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Can the (Non-)Subaltern (Understand) Rap?: Rap as Vernacular Critical Theory

Published in:
Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture

DOI:
10.5325/jasiapacipopcult.6.2.0213

Published: 01/01/2021

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Please cite the original version:
Abstract

It is relatively easy to produce a decent rap piece. Rap also has a long history as political culture. Whether people want feminist development or action against brutal capitalism – rap is there. Critical theory and political philosophy have always been a part of rap: In the 1990s MC Solaar quoted Umberto Eco and Jacques Derrida. Today, Princess Nokia rhymes on bell hooks. No other genre of popular music can come up with as strong a history on philosophy and critical theory. We have not, though, yet discussed the way rap lyrics themselves could be thought of as vernacular critical theory or philosophy. Besides attempting to do this, I will ask why philosophers and critical theorists do not recognize vernacular versions of their practice. And I will present some of the ways rap works for social change.

Keywords: rap, popular music, philosophy, critical theory, vernacular, politics

CAN THE (NON-)SUBALTERN (UNDERSTAND) RAP?

Rap as Vernacular Critical Theory

[…] I wish to teach them [Europeans] Ahmad Shamlou, Nazem Hekmat, Mahmoud Darwish, and Faiz Ahmad Faiz, in gratitude for what I have learned from their Heidegger, Derrida, Badiou, and Ranciere. I wish to invite European philosophers to read these poets not through the exoticized lenses of Orientalism or Area Studies, but with the same attitude of critical intimacy that they approach their own philosophers. Then I wish for them to join me in collapsing the binary between philosophy and poetry, to stand next to me as I show them the poetic philosophy of our poets, teaching them how to reread Philosophical poetry from Nietzsche to Blanchot.¹

Touché. Hamid Dabashi neatly uncovers the culturally narrow-minded nature of the work of the European and North American aficionados of French and German philosophy in his book Can Non-Europeans Think? (2015). They virtually never step out from their herme(neu)tically sealed circle to meet and greet the ‘world’. Without historical power-relations their work would
be merely regional, which is the Western destiny of Persian, Urdu, Turkish and Arabic language philosophy and literature – and which of course also focus on their own tradition, besides as well as Western influence. And why not: of course Europeans are also Eurocentric, Dabashi writes². This is not the issue. The issue is the lack of reflection within this group that thinks its philosophy is the only form of philosophy, and its ‘thinking’ is the ‘thinking’.

Although I feel uncomfortable with Dabashi’s eagerness to teach the indifferent who are in power and in some sense to reach their ‘friendship’, I very much appreciate the philosophical energy of his approach. I cannot, though, leave some matters untouched for the sake of truth (as a half-non-European myself) and I also need to unwind the philosophical, personal base of my take on rap music, which I think exemplifies the question of ‘other’ philosophies out there – without forgetting my desire to also pay homage to Dabashi, which calls for a ‘rap battle’.

The French mainly discuss their own writers (with some Germans, and a couple of Northern Italian and British writers) when the boundary between philosophy and literature is blurred, and this applies even more to German classics, especially Heidegger, where the use of only ‘one’s own’ (with antiquity counted here) literature is not implicit, but openly ideological, as the type of works of art he is interested in are constitutive for a ‘culture’ and can in the end be understood pretty much only by members of that culture. (This is the main tenet of The Origin of the Work of Art, 1935–1950.³)

It was not a coincidence that the idea and system of art and the standards of academic ‘Western’ philosophy were developed pretty much in the same gender, class and region: i.e. the cultural network of upper class males that could be said to have developed and flourished roughly inside the triangle of London–Florence–Berlin in the 18th and 19th centuries. The ‘Europe’ of postcolonial discussions has mostly become simply an extension of the way these dominant countries, with the colonial histories many of them have (Britain being
Dabashi’s main target on this front) do or possess things and then say that the ‘West’ or ‘Europe’ did it. When NATO countries use but then forget the Kurds in their fight against ISIS, it is the ‘West’ that forgets the Kurds. When Britons and Central Europeans (although if you look at the map of Europe, you can easily extend Central Europe to London) talk about what ‘we’ did, and call for change through their newly found crusades in postcolonialism, although there are of course many good intentions here, they also include the cultural and economic margins of the European continent in the same self-shaming. Under the now, because they have decided it is so, victorious academic trend, many middle class ‘forgotten Europeans’ in Latvia, Poland and Albania, for complex neo-colonial and postcolonial psychological reasons, try to follow, and to keep up with the ‘international scene’.

Europe is a complex mess. Take, for example, a look at Finland. Years ago, the Finns pushed away the indigenous Sámi people through settler colonialism. But the Finns themselves migrated from their *Urheimat* between the rivers Volga, Oka and Kama (routeways to Siberia) with their non-Indo-European language, where, e.g., there is no third person gender and where the polarization of active and passive (a major base for Indo-European philosophical metaphysics) was never as clear as in Indo-European languages⁴. The area was colonialized by Swedes, then Russians – and besides being an in-between area during the Cold War it stayed poor for a long while, although nobody remembers this anymore, as the past three decades have made Finland a rich ‘Western Country’ with a democratic, equality-driven stature, that right now is making headlines in what we still in the 1990s used to call ‘the West’ in Finland (i.e. North America and Western Europe). Still, the Finns were considered to be a lower race until the Second World War – a ‘fact’ nailed by the classic author of race theory, Arthur de Gobineau⁵, and ‘cancelled’ by the Nazis in their quest for partners for their war against Finland’s mighty, tricky neighbor, Russia⁶. Looking also at the geopolitical history of the areas where most of my professional playmates live (Slovakia, Hungary, Poland) it is not hard to see
that Dabashi’s ‘Europe’ is a little like the polemical leftist concept ‘fortress Europe’. It stands without its North and South (Sweden seems to be as little a part of it as Sicily and Malta) rather like the way fortress Europe does not touch the poor Roma people of the East side of Slovakia, the Balkans, the Baltics or Rumania. The philosophers Dabashi focuses on look to me too to be very privileged, although Slavoj Zizek, who Dabashi concentrates on, is for me a also a post-communist philosopher, who has to make a career in the ‘West’, much as Dabashi has to make his thoughts heard. I would not have known Dabashi had he not connected to the London scene, and the same applies to Zizek.

I would like to join Dabashi, anyway – of course – as I think he actually focuses, on the scenes of London and Paris (extended to the historical Germans) that overshadow us too, and where we have to head if we desire to become ‘somebody’, not just (shadow) ‘Europeans’, but ‘international’ – if we do not decide to simply become even more Americanized than we already are through its cultural impact, and publish in America (which is what I actually do). I would like to paraphrase Dabashi’s thinking, though: Can the middle class (and the upper class, of course, too) think? Or, can the scholars who connect only to the highbrow think? But I am less interested in gaining their acceptance, although I would love to perhaps just show how pathetic they are, as they are so afraid of walking in the ‘no go’ areas where I was raised (that are of course mainly really nice areas where there simply happen to be people other than the white middle classes.) I would love to play them Latin Kings and PastoriPike, whose rap music stems pretty much from the areas where I lived, and still live, in Stockholm and Helsinki. e.g. the infamous Rinkeby of my childhood (which even Donald Trump mentioned in his speech on how Sweden has lost the game against immigration7). I would love them to come to my today, actually very gentrified East Helsinki neighborhood (that is even more ‘dangerous’ just on a fantasmatic level for the populist extreme right): Not to be ‘friends’ with them, but just to give them an opportunity to understand that they are out,
and that they learn from us working class people with immigrant backgrounds too – and that the suburbs produce both art and philosophy.

Since Jacques Rancière’s groundbreaking work, especially *Proletarian Nights* (1981) that showed how the poor 19th century industrial worker did not need Karl Marx to step down from his podium to help him/her to become conscious of his/her societal position, the privileged philosophers have been invited to see that they somehow need the poor for their political fantasies (which of course mostly have good intentions) and then also that the poor themselves can/could think, as any grosser take on their letters from the mid-19th century shows (see also Rancière 2004). I am even more interested in the ways we/the poor, (all) the (other) unprivileged ones (too), the ‘subalterns’ (whoever they are), and/or the ethnically overshadowed systematize their thinking. The noise Dabashi made with his ‘alternative’ philosophers and poets crossed boundaries in a geo-cultural way, but for someone like me, who studied philosophy at university, and rap on my own, it remains a mystery, how philosophers even in New York, where rap evolved – or the French so close to their suburbs (of Saint-Denis, Maisons-Alfort and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges) with great intellectual rappers like MC Solaar – could remain so untouched by its philosophical force. It is not just that people who have adapted the again, broadly speaking, Central European way of appropriating Southern European philosophy (mainly Greek, which itself of course to some extent appropriated the philosophies of Northern Africa and the Middle East) its rebellions of the privileged, middle and upper class thinkers, from Nietzsche to Foucault, and its rules for how to argue for one’s stance and how to defend it, tend to not look at other cultures that by their narrow definition of philosophy do not fit their model of ‘thinking’, but that they do not even do it locally, as not just ethnic differences, but also class, provide ‘unacceptable’ challenges for the project they nurse as only their own.
Rap was ‘born’ in the Bronx, NY, where developments in rhyming, scratching, and the use of breakbeats, that had been anticipated, e.g. in the work of Pigmeat Markham, James Brown, Amiri Baraka and Gil Scott-Heron, came together. For many this happened on August 13, 1973, at the birthday party of Kool Herc’s sister at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue. One can think of this as a moment that resembles the way the culturally quite Central European Northern Italians, and more precisely the Tuscans, with Florence as their New York, ‘mix-taped’ new innovations in perspective with canvas painting, and Renaissance culture took off together with the brand new idea of the ‘artist’. The rapper took over space from commercial, ready-made music, which had silenced the vernacular singer in modern culture. S/he raised an invisible cultural historical thread to the daylight.

In his *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* David Toop presents a scene-driven history of rap, with historical cracks taking the reader all the way to the ancient *galla* tradition in Nigeria – sung in an abusive manner by females – and the *griots*, where musicians marked their existence and needs through oral poetry on the Ivory Coast. He calls us then to look at the complicated language games that developed in early modern USA, the ‘dozens’, the ‘signifying songs’. Although it is good to remember how much rap developed through fresh migration from, e.g., Barbados and Jamaica, Toop’s accent on the way slavery brutally forced an ancient poetical ‘silky way’ from Africa to the USA is an invitation to think of a cultural history of not just African-Americans, but of the whole African diaspora. The ‘Western philosopher’ and the ‘Western artist’ prides himself/herself on the historical depth of his/her practice, but forgets that others have histories too, as they are more about hidden cultural impact and less about 200–300-year-old appropriations of history (this is what I would call the Central European way of looking at the antiquity of Southern Europe). One could even ask if vernacular is the right word for discussing rap as philosophy, but as it still stems and originally mostly stemmed from a less-privileged background, it does that at least more than Nietzsche’s,
Schopenhauer’s or the Frankfurt School members’ escapes from the academic community to become freelancers or rich ‘outlaws’.12

Still in the 1980s and 1990s, rap was claimed to be the ‘most maligned and persecuted form of popular music,’ as Richard Shusterman writes13. Partly, of course, this stems from some of the misogynistic or hateful pieces that the media, and amateurs, like to pick up from the broad scene, as these topics raise reactions and of course also justified criticism. But then and now, this only forms a part of rap music – like conservative philosophy and overtly polemic critical theory form just a part of their respective practices.

The new millennium has not just made rap mainstream, but has also witnessed a whole wave of rap and hip hop studies, where the focus has often been on gender, identity, politics and religion (interestingly not much if at all on class) – and often without an interest in its African legacy.14 The scholars who talk about rap in the academy or do rap in the artworld (like Halil Altindere15) are of course often fans of rap to some extent. The early rap debates were still, interestingly, going for more. If rap’s literal value was not in the focus, there percolated an idea that it was a new art form, which fueled an interest in positing it in the art system (see e.g. Shusterman 1992.) Gladney Marvin (1995) explained rap as being an offspring of the Harlem Renaissance and desired to find economic support for it.16

Rap’s strength is that ‘anyone can sing’, as the aesthetically democratic wing of musicology keeps repeating, and developing this, even more so, anyone can rap. Rapping is a skill that takes time to develop if one wants to do it well, but if one can speak – there is rap even in sign language for the hearing impaired – it is relatively easy to produce a decent rap piece even with the help of the cheapest digital equipment available. And, as talk and music, also battling, have existed in many ways all over the world. A Finnish (east Karelian) version of this is the trochaic tetrameter battle between Väinämöinen and Joukahainen, where Väinämöinen, with his mighty wisdom, sings Joukahainen into the mire. (This is one story that
became packaged into being a ‘Beowulf’ or an ‘Iliad’ by Elias Lönnrot, who collected and edited the *Kalevala*.) But, of course, one can and should think even more of Chinese and Japanese poetry competitions.

But, from Kashmir to Chile, from Russia to Greenland, whether people want independence, action against brutal capitalism, or feminist development – rap music is always there. Political artists have celebrated their work in the highbrow for decades, but they do not reach the masses. The Estonian singing revolution brought together people in a fight against socialist totalitarianism to sing cheesy *schlagers* (they definitely did not sing Brecht-Weil). And everywhere rappers rhyme against both imagined (many are middle class and privileged, and only fantasize about being ‘street credible’) and true oppressions, and often in a personal tone, that I have chosen, naturally, to at least partly accompany my trip into the music too. And as this aesthetic culture has something of a political history already stemming from the early days of rap’s development in New York, it is not a big leap for a political ‘big mouth’ to turn the turntables on and start to rhyme in rhythm. Dr. Dre’s career started *immediately* when he gained his first turntable and a mic, and could start DJing outside his house in his early teens.  

Since its birth, rap has been also very philosophical. But although many Western philosophers are tempted to merge philosophy and ‘highbrow’ literature, we have not yet seen much on the philosophical worth/nature of rap (or otherwise, in a broader sense, of popular culture.) This is where I would like to turn into a ‘Dabashi’ and throw the records on the table of the academic clerk.

I am not the first to do that, of course. Richard Shusterman became (in)famous at the turn of the 1990s for his pioneering work on the aesthetics of rap music. Shusterman showed how one could not dismiss rap if one was an advocate of postmodernist art as rap fulfilled all the main criteria from irony to recycling material. His analysis of the lyrics of Stetsasonic and Gang Starr’s Guru took rap seriously as written art, and, interestingly – this shows rap’s
affinity with punk, and its zines – Shusterman also published his groundbreaking theoretical ideas in the Philadelphia-based JOR – The Journal of Rap Music, a non-academic but intellectual quarterly edited by ex-Panther George Ware, where Chuck D from Public Enemy also wrote a column.  

Looking at it now, it is interesting that rap became to some extent analyzed as vernacular poetry, but not vernacular philosophy, which would have been a typical take for the pragmatist philosophy of the 1990s that often attempted to find itself embedded in the world. Shusterman noted, though, that rap’s way of working shared similarities with, e.g., Nelson Goodman’s pragmatist philosophy, but this analysis focused more on the technical aspects of rap music, which at the time – now cut-and-paste and technical recycling are crucial for our everyday lives – must have felt really new.

Jack Halberstam’s idea of ‘low theory’ is a more elaborate take on vernacular philosophy and critical theory. Borrowed from Stuart Hall, who always desired to use theory pragmatically, and for whom ‘(t)heory’ was ‘a detour on the road to somewhere more important,’ as he nailed it in his essay Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities, in Halberstam’s hands the concept claims the need to theorize in a different way in differing contexts, and raises the question of the value of more pragmatic and stylistically low ways of theorizing. Halberstam nails it in an interview:

We need different kinds of theories for different critical projects, and while we might need high theory to decode and disarm the culture industry, we need low theory to criticize people who are jaded, tired, notice-hardened… who don’t think anything can be different. You can’t really get to those people through a very high set of cultural agendas. We need to have an exchange of knowledge, not just this idea of knowledge transfer.
Of course, one can find here affinities with Boaventura de Sousa Santo’s ideas on the epistemologies of the south, and the idea of different ways of knowing (‘epistemologies’)\textsuperscript{24}, that the educated Westerner at least one day has to somehow recognize, if s/he wants to understand the world better – but still little is found on vernacular theory. We are clearly lacking a healthy connection from academic theory to the theory practices of the subalterns and others who simply do not share the discourses of the educated upper and middle classes, as one can see, e.g., in Didier Eribon’s \textit{Returning to Reims}, where the philosopher wakes up after decades in the intellectual circles in Paris, and realizes that he did not bring anything with him from his poor working class background in Reims, and that he had actually been hiding his working class background for half of his life, and using its potentials for nothing. The exchange is zero, and he starts to build a bridge through the book, bringing in tacit knowledge and a new understanding to his societal thinking.\textsuperscript{25}

Could you imagine anyone coming from critical rap music and not being able to bring forth his/her earlier learnings in the academy? With a tradition that emphasizes its representants, e.g., as professors (besides Public Enemy’s Professor Griff, see, e.g., Large Professor, the founder of the underground group Main Source\textsuperscript{26}) and where one of the personal originators of the music, Grandmaster Flash, already called himself a ‘scientist’ of scratching, there is even more to say: It has been a challenge for the academic community, and one not much answered.

Interestingly, and maybe logically here, vernacular theory, as a concept, makes one of its few appearances in Henry Louis Gates Jr’s \textit{The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism}, where the language games that were brought from Africa to America (mentioned earlier in this article in connection with the prehistory of rap) from dozens to signifying, games filled with double-signification and tricky street poetics, are in themselves vernacular theory\textsuperscript{27}. Seeing ‘black vernacular’\textsuperscript{28} as something related to Derrida’s
use of language was a pioneering theoretical approach to everyday language. What Toop sees as a base for poetics is for Gates Jr also a base for some sort of theoretical practice, although the theory-side is little elaborated in the work. But still, the idea is there.

Here it is important to note that rap is not everyday culture in the sense that as producing art or making philosophy, it steps out from the everyday. This is not to say that some of the language games that made up some of rap’s history could not be also have been part of the everyday, but to emphasize that rap is a more systematized mode of production, aiming at publishing or reaching out to people in a way that also intensifies experience. It is good to note that for someone who, for example, has neither instruments nor access to writing/publishing essays, rap might also be the easiest way to access both vernacular philosophical publishing and artistic publishing.

Neither can we concentrate only on diasporas to America, as we are talking here about the nature of rap globally. As much as talking, rhyming and making noise have happened in different ways from the religious recitals of the Indian continent to the rhyme competitions of Karelia, the mix of different backgrounds (James Brown, Jamaican dub, African-American poetry, etc.) that gained maturity and a minimalist, technologically driven (breakbeats, scratching, etc.) form in Bronx NY, have become something that is in use everywhere in the world, where it often mixes with local traditions of ‘rapping’. Of course, this also often happens in weird multi-faceted neo-colonial ways. What was once counter culture in New York came to Latvia or Greece through multinational, force-feeding record industries that subordinated the locals to this new form of ‘Americana’. Many of the ways that, e.g., rappers all around the world, mime African-American gestures can be just as much about a sad form of cultural appropriation (sometimes this brings to mind even blackfacing) as they are simply a way of coping with American cultural impact. But still, everywhere, when you include the local rappers, many of them are societal critics too, and there are always a couple of them – this you
seldom find in the field of schlagers or disco (in metal you find vegan activists etc.) – who have gained a reputation for arguing for societal change to the extent that they have produced clashes or impact through their followers.

Critical perspectives open references to others’ work and argumentative speech define a great deal of rap to the extent that we can forget the question of whether all this could not have had to do with any form of popular music. I can see this in my own history too. I played guitar (remaining forever at the amateur stage) and played some music with my friends. I played schlagers with local Roma and I played rock music, and even punk in my band Lekamestarin kliimax [The Climax of the Sledgehammer Master] – but never did I turn to argumentation and critical inquiry except for a short period when we made rap music with an 8-track recorder. I immediately called myself attorney general, and told the (non-existent) listeners what I wanted them to do with society. Every object can possibly rise philosophical questions and all kinds of music can include societal discourse, but if (often obscure) philosophical reflection and speculation are typical for Western highbrow poetry, straightforward argumentation and political discourse are central for rap. One classical example is Public Enemy’s Nightrain, from the 1991 Apocalypse 1991... The Enemy Strikes Back, where the protagonist of the story starts by making clear his complicated racialized position in the US and some of its consequences: Land of the free / But the skin I’m in identifies me / So the people around me / Energize me. Then he goes on to explain his fear of criminals in the night train (obviously on the way to an African American borough), where everyone else actually “look(s) the same” and “some of them look just like you”. The nighttrain becomes an allegory of discrimination (“(t)he black thing is a ride I call the nighttrain”). The lyrics also rise a critical note on desperate (poor) Northern American black people stealing from each other (it is not hard to guess that the group would rather find them somehow (probably not through stealing though) targeting the people who historically stole their right to accumulate property),
and urge for more solidarity. It is uncommon to find such straightforward political discourse in other musical genres. And still today, famous rap media are inherently political, like the most global of them all, Chuck D’s *Planet Earth, Planet Rap* (today run by Mikko Kapanen and Amkelwa Mbekeni) which has always been very global in its approach, and also very much focused on politics and critical thinking. In what other popular music genre would it make sense that Signmark, the hearing impaired rapper, could become so famous?³⁰

In addition, painters recognize vernacular graffiti, even classical composers recognize rap as music (although they would hate it) and professional dancers understand street dance as dance, but what is wrong with philosophers and critical theorists? Should there be no vernacular version? Probably the main argument against it would be how then to define it? The same problem seems not to haunt music, dance and image-making, but when I say that rap is vernacular critical theory, or political philosophy, someone always says, what does it mean?

The bridge is maybe historically easiest to build through the way theorists have used literature as a nest of theoretical ideas (back to Dabashi, so to speak: We really need to loop back to him here) although when thinking about rap, Friedrich Hölderlin (Heidegger) and Karl Kraus (Adorno) look helplessly academic. Still, in this way one can see a dialogue between writers and philosophers, the writers more just coining poetically philosophical ideas and philosophers finding new ideas in their obscure or multi-faceted expressions. Maybe one still needs to think also of Noam Chomsky’s way of assessing both scientific and polemic text, or we might need to remind ourselves about the essayist and/or column-driven work of Umberto Eco and Susan Sontag. Another way to go would be to read the very straightforward small personal texts by bell hooks (who has criticized the way middle class white liberals in the US perform cultural openness through their uncritical listening to rap music³¹). But these too are all very academic, in a way that does not, in the end, speak enough for rap music. Like
‘other epistemologies’ (de Sousa Santos) rap is about ‘other theoretical traditions’, in the
fashion of ‘Asian philosophies’.

Of course, even Asian philosophies are often attacked by Western philosophers. Even Crispin Sartwell, who has otherwise worked in a globally sensitive manner, claims that
[in] subcontinental Indian, many African, and many Native American cultures […] there is not only no distinction between the practical and the aesthetic; there is no distinction between art, philosophy, and religion. In one sense, for example, the Indian tradition in philosophy is both the most ancient and the most elaborate in the world. In another sense, however, there is no INDIAN PHILOSOPHY, at least until very recently; virtually all Indian thought, including reflections on what we call their art, are in the service of religion.32

How come then we have Thomas of Aquinas in our philosophy books? Religion is definitely not the difference. If one thinks of more contemporary writing, and writing related to our problematics of rap, philosophers have also followed ideals and value systems in a quasi-religious way. Think of all the Marxist and post-Marxist theorists who sometimes really ‘believe’ in Marx, without reflecting critically on his work.33 Content-wise and methodologically, the Indian tradition is easy to approach if one has any background in, e.g., German philosophy, and if one is willing to do the basic work of studying the concepts and the main metaphysics. I would say that it is less work for most Westerners than becoming a connoisseur of Heidegger. One could enter a debate on the criteria for what in the end could count as philosophy, but certainly, this is not a question we face when philosophers cross the line to literature in Western philosophy.

Argumentative discourse is anyway something that binds the world of rap together, the kind of discourse that has made it easier for rappers to turn their voice to be also heard in the text-driven intellectual community. In what other form of popular music would it
be natural that someone who is known in the mainstream, such as Arivu, of Tamil Nadu, would also be a part of a group called the Casteless Collective – in India? Rappers have created quite a few anthems for social change, with one of the latest victorious ones being *A Rapist in Your Path* [Un violador en tu camino] from performance collective Las Tesis, which is often performed in Latin America in demonstrations against male supremacy. Here it is good to also recall that Chile has an incredibly strong feminist rap scene. When one searches the internet for political art in Kashmir, one comes upon, e.g., the rappers Aamir Ame and Illahi. Choices of language, with a political reach, have in the same way been at the core of rap activity. When one dives into the rich rap world of South Africa, one is greeted by Driemanskap’s *Camagu* – ‘welcome’ in creole prison slang – and when one drives north from the culturally Europeanized Helsinki city area of today, and enters the area into which the new inhabitants have pushed the Lapps, Áilu Valle, who started rapping in Finnish, raps in the Sámi language to make a point with his choice rather than reach broader audiences with the lyrics.

The fantastic thing about rap is that virtually anyone can perform it, as I have already pointed out. Of course, everybody can sing too – I love the idea – but rap is even more low threshold because of its technical easiness. I have not sung myself but I have made rap, and I know the difference. Rapping is, of course, a skill that takes time to develop if one wants to do it well, but if one can speak it is relatively easy to produce a decent rap piece even with the help of the cheapest digital equipment available. Nor is rap sentimental, which typically takes away some of the edge of political discourse in many forms of popular music (I have nothing against lamenting as such, but we do not lament in philosophy or in critical theory, unless some of Adorno’s most depressed texts are taken as an example). If one compares rap to punk, the latter is less argumentative and somehow more Dadaist, although many similarities are obvious.
The (proudly) brown Finnish rapper Yeboyah raps in her Eloena (which refers to a classical Finnish porridge brand with a blond Heimat-type of a ‘Finnish’ woman on the cover) ‘en kaipaa materiaa/mut tarviin pääomaa,’ [I don’t long for ‘material’ (culture) but I need capital,] and addresses herself as a child of nature [luonnonlapsi] with iconical ‘Finnish countryside’ images in the background of the video. One can come up with many similar images in popular music, and many lyrics from here and there, but in a way this attitude of political statements and straightforward political claims, desires, checks and expressions is the DNA of the whole practice. A schlager tune of this type would be revolutionary, and somehow even weird – a little like some of k.d. lang’s early shock country aesthetics that both ‘pimped’ and challenged the genre of country music.

Neither is it always the ‘subaltern’ that raps. Many rappers have their starting points in universities – like Chuck D in Adelphi, Talib Kweli in NYU and Guru in Morehouse College. MC Solaar rapped in a politically engaged way about the work of Umberto Eco and Jacques Derrida in the 1990s. Today, for example, PastoriPike, a Finnish rapper with roots in the Congo, salutes the (relatively) theoretical Brown Girls movement (Aito G, 2017) – and Princess Nokia rhymes about bell hooks (Tomboy, 2016.) No other genre of popular music can come up with this kind of a history regarding philosophy and critical theory. One also finds political rap everywhere, made by all kinds of people – from Uganda to Chile, from Russia to Greenland. Back to basics: whether people want independence, action against brutal capitalism, or feminist development – rap music is always there. Political artists have celebrated their work in the highbrow for decades, but they do not reach the masses – with their readings of Marx in their biennials and gallery events where radical issues are put on the table, and then people go back to their middle and upper class homes to read and have a glass of fancy wine. Rap musicians do. They reach. And I hope I have somehow been able to show that this is both an already relatively long popular culture tradition with even longer cultural roots, and that there
is no reason not to think of it as vernacular theory – and besides, not forgetting this: its nature as oral poetry and literature.

At least rap’s obvious role as *the* vernacular critical theory of popular music is obvious, and it will probably remain uncontested. It is a challenge to help philosophers and critical theorists to see it more, in the way they see Bataille’s literature as philosophical or the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) of Marx and Engels as theoretical.

I also share Dabashi’s interest, which I mentioned in the beginning, but I just want to make it broader – besides rap battling against his simplified ideas of the philosophical and cultural scene of ‘Europe’ and the ‘West’. How come there are so many obstacles between vernacular critical theory and academic critical theory? (Of course, everywhere in the world, those who philosophize or make art in the upper class, have been reluctant to accept the philosophies and aesthetic cultures of the lower classes.) It is not just about margins of theory, i.e. theoreticians that start from the margins (as curators or dissidents, like Nicolas Bourriaud or Boris Groys.\(^{41}\)) It is as if there would be no basic level critical theory, but just the super-systematized one that we usually call critical theory. The whole idea is crazy. And rap could be an example of it, one that helps us in the end to grab the whole issue of vernacular theory – as there is plenty of it today, everywhere, in the margins (I am of course not discussing much that is mainstream here) and in every possible language. *To go further on this path, one would of course need to complete the analysis by analyzing rap lyrics in depth, but that is out of the scope of this article, which should be considered inaugural by its very nature.*
2 Dabashi, Can Non-Europeans Think?”, 59.
6 Most philosophical thinkers where I roam would be almost totally marinated in the Eurocentrism that Finland was force-fed by the ‘conquistadores’ who did not let Finns use their own language in universities until the 1930s (I am actually partly descended from this Swedish-language minority.) But most people here have in fact forgotten this complex history and are happy about their (relatively fresh) ‘whiteness’, and their European identity (although even in the 1990s we still used to say that we travelled to Europe when we flew to Germany) and prosperity, and most of them – this can of course have a positive impact politically – have swiftly even adopted the white man’s burden, although Finland did not have colonies and the Finns themselves were long racially debased. Of course, Finland, with all its prosperity, gains much from global capitalism, so why not, in the end? But history as history, facts as facts.

9 We are, more often than people realize, talking about a she.
15 See Halil Altindere’s presentation e.g. at the webpages of the MoMA: https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/halil-altindere-wonderland-2013/.
17 Ronin Ro, Dr. Dre: The Biography (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press), 4-5.
25 Didier Eribon, Returning to Reims (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

28 Ibid., 53.


33 Lucien Goldman’s lifework is pretty much, I think, about this view.


35 Thank you Amkelwa Bkeni and Mikko Kapanen for introducing the group to me.


I have here made two small additions (and two small correction, also some added words) to the article. All new text that I have added, has been colored blue, both here in the report and in the article text.

1

After mentioning the Rinkeby township of Stockholm (page 4 in the original manuscript), I added of my childhood as this was actually for some lost during the language revision of the text, I think. It now says: "e.g. the infamous Rinkeby of my childhood".

2

I took away, from the paragraph (on page 17 in the original manuscript) starting with “At least rap’s…”, the end “(for me it is theoretical ‘noise music’.

Then to the reviews:

Reviewer #1: The article is very good. There is no clear reference to the opposition between East Coast Rap and West Coast Rap (Gangsta Rap): Mark Fisher in Capitalist realism speaks about social dialectic of Gangsta Rap. It is no necessary integrating the article with this reference, it is only an advice to author.

Reviewer #2: There are some repetition in the argumentation (cfr. p. 8: "Rapping is a skill that takes time to develop if one wants to do it well, but if one can speak - there is rap even in sign language for the hearing impaired - it is relatively easy to produce a decent rap piece even with the help of the cheapest digital equipment available" and p. 15:"Rapping is, of course, a skill that takes time to develop if one wants to do it well, but if one can speak it is relatively easy to produce a decent rap piece even with the help of the cheapest digital equipment available"), which I wold reformulate (and maybe further develop) or delete. The overarching argument is sometime too vague, since the paper doesn’t really fully explain on what precisely the philosophical content (which N.B. is different from mere philosophical interest, since every object can possibly rise philosophical questions) of rap music should lie, nor does it exposes this content through the analysis of specific rap-music pieces. I would underline and explicitly acknowledge the inaugural character of the paper, which needs to be completed by further analysis.
Every object can possibly rise philosophical questions and all kinds of music can include societal discourse, but if (often obscure) philosophical reflection and speculation are typical for Western highbrow poetry, straightforward argumentation and political discourse are central for rap. One classical example is Public Enemy’s *Nightrain*, from the 1991 *Apocalypse 1991... The Enemy Strikes Back*, where the protagonist of the story starts by making clear his complicated racialized position in the US and some of its consequences: *Land of the free / But the skin I’m in identifies me / So the people around me / Energize me.* Then he goes on to explain his fear of criminals in the night train (obviously on the way to an African American borough), where everyone else actually “look(s) the same” and “some of them look just like you”. The nighttrain becomes an allegory of discrimination “(t)he black thing is a ride I call the nighttrain”). The lyrics also rise a critical note on desperate (poor) Northern American black people stealing from each other (it is not hard to guess that the group would rather find them somehow (probably not through stealing though) targeting the people who historically stole their right to accumulate property), and urge for more solidarity. It is uncommon to find such straightforward political discourse in other musical genres.