided the Adviser with the (then unpublished) “grime report”, which “provided evidence” that brought “academic rigour” to the campaign [c]. *State of Play* was a particularly **important source of knowledge for the adviser and his team** as “no-one had done this research before; certainly as far as I could find, and we did look far and wide” [c]. By outlining the cultural and economic contribution Black British music has made to the UK, and how Form 696 had been limiting it, the *State of Play* report enabled the Senior Policy Adviser and his team to make the case that more needed to be done to expand this contribution, i.e. by facilitating the freedom of Black Britons to perform and promote their music unhindered. These points featured prominently in Hancock’s effective media campaign against Form 696, which included an open letter to Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, asking him to intervene due to his concern that “the form is not only potentially stifling young artists and reducing the diversity of London’s world renowned musical offering, but is also having a negative impact on London’s night time economy by pushing organisers and promoters of urban music events to take them outside London” [d].

Khan undertook a consultation with industry stakeholders and requested the Met review the Form on 21st September 2017. The Form was withdrawn by the Met on 10th November 2017, and Hancock’s former Policy Adviser confirms: “Mykaell’s research was an important part of that” [c].

Khan highlighted how the scrapping of the Form had economic, social and cultural benefits: “This decision will help London’s night-time economy thrive, ensure the capital is a welcoming place for artists and DJs of all music genres and that Londoners are able to enjoy live music safely” [b]. Music site *GRMDaily* praised the move as “a win for the industry and music culture as a whole”, given that it now ensures “even more shows from some of urban’s best acts”, with industry body UK Music celebrating the removal of this “unpopular restriction on our diverse and vibrant music scene” [b]. Riley’s research played an important role in this **positive reduction of discriminatory restrictions against Black British performers**.

Reaching and inspiring an underserved community

Seth George Ramocan, High Commissioner of Jamaica, has said of the *Bass Culture 70/50* exhibition [4] that: “This research is a great example of universities doing what they are supposed to do which is to discover and uplift the people who are at the lowest end of society to see how much value they can contribute to society” [e].

Similarly, Sharon Ament, Director of the Museum of London, attests that Riley’s decision to break out of the traditional white cube gallery space meant that “[t]he exhibition clearly **reached new audiences** [...] It was clear that the people in the room owned the research. It was their ideas and their history they were looking at. You got a sense that this work was very alive and felt deeply meaningful for communities. [...] They hadn’t been researched upon, they owned it. I thought that sense of ownership came through very clearly and it was profoundly important” [f].

This impact is confirmed by feedback from attendees of the exhibition who specify that they are of Jamaican heritage. As exemplified in this selection of comments, such **attendees gained self-knowledge in respect to their heritage** through Riley’s exhibition: “It makes me feel proud of my heritage and [the] contribution of Jamaican artists and culture in Britain”; “Being of Jamaican

heritage myself, I have been taught a lot from my family but this extensive exhibition put images to the stories I've been brought up with which helps to understand just how the climate was"; "The exhibition surrounds you with historical references of my culture and for me definitely inspired a sense of pride" [g].

This impact has continued through the use of Riley's Bass Culture project as **a best practice model** for "[No Bass like Home](#)" – a community-led project aimed at uncovering and communicating Brent Borough's reggae heritage and its contribution to music in Britain. Project Manager Zerritha Brown states: "Bass Culture is an invaluable role model for us as a research project which our project is learning from. [...] His input is enabling us to navigate the process of undertaking the research, providing rigour to what we are doing and helping us focus on our research process effectively" [h]. Brown also explains how Riley's provision of **expert advice, drawn from his own navigation of the politics of community focussed research**, "has been instrumental in helping me frame the project and advocate on behalf of the project to the council so it is seen as a project for the whole borough and it doesn't get marginalised as just a project for a particular community" [h]. This is to say that, as with his overall research agenda to situate Black British artistry within broader British culture, in his role as "an adviser for the project" Riley helped this non-academic project to simultaneously speak to the Black British community in Brent as well as the borough itself, **ensuring its visibility within the programme for "[Brent 2020](#)"** – events relating to the borough's designation as the Mayor's London Borough of Culture for 2020 [h].

The *Bass Culture* project has also directly upskilled the founders of the community-focussed [SDS Entertainment](#), a platform which aims at "changing the perception and narrative of Croydon's non-existing music scene onto something positive and helpful to the young creatives without outlets in the borough" [i]. Makeda Bennett-Ampar Beng, one of the two co-founders of SDS – both of whom had participated in the undertaking of Riley's project – states it "helped me develop my networking skills further", such that "my work with Mykaell **opened up more/key doors for me to start SDS Entertainment**" and "led to me meeting the right people who had a helping hand in the development of SDS and [its] partnerships", including Croydon's Creative Enterprise Zone and the Midi Music Company [i]. Along with providing opportunities for their underserved local community, via their Arts Council funded Croydon Hub 2020 project for instance, SDS "implement bass culture teachings" by "mak[ing] sure that we use our platform to spread awareness of the impact Jamaican music has had on the black British music scene" through "conversations with upcoming artists about the history" and the creation of "a short animation explaining the importance of this" cultural lineage [i].

Aiding the Jamaican government

Whilst establishing Black British music as distinct from Jamaican-based musical production, Riley's project has nevertheless also highlighted how the latter was fundamental to the emergence of multi-culturalism in the UK and helped to redefine the postcolonial nation.

The *Bass Culture 70/50* exhibition [4] was attended by 3,400 people across the four weeks and an exit questionnaire of audiences revealed that 95% of attendees felt that the exhibition had **contributed to their knowledge and understanding about the impact of Jamaican culture on the UK** [g]. This is also exemplified in collected feedback from visitors, such as the following: "I have gained more knowledge of how reggae music has influenced artists from other musical genres"; "As a drum & bass producer I'm starting to realise that the majority of music I enjoy and am influenced by has come from Jamaican influence"; "I have been able to connect different movements as one, e.g. Lover's Rock, Drum & Bass, are both parts of 'Bass Culture'" [g].

This impact is particularly significant in bringing recognition to how contemporary forms of British music have their roots in Jamaican originated music. As such, Riley's research is seen by the Jamaican government as producing vital cultural capital for the nation. As the High Commissioner of Jamaica states: "Mykaell Riley's research [...] elevates the value and the importance of the music, and when you do that for reggae you are doing it for Jamaica. It **helps to build Jamaican brand; it helps to ensure that reggae music gets the respect it truly deserves** due to its global impact it has had across the world as well for its significance for Jamaica and for Jamaican communities across the world" [e].

On the basis of this *Bass Culture* project, Riley has subsequently been invited to work with the Jamaican government on a number of projects aimed at increasing awareness and appreciation of the influence and significance of Jamaican culture both in the UK and internationally.

In the UK, the High Commissioner explains, “Mr. Riley has worked with us on several events including women in reggae music and the business of reggae music. In fact, his presentation on the Bass Culture Research was the event we used to kickstart our Jamaican 55 celebration” [e]. Further, Riley’s research was deployed within the 2020 launch of the new Jamaican Tourism Board website, for which “a major part of the rebrand is foregrounding Jamaica’s music heritage” [j]. As Elizabeth Fox, Regional Director UK/N Europe of the Jamaican Tourism Board, explains, Riley was asked to do research on “key locations of interest” relating to musical history on the island [j]. She highlights the benefit as follows: “We see the research as **allowing us to capitalise on a market opportunity which we haven’t fully realised to date**. When you think of New Orleans or Chicago you think of the music. We felt we didn’t have anything dedicated to Jamaica’s great music history and we wanted to capitalise on that potential. MR’s research is helping us do that”; i.e. to “differentiate ourselves from other Caribbean islands and use that cultural uniqueness of the music and the food, amongst others, to help sell the destination [...] to another audience” [j]. Notably, Fox adds: “We haven’t worked with other academics in this way before, so this is a first actually” [j].

Enriching UK cultural archives and influencing curatorial practice

The research collected throughout the *Bass Culture* project has addressed gaps in knowledge identified in the nation’s archives, thereby enriching the cultural repository of the nation.

Riley was appointed a member of the academic panel of the Museum of London in November 2017. As Ament, the Museum’s Director, explains, in this capacity Riley “provides **guidance and advice on the future development of our museum**, particularly for our big new project which is developing a new museum for London. This involves our museum thinking about the future, about what sort of museum we need to be and what future stories we need to tell. [...] As an academic whose sphere is popular culture he is bringing insight to an enormous part of London’s history and culture which we don’t have on site. [...] In doing so he is **filling a significant gap in our knowledge**” [f].

Of further significance, Riley has been **raising intercultural awareness within a field that is predominantly white**: “MR also helps us think about language [...] he has helped us set up the intellectual framework that will guide the whole of our new museum about London”, and “has contributed to helping us thinking differently about all communities in London, about black communities in London, about how music genres have mashed up the specifics of London, and how this has enabled cultures to ‘remix themselves’ within the London context” [f]. Riley has also had a **direct impact on curatorial strategies at the Museum of London**. As Ament testifies: “Our contemporary collecting programme has been informed by MR’s research and what he achieved in Bass Culture [...] we are now looking to do a project around dub reggae and the dub reggae music scene and that will manifest itself next year with a record shop in the museum” [f].

Additionally, Andy Linehan, Curator of Popular Music at the British Library, states that “[t]he value of personal testimony the Bass Culture project has amassed is huge. They can provide **an incredibly useful resource for future generations** who can use the project as a primary resource for their own research” [k]. In this connection, the materials obtained through Riley’s research have already been requested as a resource by a number of non-HEI organisations. The HF (Hammersmith & Fulham) ArtsFest 2019, for instance, “which aims in all its activities to be representative of the demographics of the community and to reflect, wherever possible, the cultural diversity of the Borough”, sought visual materials from the *Bass Culture 70/50* exhibition [4] as part of a celebration of reggae at a local record store with “legendary associations” with the art form, and also screened *The Bass Culture Documentary* [5] film [l].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[a] Form 696 and racial discrimination ([The Guardian](#), [IQ Mag](#)) [b] Responses to the Withdrawal of Form 696 ([BBC](#), [IQ Mag](#), [GRMDaily](#)) [c] Interview with Senior Policy Adviser at DCMS [d] Hancock campaign examples [[letter](#)] [[interview](#)] [e] Testimony: Seth George Ramocan, CD, High Commissioner of Jamaica [f] Testimony: Sharon Ament, Director of the Museum of London [g] Feedback from Bass Culture 70/50 exhibition [h] Testimony: Zerritha Brown, project manager of “No Bass Like Home” [i] Testimony: Makeda Bennett-Amparbeng, SDS [j] Testimony: Elizabeth Fox, Regional Director UK/N Europe of Jamaican Tourism Board [k] Testimony: Andy Linehan, Curator of Popular Music, British Library [l] Portfolio of *Bass Culture* contributions to HF Artsfest