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On Being a White Norwegian Analysing Rap

The realisation that I wanted to analyse rap flows (that is the vocal track[s] of rap recordings/performances) was the spark igniting my academic career. Coming from an angle of being a performing and recording musician—mostly in the Norwegian hip-hop scene—the ethics of cultural appropriation were not initially a consideration. After all, hip-hop was something I *did*, not really something I reflected upon, and it never struck me that my engagement with a cultural expression that I have nothing but love and appreciation for could be problematic in any sense. Suffice to say, engaging with hip-hop as an academic invited this type of reflection, and the goal of this colloquy contribution (which is a slight adaptation of a section of my PhD thesis) is to exemplify the type of ethical reflections that is 1) of fundamental importance to any music researcher's engagement with any type of music, and 2) not necessarily reflections that people—whether those people are scholars, performers, writers, fans or none of the above—actually make.

A central epistemological tenet in my work as a rap analyst is to embrace my position as what Donald Schön (1983) calls “the reflective practitioner”—taking advantage of the tacit knowledge accumulated from years of practice and the situations and positions that are unavailable to non-practitioners. However, this is only one minor aspect of me and my relationship with hip-hop. I am not *only* a reflective practitioner in my engagement with rap music and hip-hop culture. I am also a (or one could say “yet another”) White cis-male academic writing about Black music,¹ another position which requires reflection, as does the profound *non-Americanness* of my specifically Norwegian and more generally European background, as regards both hip-hop culture and academic disciplinary traditions. I will, of course, not be able to engage in full with these topics, which would require a thesis of its own, but I will preface the following discussion with a few statements:

- 1 My work both as a hip-hop scholar and hip-hop artist is cultural appropriation.
- 2 Hip-hop does in no way need academia, nor does it need my work.
- 3 This colloquy contribution is not just a simple disclaimer. The problematic aspects of a White man who has come from a particular cultural tradition and who occupies a position of privilege in the racial-colonial hierarchy looking at

1 Note that I capitalise both “Black” and “White” when they refer to a racialized identity. The history and reasoning for the former is well established—see for example *The New York Times's* reasoning for using it (Coleman 2020)—the latter is more contested. I follow Nell Irvin Painter's (2020) argument in that “We should capitalize ‘White’ to situate ‘Whiteness’ within the American ideology of race, within which ‘Black,’ but not ‘White,’ has been hypervisible as a group identity.”

a Black cultural expression through what Philip Ewell (2020) calls a *White racial frame* cannot and should not be understated. However, I believe that the good my work does outweighs the bad, because—as Ewell stresses²—anyone engaging with and challenging the inherent Whiteness of the field and society is valuable, even if that engagement, in this case, is done through research which would not exist without White male privilege. While I cannot deny my privilege, I can use it as productively as I am able to in challenging White supremacy in music studies.

Rap, and by extension hip-hop, is a global phenomenon. This globalisation of the cultural expression has led to a variety of local appropriations. Let us compare it to a very different type of cultural expression: pizza. The way pizza has travelled from its roots in Italy (and there is a significant difference between what Neapolitans and what Romans would consider “authentic” pizza) and been appropriated—some would even say subverted—by local traditions like the deep-dish Chicago style or the Swedish variant with bananas and curry powder might be frustrating to many Italians (my personal specialty is made with cured fish and lacto-fermented plum—highly inauthentic), but due to how fantastic pizza is, this appropriation was unstoppable: everybody wants pizza, however little they might know about its roots. Likewise, people from all around the world find both pleasure and immense social value in hip-hop (this has been chronicled extensively in for example Mitchell 2001; more local variants of this type of scholarship is also widespread, like the Scandinavia-focused Krogh & Stougaard Pedersen 2008). The task for those of us who have been exposed to and fallen in love with an expression of this culture such as rap music while lacking a rounded knowledge of the culture as a whole is to make sure we learn more and are sensitive to the culture in the way we engage with it. Appropriation is not always exploitation (even if it clearly *can* be).³ Akil The MC from the legendary rap crew Jurassic 5 wrote the following on the group’s Facebook page:

I am a guest in the culture of Hip Hop because I am not from where Hip Hop originated (The Bronx, New York). I’m from Los Angeles. I was invited to this culture in 83 and have been treated as a guest should be treated with honor and respect and nothing but the best. I don’t mind being called a guest or have a problem with someone saying I’m a guest in this culture. I know what I am and not ashamed of it. (Akil The MC 2021)

Like Akil The MC, I wish to take the stance of being “a guest in the culture”—with the extra added difference that unlike Akil The MC, I am not African American. Whether or not my enthrallment with G-Funk music videos in the mid-1990s should be con-

2 “Whites ‘critiquing whites,’ ‘refusing complicity,’ ‘naming what’s going on,’ ‘subverting white authority,’ and ‘dismantling whiteness’ is sorely needed in music theory” (Ewell 2020).

3 As is evident in the title of Eric Lott’s *Love & Theft* (1993), the act of appropriating cultural expressions without referencing their roots is not necessarily a violent act of theft—it can also be an expression of appreciation and admiration.

sidered an *invitation* is up for discussion. Of course, my engagement with hip-hop as a musician and a scholar is an appropriation of the cultural expression, but my take on hip-hop (music and research) is derived and delivered with the utmost respect for its roots and history, and I hope and believe that this shines through in my work.

As a call to arms for music researchers to challenge the existing, suppressive structures of “music theory”—both the institutions teaching it and the discipline itself—Philip Ewell’s “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame” (2020) sets out to become the most influential publication in music studies in the early 2020s. Painting a picture of the field of music theory, both in general and specifically within US institutions, the article sums up how the field displays and reinforces its approach.

Our white racial frame believes that:

- the music and music theories of white persons represent the best framework for music theory.
- among these white persons, the music and music theories of whites from German-speaking lands of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries represent the pinnacle of music-theoretical thought.
- the institutions and structures of music theory have little or nothing to do with race or whiteness, and that to critically examine race and whiteness in music theory would be unfair or inappropriate.
- the language of “diversity” and the actions it effects will rectify racial disparities, and therefore racial injustices, in music theory. (Ewell 2020)

Taking Ewell’s description of music theory’s problematic beliefs to heart, I see several implications for how I might attempt to combat the White racial frame as a young music scholar. To start with, the first two points are ones I set out to challenge, both through my musical material and through the theoretical and methodological framework I apply to it. The first is obvious: I write about, perform and analyse music rooted in a Black American tradition, not in comparison to other musics but as the central protagonist of its own story and its relation to me, the analyst. The second is not obvious, as it is by no means clear which applications of which theoretical and/or methodological frameworks would be suitably “colour blind,” and throughout my own work appear applications of frameworks (both theoretical and methodological, with regard to music, poetry, linguistics, psychology, or philosophy) which are based in or on the White German-speaking traditions Ewell identifies as foundational for a White racial frame (it is important to note that Ewell does not outright reject white music theory as such, not even Schenkerian theory, the main case study of his critique). The very idea of “colour blindness” is, as Ewell notes, problematic in itself, because an important step in understanding and ultimately resolving or “de-framing” the discipline is to both acknowledge and embrace the historical and cultural concepts of Whiteness and Blackness. To tear something down, one has to first acknowledge its existence. I have, to the best of my ability, evaluated whether my

choices and applications of theories and methods are sensitive to both cultural and musical nuances, and when I have committed to a specific framework—like musical notation or theories on categorical perception—it is because I believe it to be suitable to the analysis of Black music, however White its origins might be. For example, musical notation is well suited to represent certain rhythmic structures of rap flows (like cross-rhythms, off-beat phrasings and such), while it is—in my opinion—unsuited to visualise the significance and intricacies of the relationship between poetic lines and musical metre.

Thirdly, Ewell highlights the institutions and structures of the field of music theory and in particular the perpetuation of the White racial frame by US academic institutions. The picture Ewell paints of the persistent conservative aspects of these institutions is unfamiliar to me as a Norwegian music scholar. Coming from a position of perhaps ignorant naïveté, I have always reacted with surprise and bemusement when reading or being told about how US music theory programs have obligatory German language or Schenkerian analysis classes. The former would never be required in a Norwegian institution, and the latter is only briefly mentioned in introductory classes as a marginal practice at best. From the outside looking in, it seems that I am in yet another privileged position in that I have never been discouraged from pursuing an interest in “popular music” (an antiquated and loaded term if ever there was one) in general or hip-hop specifically. While there remain clear challenges concerning both inclusivity and structural Whiteness in Norwegian institutions as well (speaking for myself, the music education I received some fifteen to twenty years ago was heavily weighted towards European “art music”), I take pride in belonging to a group and lineage of (admittedly, mostly White) music scholars who actively advocate “for a restructuring of our racialized structures—a deframing and reframing of the white racial frame” (Ewell 2021, 1; in particular, my supervisor and mentor—Anne Danielsen—has been a huge inspiration and a role model in how to engage with and approach Black music coming from a White background). Thankfully, Ewell is most definitely not a lone voice but part of a large progressive movement of music theorists whose voices—both in publications and in the social media discourse—are at once inspirational and encouraging. (One of the more straight-forward ways of fighting against White supremacy in music studies is to be conscientious in regard to which scholars one cites and engages with. Of the scholars I have engaged with in my own work it is worth mentioning for example H. Samy Alim, Chris Stover and Noriko Manabe as good examples of progressive hip-hop and music scholars.)

However, as I am a White, privileged man, my engagement with hip-hop and rap both as an artist and a scholar is, again, fundamentally an act of cultural appropriation, and the Blackness of the cultural origins of the music I make and analyse will always be contrasted by the Whiteness of my cultural background. If some believe that my music or academic work is less valuable because it is less Black than the music inspiring it, that is their prerogative, but the type of cultural appropriation that my thesis and music exemplifies is not one of Whiteness attempting to subjugate Blackness but rather one celebrating Black music in general and hip-hop and

rap specifically. It should be (and is!) possible to avoid taking on “everything but the burden” as Greg Tate (2003) warns about. While it is not necessarily possible to take on the burden from a position of White privilege, we sure can work to ease or diminish the burden where we can. Crucially, White people engaging with Black music cannot stop the music from being Black—there is no requirement of purity, as Imani Perry argues in her influential *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*:

To deem something French or English rarely implies that there were no Germanic cultural influences, or Irish, or even Algerian . . . a music drawing on hybrid influence yet also having a black political and social existence is one that understands hip hop as existing within society as black music, but also one that assumes that black music is and has always been hybrid, drawing on influences from other cultures and places. In fact, music is never compositionally pure, even as it exists within a culture and is identifiable with a community (2004, 11).

Hip-hop has taken over the world, and it will stay Black and celebrate and promote Blackness even when it is also Norwegian, White and middle-class.

If the academic pursuit of rap’s aesthetic intricacies is to be successful, the scholar studying it must be intimately familiar with this music. There is an impressive array of published analyses of rap, and most of the time these scholars’ enthusiasm for hip-hop shines through. Still, there are also varying degrees of familiarity with the music and culture, and, as mentioned, there are few practitioners lending their voices to the choir. Again, I believe the positioning of the “reflective practitioner” is likely to be fruitful in this field, because a hands-on engagement with the music can produce insights which might elude others. Eileen Southern writes in *The Music of Black Americans* that “serious study of African-American music requires getting to know the music, which means listening to it and, if possible, performing it” (1997, xx). While I might be only an uninvited (or unwittingly invited) guest in hip-hop culture, I have—with sincere enthusiasm—listened to, made, and performed rap music for many years. I am not a conventional “insider” in the main branch of hip-hop’s historical culture, but I can claim the status in one grafted-on twig,⁴ and I have, as Southern requests, both listened to and performed rap—and gotten to know some version of it quite intimately. Of course, Southern’s ground rule for music analysis is by no means exclusive to the study of Black music. However, as a younger subdiscipline in a well-established academic field, rap analysis must critically evaluate which methodological and theoretical approaches its adherents take, and whether those approaches are indeed suitable for analysing the music at hand or instead simply those most convenient to the trained music scholar. Like virtually everyone else in the privileged position of being funded to write a lengthy treatise on music, I have been trained in a discipline that “locates [certain] Western European and Euro-diasporic practices as an unmarked

4 The inspiration for positioning my “insiderness” on some sort of insider-outsider spectrum comes from Chris Stover’s positioning through self-identification and background in his dissertation (Stover 2009, 32–33)

norm" (Stover 2022, 2), meaning that my toolbox includes some insurmountable biases towards which musical features and structures are readily identifiable and representable. Or as Ewell (2020) puts it: there are "racialized structures, put in place to benefit white persons, remain foundational in the field without appearing racist." It is impossible to fully separate oneself and one's practice from the biases of tradition and training, but I attempt to be conscious of them and how they impact my work, and I am careful to make the reader aware of them as well.

The idea of music analysis being primarily a pleasurable act meant "to overwhelm, entertain, amuse, challenge, move, enable, indeed to explore the entire range of emotions, if not in actuality then very definitely in simulated form, at a second level of articulation, so to speak" (Agawu 2004, 280), and only secondarily meant to make explanatory or epistemological points, is an attractive one for a musical analyst. And if it were true, as Agawu argued, that "analytical knowledge resists or escapes verbal summary" (2004, 274), one might even conclude that performing an analysis is the only way to obtain some of the many insights which are available about a piece of music.

If part of the value of analysis is the analyst's subjective experience of making the music their own, then the perspectives, inclinations, goals, values—the very *identity* of the analyst—is critical to the analysis itself and whatever epistemological points it might make. I have already implied the same here. So: What are my goals and motivations going into my analytical work? And what do these goals and motivations mean for the nature of the analyses?

Following Agawu's notion of analysis as performance, one central aspect of my process is the pleasurable and educational experience of sharing an analytical space with music I already enjoy so much. By tapping into my positioning as a reflective practitioner, I attempt to accomplish what J. Griffith Rollefson calls for in *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality*: namely, 'hip hop close readings in both form and content' which are not the result of mere scholarly work on hip-hop or even the scholarly work of a rapper. Instead, I intend to "move past [my] subject position as 'scholar of hip hop' and truly take on the mantle of 'hip hop scholar' by doing scholarly work in a hip-hop way" (2017, 10). The way this is most visible in my work is on the surface, where the language, discourse and graphics employed are "hip-hop flavoured," as the title of my doctoral thesis (*What Makes the Shit Dope*; Oddekaly, forthcoming 2022), the use of hand-drawn figures (exemplified in figure 1), and personal anecdotes contextualising my analytical and theoretical discussions (I might even argue that the hip-hop flavour permeates the style of my prose as well). Most importantly to me, doing my scholarly work in a hip-hop way means approaching analysis and the act of *doing music theory* like I approach *doing hip-hop*—as a creative, playful and enjoyable act of immersing myself in a musical and cultural expression which I consider to be radical, democratic, socially conscious and capable of being a positive transformative force at both an individual and a collective level. I want my analysis to reflect the joy of my approach or mindset and even to be enjoyable (or even inspirational) for the reader.

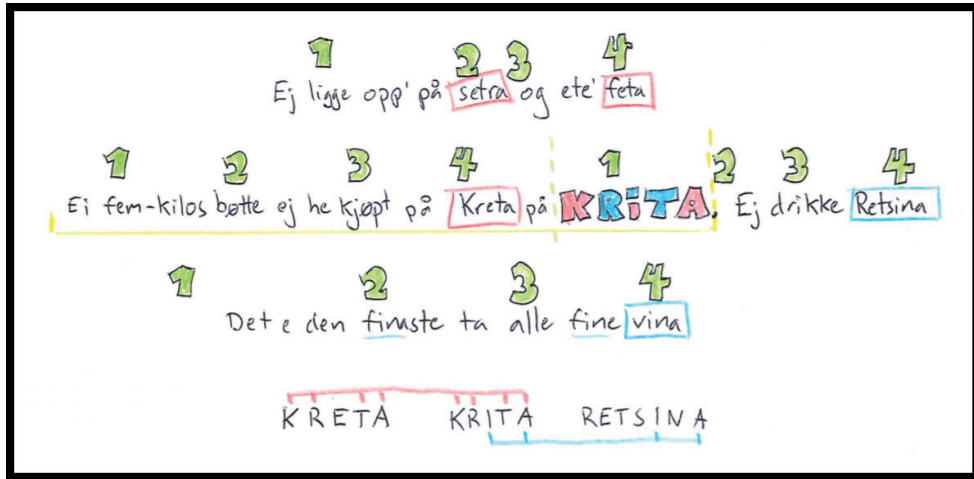


Figure 1: Example of hand-drawn figure from Oddekav (2022.). Here, analysis of a *pivot rhyme* in Norwegian rap-group Side Brok's track "Setra"

Other aspects of my process are the more traditional "woodshedding" of the musical practitioner—transcribing, deconstructing and recontextualising musical ideas are common ways of expanding one's own musical vocabulary, and this is how I initially started doing rap analysis—as well as a theoretical and discursive one. In both academic and colloquial discourse there is perhaps not a "need for" but at the very least a gap in the naming of musical techniques, their variants and their role in rap music as a whole. My analyses aim to highlight, present and explain various musical, poetic and theoretical concepts which I believe are significant to rap. This may be useful both to the field of rap analysis and to music makers, teachers and students of both the theoretical and practical aspects of rapping, as well as aficionados and "heads" in general.

All in all, my subjective position and approach are core to my analyses, as they are for everyone else who immerses themselves or dabbles in music analysis. I believe, however, that it is particularly crucial to emphasise the identity, background and position of the analyst in cases like mine, where there is an institutional power imbalance between White analyst and Black cultural subject matter. For my analyses to be valid—that is, for the reader to be able to trust me as an analyst—my Whiteness, Norwegianness, performer's background, and epistemological ideology is not just interesting flavouring, it is a central part of what makes my work potentially valuable.

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