IASPM JOURNAL
ISSN 2079 - 3871

# Ethnography and Researcher Positionality – Reflections on Feminist Fieldwork in Hip Hop Scenes in Sweden and Finland

Inka Rantakallio
University of Helsinki
*inka.rantakallio@gmail.com*

Andrea Dankić
Umeå University
*andrea.dankic@gmail.com*

## Abstract

In our article, we reflect on our respective ethnographic projects in Sweden and Finland among feminist women, girls, and non-binary people who are hip hop practitioners and/or artists. We focus on the intersectional analysis of our situatedness as white women scholars, reflecting on how our various identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences, such as being a DJ or "hip hop head," affected our work in these specific contexts and hence also our knowledge production. In addition to feminist ethnography and critical race and whiteness studies as theoretical-methodological points of departure, we follow hip hop feminist principles outlined by Black women scholars such Gwendolyn D. Pough (2007: vii) as we "complicate understandings of hip-hop as a male space by including and identifying the women [...] involved with the culture," and connect "personal narratives with theoretical underpinnings and critique."

KEYWORDS: ethnography, feminism, gender, hip hop, intersectionality, race

## Introduction

Ethnography has had a significant role in the interdisciplinary field of hip hop studies (see for example Schloss 2004; Morgan 2009; Koutsougera 2023). This is largely due to the epistemological concerns shared by many researchers that knowledge should be built in close connection with hip hop practitioners. In this article, we discuss our respective ethnographic fieldworks in the hip hop scenes of Sweden (in the 2010s) and Finland (in the 2020s) and the role of feminism, women, gender, race, and whiteness in those scenes. We focus on the intersectional analysis of our situatedness as white (1) women scholars, reflecting on how our various identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences, such as being a DJ or "hip hop head," affected our work in these specific contexts. Further, we apply feminist theory and critical race and whiteness studies as theoretical-methodological points of departure for our analysis and discussion.

Hip hop culture developed in the 1970s in the Bronx and other New York City boroughs, when working-class Afro-Caribbean, African American, Latinx, and other youth of color channeled their frustration with the abysmal post-industrial societal conditions into this creative form of self-expression which came to comprise DJing, rap, graffiti, and (break)dance (Rose 1994). Today, they are called the four elements. Through its so-called fifth element, knowledge, hip hop has historically converged at the intersection of anti-racist, Afrocentric, and street conscious epistemologies, spirituality, and critical self-understanding shaped by socio-political conditions (Gosa 2015).

Global hip hop studies view hip hop as a transnational culture which merges elements of US hip hop with local cultures (Nitzsche 2013: 15). This relationship between the "global" and the "local" results in translocal practices and communities which can be understood as "glocal" (see Alim 2009: 107).

The consistent devaluation of women's skills and contributions to hip hop culture (Rose 1994: 151; Lindsey 2015: 53; Rantakallio 2021) is connected to cultures' and societies' patriarchal values and structures (Rose 2008: 118–119). The invisibility of women in hip hop is prevalent across various contexts, including Sweden and Finland.

Localized hip hop subcultures developed in the 1980s in Sweden (Strage 2001) and in Finland (Sykäri et al. 2019). By the 2010s, rap music had become a self-evident part of popular culture in both countries, exemplified by rappers appearing in prime-time television and performing at large arenas. Rap has been male dominated in both Sweden and in Finland, but race and whiteness have had slightly different meanings.

Historical accounts have emphasized ethnicity and race as important factors among Swedish male (mixed race) youth who used hip hop as a creative practice to negotiate identity processes and representation (Dankić 2019: 67–68; Strage 2001). In contemporary multiethnic and multiracial Sweden, Swedishness is still closely connected to whiteness. Swedes have historically been viewed as an ideal example of the imagined Nordic race, "being the whitest of all whites, and as a consequence, the very elite of humankind itself" (Lundström and Hübinette 2023: 15). This in turn informs the relationship between race and ethnicity as well as

hegemonic whiteness in a Swedish context – to be considered a Swede, one has to be considered white (Hübinette and Lundström 2014: 426).

Finnish rap has been dominated by white male artists which arguably mirrors Finland's contested racial homogeneity as white (Rantakallio 2023). Finland has historically been under the rule of two colonial powers, Sweden and Russia, and Finns were not considered part of the white Nordic race; thus, Finns actively strived to achieve this privileged "Western" identity in the early 20th century (Keskinen 2019: 171–174). Finnishness and whiteness have in recent history been portrayed as synonymous (Hoegaerts et al. 2022: 6), while the indigenous Sámi and the Roma have lived in Finland for centuries (Hoegaerts et al. 2022: 4–6; Keskinen 2019: 172–173) and the number of Black African and Middle Eastern immigrants has increased in the past three decades (Kelekay 2022: 20–21). In the 2010s, more rappers of color entered the Finnish scene, challenging the white male norm (Kelekay 2022; Westinen 2023; Rantakallio 2023).

Although the invisibility of girls and women characterizes the historical accounts of Swedish hip hop (Dankić 2019: 68) as well as Finnish hip hop (Rantakallio 2021), women and girls have always been a part of these scenes. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Swedish artists Leila K and Neneh Cherry were international pop stars but their status as also the first Swedish rap stars is generally not mentioned in Swedish hip hop history (Dankić 2019: 65–69). In the 2010s, an example of commercial Swedish hip hop's political awareness was a wave of feminist and anti-racist activism represented by women rappers such as Cleo, a founding member of the feminist music collective Femtastic discussed also in this article. Silvana Imam, who came to personify an intersectionally feminist, anti-racist, queer Swedish rapper in Sweden as well as in other Nordic countries like Finland, highlighted sexuality, ethnicity, race, and gender in Swedish hip hop. In Finland, women and non-binary artists have formed networks for making and performing rap. In the mid-2000s, Femcees Finland was a pioneering network. Examples from the 2010s include NiceRap (Facebook group) and the 2018–19 showcase of two DJs and seven artists, D.R.E.A.M.G.I.R.L.S. (Rantakallio 2021; 2023.) More recently in the 2020s, the award-winning collective Bämä has challenged heterosexism in Finnish rap. Thus far, only two (white) women have reached mainstream success: Sini Sabotage in the early 2010s, and Etta in the 2020s. (2)

Ethnographic research on Swedish hip hop culture and rap music has focused on identity formation (Sernhede 2002) and the analysis of creative processes (Dankić 2019) while Finnish hip hop research has included ethnography among rappers (Sykäri 2014) and graffiti artists (Fransberg 2021). With our article, we contribute particularly to methodological discussions about ethnography and autoethnography in hip hop.

In what follows, we first present the theoretical-methodological framework and how feminist theory, and critical race and whiteness studies have informed the methodological discussion in this article. After our respective accounts of conducting fieldwork in hip hop scenes in Sweden and Finland, we conclude with an analytical summary in which we discuss how our multiple identities and experiences shaped the production of ethnographic knowledge.

## Theoretical-methodological framework

This article is theoretically informed by feminist hip hop studies, feminist ethnography, and critical race and whiteness studies. Similarly to music research in general, within hip hop studies there are fewer studies on women who engage with the culture than on men (Lindsey 2015: 54; Rantakallio 2021). Our work addresses the gender imbalance of the field and genre; following hip hop feminist principles outlined by Black women scholars such Gwendolyn D. Pough (2007: vii), we aim to "complicate understandings of hip-hop as a male space by including and identifying the women [...] involved with the culture," and to connect "personal narratives with theoretical underpinnings and critique".

Hip hop feminism as a theoretical approach was first coined by Joan Morgan (1999) to address the contradictions and pleasures of being a Black feminist woman in the hypermasculine hip hop culture. While hip hop feminism is part of the legacy of Black feminism and centers the voices of Black women and women of color, there exist different types of feminist approaches in global hip hop studies today. Non-Black researchers are also working under the umbrella of feminist hip hop studies from intersectional and queer perspectives, for example (see Pabón-Colón 2018; Withers 2021; Koutsougera 2023). In this article, we aim to contribute to this larger field which we call feminist hip hop studies by drawing from pioneering Black hip hop feminist knowledge while also critically and intersectionally reflecting on our research and positionality as white feminist scholars. Intersectionality theory highlights how different systems of power work together to produce intersecting identity categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Collins and Bilge 2016). We adopt this framework to reflect on our respective feminist ethnographies and further illustrate the role of theory in ethnographic research.

There is no uniform definition for feminist ethnography except for being informed by feminist theory (Skeggs 2001; Davis and Craven 2020: 283–284). We situate our work in this field, as the role of women and gender in hip hop in addition to how the culture's masculine norms produce inequality have been the underlying focus in our respective projects. Furthermore, our roles as women scholars doing ethnography became central to the overall analysis: reflexivity is common in ethnographic research, and in this article, we also analyze our positionality and situated knowledge that goes beyond listing our identities (see Davis and Craven 2020: 286). Reflexivity is a key aspect of anthropological and sociological research, and it is also at the heart of feminist epistemology, where looking critically and analytically at the research process and research setting is used to produce understanding about gender relations more generally (Fonow and Cook 1991: 2). Fonow and Cook (1991: 4) note that there is reflexivity in feminist methodology "through its emphasis on collaboration between women researchers." Thus, our coauthorship also reflects this overall approach. We have known each other professionally for over a decade; we became friends over the course of attending hip hop focused academic conferences and seminars while conducting our respective doctoral projects (Andrea's in ethnology, Inka's in musicology).

Anderson (2006: 382) argues that "reflexivity involves an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants." Ethnography

has traditionally "focused outward, on understanding and making understandable to others a social world beyond themselves" (ibid.) and thus renders the ethnographer nearly invisible. Autoethnographers, on the other hand, place themselves at the center of events while analyzing the broader social setting, that is, make themselves visible in their writing by combining a personal and a scientific perspective in analysis, and pay attention to how they not only affect but are affected by the people, events, and setting of their fieldwork (Anderson 2006: 382–383; Ettorre 2017: 2). As such, autoethnography shares epistemological concerns with feminist ethnography (Ettorre 2017: 4).

Since the 1990s, critical race theory has analyzed the functions and societal consequences of white supremacy and racial hierarchies (Crenshaw et al. 1995) and generated the field of critical whiteness studies (Frankenberg 1993; Dyer 1997). Critical race and whiteness studies have since progressed greatly and now include an international perspective that complements the originally Anglo-Saxon one (Andreassen et al. 2023). We draw particularly from critical whiteness studies in discussing the often unmarked standpoint of whiteness in the Swedish and Finnish contexts.

Hurtado and Stewart (2004: 328) argue that "[i]n progressive scholarship where the goal is to dismantle oppression, social location is crucial in determining our research methods." For this reason, we not only analyze our own positionalities but also choices in our respective studies which arguably highlight the agency of women practitioners. Beverly Skeggs (2001: 437) argues that feminist ethnography "is always informed by feminist ethics"; also in this article various questions of ethics are central. Masking both places and study participants is a common approach to ethics in ethnography but often results in making the embedded power relations less visible (Guenther 2009). Andrea was unsure about taking this approach to research ethics because she was conducting an ethnographic study of creative hip hop music-making processes during a period when hip hop was simultaneously a part of mainstream Swedish popular culture and interwoven with feminist and anti-racist political movements. Including participants' first names along with their artist names in the study enabled the analysis of power structures such as gender and race (see Guenther 2009: 418). Another important argument for using the participants' real names was fighting the invisibility of women in music; doing so enabled the writing of a historical account of creative processes and industries in a specific time and place.

Similarly for Inka, fighting the invisibility of women was a central motivation for the study. The participants (see more below) in her research project were all artists with public careers, thus anonymizing them was impossible when the research also included analysis of live performances, music videos, and records. Further, including the participants' names reflects a feminist research aim to highlight mutual knowledge production and relationality (Schultz 2017: 507).

## Nostalgic sentiments and belonging/non-belonging: female researcher and "hip hop head" of refugee background

My (Andrea's) doctoral project focused on music making processes in Swedish hip hop during the first half of the 2010s (Dankić 2019; forthcoming 2025). I focus on

ethnographic fieldwork conducted at three music camps for girls and young women during 2013–2014. The fact that my fieldwork was conducted more than a decade ago, I argue, is a determining factor and prerequisite for the analytical discussion below. This distance allows me to reflect on my fieldwork in new ways not possible back then. Time is also relevant in terms of the nostalgia I experienced while conducting the fieldwork and which I discuss in this section. These two examples of the role of time illustrate how "past, present, and future are created and re-created together" (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 180) in ethnographic research.

The fieldwork consisted of qualitative semi-structured interviews with the camp participants and leaders as well as observation of various kinds. The camps were organized by Femtastic, a Swedish feminist music collective for women creatives and practitioners in hip hop, r&b, reggae, and other related genres, and Popkollo, an organization that aims to get more girls and women involved in music making to fight the dominance of men in the music industry. A couple of years after my fieldwork, non-binary and trans youth were added to Popkollo's target group.

Two of the camps lasted for four days and took place in a suburb of Stockholm during the school spring break in February 2013 and 2014. The third camp lasted for nine days and took place during July 2013 in Hultsfred, a small town in southern Sweden known for a music festival. I conducted participant observation among the participants at the Stockholm camp in February 2013, while at the other two camps, I focused mainly on observing activities without participating myself. The camp leaders were women rappers Cleo and Silvana Imam, DJ NeyNey, and male rapper Mofeta, who were all in their late twenties at the time.

My first participant observation among the camp participants included being assigned a working group. We took part in various practices and processes such as writing lyrics, selecting a beat, stage presence, and workshops in beat-making, rhyming and rapping. I also wrote my own rap lyrics and performed them at the final evening concert in front of the participants' families.

During my fieldwork, I pondered several interrelated questions concerning reflexivity. What is the impact of my positionality as a researcher? What about my personality and personal history, who I am as an individual? How do these questions manifest in relation to this specific research topic? Also, "does [sic] researcher's gender affect reflexivity more when one studies gender-related issues?" (Berger 2015: 231). Most central for the dynamics of my fieldwork and reflexivity were age, gender, ethnicity, class, and race – all intertwined with my own experiences with music and dreams of becoming a musician. Below, I discuss how these categories informed my feelings of nostalgia and belonging/non-belonging as important aspects of reflexivity in my fieldwork.

The intersection of age and gender significantly shaped the production of ethnographic knowledge. At the age of twenty-nine, I was around the same age as the camp leaders. Even though some of the camp participants were around twenty years old, the majority were fourteen to sixteen years old. Upon arrival at the first hip hop camp, I felt excited and nervous. The focus of the camps resonated with my own identity in several ways. I was a woman, and a "hip hop head", who shared the same feminist values as the camp organizers, leaders and participants. The term "hip hop head" is often used by members of the global hip hop community and culture(s) to refer to themselves based on an understanding of hip hop culture as

"an identity, a worldview, and a way of life" (Morgan and Bennett 2011: 177). While I wouldn't call myself a musician, during my upbringing I had performed songs by my favorite artists at many school graduations. This entailed mainly singing and as I got older, I started to rap as well. As the years went by, I would pinpoint the lack of a social network with other aspiring musicians as the reason why my teenage dream of becoming a performing artist – preferably a rapper – never became reality. Suddenly, here I was almost fifteen years later in the role of a PhD candidate studying the creative process and social setting of musicmaking.

My field notes from the first camp include repetitive descriptions of negative feelings about my own (in)abilities to take part in assigned practices. I struggled with writing song lyrics and finding the appropriate rhythm when rapping to the beats ("the marriage between the beat and the lyrics" as it was called at the camp). Some beats were assigned to the participants while others could be chosen from a selection. I also found it very difficult to remember the lyrics during the final performance at the end of the camp, resulting in forgetting most of my verse (I "choked"). In my field notes, these difficulties were mentioned numerous times in relation to my teenage self: "I constantly reminded myself of my own inexperience and ignorance, resulting in feelings of anxiety for giving up on a potential rap career at the age of sixteen" (3). Age became relevant also in my relationship with the participants, many of whom assumed I was much younger. One such incident was a sixteen-year-old camp participant reacting to my age: "NO WAY! (laughs) You ARE seventeen!".

These dynamics of gender and age which also evoked memories of my teenage dreams can be understood through Maki Motapanyane's (2013: 12) idea of nostalgic expressions as a melancholic longing. By revisiting and examining the nostalgic sentiments that I felt as a researcher about an imagined past of being a rapper, I am striving to create "the thoughtful transparency that feminist self-reflexivity encourages" (Motapanyane 2013: 13).

My nostalgic sentiments were also connected to ethnicity and race. Based on my field notes and the information I have about the camp participants and leaders, most of them were white Swedes, and the rest non-white Swedes. By Swede, I denote someone who is a part of Swedish society through being born and raised there, through having Swedish citizenship, and/or through living there. However, I never asked how the participants self-identify in relation to race and ethnicity because at the time, I did not consider race and ethnicity as central to my PhD research. My initial aim was *not to* focus on ethnicity because I deemed that some of the previous Swedish and Nordic hip hop scholarship had placed too much emphasis on it. Rather, I wanted practical music-making to guide my research. Connected to this, the first years of my PhD research were informed by the prevailing ideology of color-blindness in Sweden and other Nordic countries, where this ideology has resulted in "a silence around race and racial privilege" (Andreassen and Myong 2017: 97). However, after I conducted my fieldwork, it became clear that power relations such as ethnicity are relevant for my project, and intersectionality became an important theoretical tool. The fieldwork was conducted simultaneously as I was introduced to critical race and whiteness studies which during 2000s and 2010s

gained increased popularity among Swedish scholars interested in Swedish identity and whiteness (cf. Habel 2008; Hübinette and Lundström 2014).

In retrospect, my experiences participating in the music camps can be unpacked through hegemonic whiteness in Sweden, "a structure, an ideology and a system that includes antiracists as well as racists and whites as well as non-whites" (Hübinette and Lundström 2014: 426) but where white, ethnic Swedes are the norm. At the music camps, I navigated this Swedish whiteness and "passed as white" based on my skin color but also based on having lived in Sweden most of my life and speaking fluent Swedish – two other signifiers of Swedishness (Hübinette and Lundström 2023). However, the feeling of non-belonging was present a few times when the camp participants asked me "Where are you from?". This is an example of being racialized as non-white due to my thick curly dark brown hair and brown eyes, aspects of my body which are in conflict with the fair thin blonde hair and blue or green eyes included in the hegemonic whiteness in Sweden (Hübinette and Lundström 2014). My family and I fled from the 1990s Yugoslav wars to Sweden when I was eight years old.

In fact, my refugee background is difficult to separate from my initial interest in hip hop music that I credit to the globally successful US rap group The Fugees. It meant the world for my eleven-year-old self when I learned that the name Fugees was an abbreviation of "refugees." The storytelling within hip hop culture and music offered me positive representations of not only my traumatic experiences which remained unspoken of, but also a window into what it means to be human in modern society. Hence, I started to identify with the concept "hip hop head". My imagined past (becoming a rapper) and my actual past (dream of becoming a rapper) raised nostalgic sentiments in me during my fieldwork at the music camps, reminding me of growing up as a "hip hop head" with refugee background.

The concept of non-belonging enables an examination of the nation-state's role in how I as an individual with refugee experience was positioned in terms of ethnicity and race. Non-belonging is here understood as "fostered by bordering through state practices, and boundary formations through representation, with both being inscribed on bodies" (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2024: 294). My physical appearance and lived experience of being a member of Swedish society for most of my life enabled me to "pass" as a white Swede in some situations, while in others I was ascribed non-belonging, as exemplified above. The term "passing" here highlights how ethnicity is an important aspect of the hegemonic Swedish whiteness; in my daily life, I am often not ascribed Swedish ethnicity although this depends on time, place, and overall context.

This negotiation of belonging/non-belonging enabled me to relate to the group of girls that was identified as the primary target group by one of the organizers of the two Stockholm camps. These girls were described through stereotypical ideas of gender, race, ethnicity, class, place, and religion: "they are not allowed to have sleepovers due to cultural and religious beliefs," "their families do not have much money," and therefore "they really are those most in need of these camps!" These descriptions were mentioned as the reason for organizing these camps in the suburbs of Stockholm – associated with racialized residents of low socioeconomic status – where these girls lived according to the organizer.

This idea of the primary target group – a social position in my doctoral dissertation referred to as *förortstjej* ('hood girl', i.e., a girl located in a vulnerable area) – contrasted with the middle-class experiences expressed by several of the actual camp participants. The music camps were described by the participants as a continuation of their institutionalized music education, such as the School of Arts (offering leisure time courses and activities in arts and culture), acquired during their school years. Many lived in neighborhoods associated with high socioeconomic status. During a group discussion, one of the participants asked why hip hop shouldn't be for those like herself "who have parents with money."

Attending the music camps as a PhD student – a token of my upward mobility enabled by education – did not, however, help me relate to the camp participants' middle-class experiences. Rather, my working-class background along with the previously mentioned negotiation of Swedishness created a feeling of being an underdog. Relating more to this imagined target group instead of the middle-class participants resulted in ambivalent feelings towards my role as a researcher. What was my role in all this? What kind of research can be produced from this situated place? Growing up, the only institutionalized music education and instruments I came in contact with were the regular but rare music classes at school. During the analysis process of my empirical material, the various descriptions concerning the participants' assumed race, ethnicity, religion, and class struck me as highly problematic. I was surprised that the camp organizers were not aware of this considering their pro-feminist and anti-racist agenda.

## Being an outsider-within: white, queer, middle class, female researcher-DJ

In my (Inka's) postdoctoral project (2021–24), the focus was on Finnish feminist women and non-binary rappers, and how and what kinds of notions of feminism, gender, race, and whiteness are constructed in their artistry. Feminism was loosely defined as a pro-women and anti-oppression stance that includes an analysis of patriarchal or male-centered norms. All the artists also self-identify as feminists. The artists in my study were Adikia (as part of Matriarkaatti (4)), F, Pimeä Hedelmä (group), Rehtori, SiniMini, Slani, and Yeboyah. I interviewed them during 2022, and between November 2021 and February 2023, I conducted participant observation at their concerts and/or clubs. The artists were at that time between twenty-five and thirty-nine years old and had begun rapping in the 2010s. Two (Slani and Yeboyah) were Black, the rest were white; during each interview, I asked how the artists self-identify in terms of gender, ethnicity, and race. Apart from one artist, everyone lived in the capital region at the time, where the Finnish popular music industry is highly concentrated. Three were signed to major labels (Sony, Universal) and one to an independent label, whereas others were unsigned (independent). The research materials consisted of fieldwork diaries, interview transcripts, photographs and videos of the live shows, and music and music videos.

My work is informed by cultural and practical insights as well as tacit knowledge gained through working with practitioners. During 2018–2023, I was the live DJ for feminist rap duo SOFA. Through that work, I got to know most of the eight artists backstage at festivals and clubs where we were part of the same lineup. I have also worked as the live DJ on one or several occasions with all the artists except for

Rehtori, Slani, and SiniMini. I assumed that my interviewees knew of my feminist politics when I asked them to be a part of my research and that my interest in them was related to my own feminist work as a DJ for an outspokenly feminist rap duo and as the co-editor of a hip hop feminist anthology (Rantakallio and Strand 2021). I also mentioned some of this background when inviting the artists to be part of my research.

At the first two club nights, where I conducted participant observation, I also performed a DJ set. Both events took place at Kuudes Linja club in Helsinki. The club typically hosts metal, indie, and rap live shows in the early evenings and late-night clubs with DJs. The first event was a Matriarkaatti (Matriarchy) club night in November 2021. At the event, resident DJ Adikia and I played music before and after the short, back-to-back live performances by six women rappers/r&b singers. My second participant observation took place at the album release party of the Pimeä Hedelmä rap group in December 2021 after live performances, when I played back-to-back with Adikia once again who was also a friend of the group. For both events, I was invited through social media direct messages which illustrates the already established collegial networks between (white) women in rap of roughly the same age (early to late thirties) in the Helsinki rap scene. (5) During the rest of my participant observation fieldwork, I went to see one live show per artist as a spectator. The concerts took place in Helsinki, Turku (Southwest of Finland), and Jyväskylä (Central Finland). The artists and I hugged and talked to each other after the show, or exchanged voice and text messages about the performance, which again reflects collegial friendship.

My fieldwork raised questions about friendship, but also race, intersecting identities, and the role of autoethnography. I experienced a conflict with wanting to distance myself as a researcher from my informants and began reflecting on where this disturbing urge came from. I had known most of the artists prior to my research project (from c. 2017–2019), worked with them as a DJ, and/or interviewed them as a music (radio) journalist. With some of them, I had spent time also outside the professional context: we met at housewarming parties, clubs, and sauna evenings.

I realized that the positivist idea(l) of "objective" and "value-free" science I had learned earlier as a university student (which feminist ethnography and autoethnography criticize, see Davis and Craven 2020: 284; Wolf 1996: 4; Ettorre 2017: 3) was tied to internalized white male supremacist or Europatriarchal thinking (Salami 2020). I felt a need to distance myself as a researcher even though I was already part of the field. I noted in my field research diary after my second participant observation (16 December 2021): "my immersion in the scene had lasted over four years already." I had thus also been building trust and access for years. After understanding that I was personally involved with my research as a practitioner (DJ), albeit not as a rapper, I accepted that autoethnography was a necessary part of my methodology: firstly, as "strong reflexivity" to achieve deeper insight about the field and key themes emerging from it (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2013: 72–74), and secondly, because my occupation as a DJ and thus membership in the (feminist) hip hop scene preceded my decision to conduct research (see Anderson 2006: 379). These conflicting emotions resulted in necessary and valuable reflections concerning my positionality as researcher: I now align more

firmly with feminist theoretical and ethical paradigms and look more critically at approaches that privilege and reproduce only white male perspectives.

Being a scholar and a woman in hip hop, I relate to what Patricia Hill Collins (1986: S29) terms the standpoint of "outsider-within": in this position, one "learn[s] to trust their own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge" (ibid.) and to critique the white male bias. As a white postdoctoral scholar, I held power and privilege vis-à-vis my artist informants whereas as a female hip hop DJ, I was their colleague and marginalized in the scene like them due to gender. This is a position ripe for contradiction and blurring of the two roles, as I was already friends or at least acquaintances with my interviewees beforehand (Schultz 2017: 507). There were questions of power involved in terms of controlling the form of the project and its production of knowledge and representation (Wolf 1996: 2–3), but also in terms of race, or my white privilege vis-à-vis the Black artists I studied. Slani's and Yeboyah's descriptions of misogynoir, racism, and being highly visible as Black artists in a predominantly white hip hop scene were distinct in comparison to my experience as a white woman who usually does not have to think about race in everyday life and is assumed to be Finnish (unlike Black people and people of color). This "invisibility" of whiteness illustrates its normativity (Frankenberg 1993; Dyer 1997).

While there may have been class differences, these did not come up during the research. Several artists reflected on their middle-class upbringing and some of its material benefits, such as being able to attend dance or music lessons, and I shared similar memories of my middle-class childhood. Music Television (MTV) and other music video channels or programs introduced the artists and me to rap music in the mid-to-late 1990s. This shared generational experience built rapport but also hints at middle class popular cultural sensibility because MTV was globally selling – and targeting – a (Western white) middle-class experience based on consumerism that included buying records and fashion for example (Sowards 2003). Hip hop records and fashion similarly came up in our conversations.

While being a woman and a DJ of roughly similar age (at the beginning of my research project I was thirty-six years old) and class background facilitated building rapport with the rappers, being openly queer seemingly encouraged the queer artists to discuss their views about their/our identities and the position of queer people in hip hop. I began embracing my own queer identity when I got to know women rappers in the late 2010s: the representation offered by other non-male queer hip hop practitioners helped me navigate the conflicting emotions my newfound identity raised. Sharing this (marginalized) identity in addition to being a woman seemingly elicited trust and mutual understanding between me and the artists. My fieldwork experience suggests that, for people who are marginalized (for example women, LGBT+, BIPOC) in the music industry, friendships with other marginalized people who are "insiders" of exclusionary music industry norms become important psychologically and in terms of networking (see Rantakallio 2023). The shared identity and friendships also offered me a sense of belonging; that belonging, however, is impacted by the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race, and age, rather than simply being queer or a woman.

Friendships have been a recurrent topic in research concerning fieldwork, questions of power, and reflexivity (see Cooley 2003; Tillman-Healy 2003). Cooley (2003: 11) notes that in the latter half of the 20th century, friendship in fieldwork

was "a reaction against the 'science' model of the detatched [sic] observer." Tillman-Healy (2003: 731) suggests that friendships provide "identity resources" and "tend to confirm more than contest conceptions of self because we are prone to befriend those who are similar to ourselves." Also in my case, the artists I met outside professional contexts were usually either white, queer, and/or over thirty years old, like me. Our multiple shared experiences, positionalities, and feminist values made the research interviews feel comfortable, even effortless to me. I felt the (rather human) desire to share my own ideas and engage more in the conversations as not just an interviewer, but I restrained myself: I did not wish to affect the artists' views too much. Still, there are no neutral interview situations, as we always influence the research through our methodology and physical presence.

The friendships also affected some of the research materials. I had informed the artists prior to the interviews via a consent form about archiving the interviews. When interviewing one of the artists, F, I reminded her that the transcript will be made available to other researchers later (via a repository) and thus, she may want to be mindful about how she refers to her family's influence on her music. I had performed with F on several occasions as her DJ or as part of the same lineup; I knew that some close relationships had affected the content and production process of her music and that she had been careful not to disclose this to the public. I considered it ethical to double check that she was aware of how the materials would be used and thus would respond to my questions accordingly: to consider me as a researcher when the recorder was on, less as a friend. I applied a "relationally responsible" (Adams et al. 2015: 104) approach, as I reminded the artist of the separateness of our research relationship and our friendship (Kirsch 2005: 2168). Throughout my research process, I noticed that I wanted to avoid harming the artists. This is a key component of feminist research ethics (McCormick 2012) and of research more widely. During a discussion outside of the fieldwork context, Yeboyah said that they trusted that I would not use the research material in a harmful way, addressing this exact issue. While I appreciated their words, I thought that despite my best intentions, I cannot always control the impact. This is perhaps something that ethnographers need to accept: not everything is in our control.

## Discussion

Scott and Shah (1993: 96) note that "none of us occupies a fixed positionality, rather positionality is defined by shifting contexts and multiple identities that become more or less relevant depending upon the research project in which we are engaged." The analysis of our respective fieldworks reflects this understanding, which we summarize and discuss in a dialogical format in this section.

ANDREA: Reflecting on this fieldwork conducted a decade ago has been an interesting and rewarding but also challenging process. This being the first fieldwork I conducted as a part of my PhD project, I remember the demanding task of simultaneously trying to learn how to do proper research while figuring out what to do with all the feelings, memories, and thoughts that arose. Now that I have described some of these experiences, I believe that placing more analytical emphasis on, for example, feeling like an underdog in relation to the study

participants could result in further developing the social situatedness of feminist methodology. Autoethnographic aspects have informed the process of writing this article due to this article's focus on positionality, but it was not a part of the actual research. While conducting the fieldwork, these aspects were part of my general research reflexivity instead.

INKA: In my work, the porous boundaries between being a friend, colleague (DJ), and a researcher led to mixing aspects of ethnography and autoethnography and producing knowledge from an insider-outsider, or rather outsider-within (Collins 1986) perspective. Even now, after writing this article, it is challenging to distinguish between "traditional" ethnography and autoethnography when one is part of the field but studying one's own experiences and feelings is not the main aspect of the research. Further, after realizing that I had strictly speaking never entered or exited the field, and that it was possible – even necessary – to challenge the internalized idea of a distanced white male researcher, I was able to reflect on the meaning of collegial friendships. Trust had already been built with most of the artists I chose to study because I knew many of them prior to the research project. My pre-understanding of the field as a DJ who performs regularly with feminist rappers was crucial in designing the whole project. Further, marginalized positionalities led to shared experiences and understanding concerning what it means to be a woman and/or queer in the Finnish hip hop scene. Being roughly the same age as the artists made the interaction feel easy. But primarily, I felt that I shared feminist values with the artists. That said, the artists and I were not identical in our opinions or views which undoubtedly reflects our various intersectional identities and life experiences. In my case, my positionality as both a researcher and performing artist (DJ) has shaped my views and situated knowledge.

ANDREA: Shared feminist values were an important aspect of my fieldwork experience as well. The fieldwork at the musical camps was shaped by feminist ideals and practices which coincided with feminist and anti-racist societal discussion in Sweden. In the 2010s, debates on hip hop and activism focused on which bodies and positions were given representation. I found these developments important and relevant, and they made me ask questions such as: What does it mean to do fieldwork in a "feminist space"? What does it mean when creative practices that focus on societal change become part of one's research field? When I conducted the fieldwork, I did not categorize my research approach as feminist ethnography since I was not familiar with the concept. Rather, I was trying to apply the Swedish ethnological stance of "doing justice to the empirical data" (cf. Daun 1969) based on an insider account. When analyzing the fieldwork from a feminist ethnographic and feminist theory perspective in this article, it becomes evident that my approach was informed by feminist theory and methodology despite lacking the language for it.

INKA: We both experienced feelings of contradiction during fieldwork. It became necessary to embrace vulnerability and to rehumanize ourselves by recognizing and accepting that conflicting emotions are a normal part of fieldwork. But our differing standpoints in relation to gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality for example raised different questions for us. Being white and middle class has enabled my belonging in academia, Finnish society, and Finnish hip hop. As a white ethnic Finn born and raised in Finland, my race became "visible" only when speaking with Black artists, which testifies to the privilege that comes with it.

ANDREA: Indeed, writing this article has clarified our at times similar and at other times different positionalities. My lived experiences as a "hip hop head," privileged scholar, and as an underprivileged working-class war refugee racialized in the Swedish context result in a peculiar position which greatly informed my fieldwork one decade ago. I chose to frame my discussion about ethnicity and race through the Swedish national context prior to analyzing my own experiences instead of the other way around. This reminded me that knowledge production is the result of a constant negotiation of the uneven distribution of power (cf. Andreassen & Myong 2017: 100). Choosing not to frame the discussion through my own experiences of war was my attempt to take part in this negotiation on my own situated terms. Thank you for the pleasure of thinking and writing together.

INKA: I also want to thank you for constantly ensuring we communicate during the writing of this article concerning not only the content but also our life situations. I think this is a truly feminist practice which I learned from you during this process.

## Conclusion

In this article, our focus has been on the intersectional analysis of our positionality, including various aspects of privilege and marginalization. Andreassen and Myong (2017: 101) note that "it remains difficult to initiate discussion or self-reflexive dialogue on the whiteness of academia and how 'we' as scholars and our knowledge production are embedded in racial structures." This question of the embeddedness of our knowledge production in racial and gender structures as white women scholars has been a guiding one. Further, we have contributed to feminist hip hop studies by combining feminist theory with our lived experiences. Although critically reflecting on our fieldwork and the various questions of power therein, it remains unclear how our knowledge production and our aim to highlight the agency of women are creating "progressive scholarship where the goal is to dismantle oppression" (Hurtado and Stewart 2004: 328). We hope that our vulnerability inspires other researchers to critically self-reflect on their positionality and its effects on research and knowledge production.

## Endnotes

1 Like Sullivan (2019: 1), we spell "white" with lowercase letters when discussing white people "since they have not (yet) really figured out a racial identity" and "Black" with uppercase letters when discussing people of the African diaspora.

2 Some women rappers from previous decades are still active, some are not. In Finland, for example, Sini Sabotage has quit music making whereas Yavis, a founding member of Femcees Finland (2002–2004), has rekindled her career as a rapper and has recently released several new songs. In Sweden, both Cleo and Silvana Imam have released new albums during the past couple of years.

3 Quotations are the author's translations from Swedish.

4 Matriarkaatti is a feminist rap project and multimedia platform established in 2017 by two white women rappers, Adikia and Mon-Sala, that includes for example music releases, events, and a podcast. I also interviewed Matriarkaatti's then-producer Emma with Adikia, and Ida Karimaa, the A&R for Warner Music Finland's subsidiary label Monsp, who has

organized songmaking bootcamps for women and other non-male beginner artists (see Rantakallio 2023).

5 I also performed a DJ set prior to two of F's live shows in spring 2022, but these were not part of my fieldwork as I had not yet decided to include F in my study.

## Acknowledgements

Rantakallio's work was supported by the Research Council of Finland under Grant 343137.

## References

Adams, T. E., Ellis, C. and Jones, S. H. 2015. *Autoethnography*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Alim, H. Samy. 2009. Translocal Style Communities: Hip Hop Youth as Cultural Theorists of Style, Language, and Globalization. *Pragmatics* 19 (1): 103–127. https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.19.1.06ali

Anderson, L. 2006. Analytic Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (4): 373–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449

Anderson, L. and Glass-Coffin, B. 2013. I Learn by Going. Autoethnographic Modes of Inquiry. In S. H. Jones, T. E. Adams, and C. Ellis Eds. *Handbook of Autoethnography*. New York: Routledge: 57-83.

Andreassen, R., Lundström, C., Keskinen, S. and Tate, S. A., Eds. 2023. *The Routledge International Handbook of New Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*. London: Routledge.

Andreassen, R. and Myong, L. 2017. Race, Gender, and Research Positionality Analysed Through Memory Work. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 7 (2): 97-104. https://doi.org/10.1515/njmr-2017-0011

Berger, R. 2015. Now I See it, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Research* 15 (2): 219-234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

Collins, P. H. 1986. Learning From the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought. *Social Problems* 33 (6): S14-S32. https://doi.org/10.2307/800672

Collins, P. H. and Bilge. S. 2016. *Intersectionality*. Malden: Polity Press

Cooley, T. J. 2003. Theorizing Fieldwork Impact: Malinowski, Peasant-Love and Friendship. *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 12 (1): 1-17. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09681220308567349

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N. T., Peller, G. and Kendall, T., Eds. 1995. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. New York: New Press.

Dankić, A. 2019. *Att göra hiphop. En studie av musikpraktiker och sociala positioner*. PhD. Stockholm University, Stockholm.

Dankić, A. Forthcoming 2025. Navigating Stereotypes, Becoming Credible. Skills, Gender, Race and Nation Among Swedish Hip-Hop Practitioners. In S. Lindholm and K. Ringsager Eds. *Nordic Noise. Hip Hop, Culture, and Community in Northern Europe*. London: Routledge.

Daun, Å. 1969. *Upp till kamp i Båtskärsnäs. En etnologisk studie av ett samhälle inför industrinedläggelse*. PhD. Uppsala University, Uppsala.
Davis, D. and Craven, C. 2020. Feminist Ethnography. In N. Naples Ed. *Companion to Feminist Studies*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell: 281-299.
Dyer, R. 1997. *White*. New York: Routledge.
Ettorre, E. 2017. *Autoethnography as Feminist Method: Sensitising the Feminist 'I'*. New York: Routledge.
Fonow, M. M. and Cook, J. A. 1991. *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Frankenberg, R. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Fransberg, M. 2021. *Helsinki Graffiti Subculture. Meanings of Control and Gender in the Aftermath of Zero Tolerance*. PhD. University of Tampere, Tampere.
Gosa, T. 2015. The Fifth Element: Knowledge. In J. Williams Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 56-70.
Guenther, K. M. 2009. The Politics of Names. Rethinking the Methodological and Ethical Significance of Naming People, Organizations, and Places. *Qualitative Research* 9 (4): 411-421. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794109337872
Habel, Y. 2008. Whiteness Swedish Style. *Slut* 2: 41-51.
Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. 2007. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
Hoegaerts, J., Peterson, E., Liimatainen, T. and Hekanaho, L. 2022. Finnishness, Whiteness and Coloniality. An Introduction. In J. Hoegaerts, T. Liimatainen, L. Hekanaho and E. Peterson Eds. *Finnishness, Whiteness and Coloniality*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press: 1-16.
Hübinette, T. and Lundström, C. 2014. Three Phases of Hegemonic Whiteness: Understanding Racial Temporalities in Sweden. *Social Identities* 20 (6): 423-437. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2015.1004827
Hurtado, A. and Stewart, A. J. 2004. Through the Looking Glass: Implications of Studying Whiteness for Feminist Methods. In M. Fine, L. Weis, L. Powell Pruitt, and A. Burns Eds. *Off White: Readings on Power, Privilege, and Resistance*. New York: Routledge: 315-330.
Kelekay, J. 2022. From "Something in Between" to "Everything All at Once": Meditations on Liminality and Blackness in Afro-Finnish Hip-Hop and R&B. *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1 (2): 18-49. https://doi.org/10.5070/C81258317
Keskinen, S. 2019. Intra-Nordic Differences, Colonial/Racial Histories and National Narratives: Rewriting Finnish History. *Scandinavian Studies* 91 (1–2): 163-181. https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.91.1-2.0163
Kirsch, G. E. 2005. Friendship, Friendliness, and Feminist Fieldwork. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30 (4): 2163-2172. https://doi.org/10.1086/428415
Koutsougera, N. 2023. Out in the Streets: Hip-Hop Narratives in Contemporary Greece. *Meridians* 22 (1): 204-228. https://doi.org/10.1215/15366936-10220557

Lindsey, T. B. 2015. Let Me Blow Your Mind: Hip Hop Feminist Futures in Theory and Praxis. *Urban Education* 50 (1): 52-77. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914563184

Lundström, C. and Hübinette, T. 2023. The Modern History of Swedish Whiteness and Swedish Race Relations. In T. Hübinette, C. Lundström and P. Wikström Eds. 2023. *Race in Sweden: Racism and Antiracism in the World's First 'Colourblind' Nation*. London: Routledge.

McCormick, M. 2012. Feminist Research Ethics, Informed Consent, and Potential Harms. *The Hilltop Review* 6 (1): 23-33. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol6/iss1/5. Accessed: 19 June 2024.

Morgan, J. 1999. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-hop Feminist*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Morgan, M. H. 2009. *The Real Hiphop: Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the LA Underground*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Morgan, M. and Bennett, D. 2011. Hip-Hop and the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form. *Daedalus – the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 140 (2): 176-196. https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00086

Motapanyane, M. 2013. Nostalgia and Poetry: Reflections on Research, Creative Expression, and Fieldwork Across Borders. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice/Études Critiques sur le Genre, la Culture, et la Justice* 36 (1): 12-21. https://atlantisjournal.ca/index.php/atlantis/article/view/3182. Accessed: 19 June 2024.

Nitzsche, S. A. 2013. Hip-Hop in Europe as a Transnational Phenomenon: An Introduction. In S. A. Nitzsche and W. Grünzweig Eds. *Hip-Hop in Europe: Cultural Identities and Transnational Flows*. Zürich: LIT: 3-34.

Pabón-Colón, J. 2018. *Graffiti Grrlz. Performing Feminism in the Hip Hop Diaspora*. New York: New York University Press.

Pough, G. D. 2007. An Introduction of Sorts for Hip-Hop Feminism. In G.D. Pough, E. Richardson, A. Durham and R. Raimist Eds. *Homegirls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*. Mira Loma, CA: Parker Publishing: iv-ix.

Rantakallio, I. 2021. Femcees Finland, NiceRap ja vastatilojen voima. Suomiräpin naisten vertaisverkostojen historiaa. *Etnomusikologian vuosikirja* 33: 60-87.

--. 2023. Who is Heard and Who Gets to Belong in Hip-Hop? The Counterspaces of Women and Gender Minority Rappers in Finland. In P. Dale, P. Burnard and R. Travis Eds. *Music for Inclusion and Healing in Schools and Beyond: Hip Hop, Techno, Grime, and More*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 356-382.

Rantakallio, I. and Strand. H., Eds. 2021. *Kuka kuuluu? Kirjoituksia hiphopista ja feminismistä*. Helsinki: Kosmos.

Rose, T. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover (N.H.): Wesleyan U.P.

--. 2008. *Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – And Why It Matters*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.

Salami, M. 2020. *Sensuous Knowledge. A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone*. New York: Amistad.

Schloss, J. G. 2004. *Making the Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. Middletown: West University Press.

Schultz, C. S. 2017. "Working the Ruins" of Collaborative Feminist Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30 (6): 505-518. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1250175

Scott, E. and Shah, B. 1993. Future Projects/Future Theorizing in Feminist Field Research Methods: Commentary on Panel Discussion. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13 (3): 90-103. https://doi.org/10.2307/3346745

Sernhede, O. 2002. *Alienation Is My Nation. Hiphop och unga mäns utanförskap i Det Nya Sverige*. Stockholm: Ordfront.

Skeggs, B. 2001. Feminist Ethnography. In S. Delamont, P. Atkinson and A. Coffey Eds. *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: Sage: 426-443.

Sowards, S. K. 2003. MTV Asia: Localizing the Global Media. In L. Artz and Y. R. Kamalipour Eds. *The Globalization of Corporate Media Hegemony*. Albany: State University of New York Press: 229-243.

Strage, F. 2001. *Mikrofonkåt*. Stockholm: Atlas.

Sullivan, S. 2019. *White Privilege*. Cambridge: Polity.

Sykäri, V. 2014. Sitä kylvät, mitä niität. Suomenkielinen improvisoitu rap ja komposition strategiat. *Elore* 21 (2): 1-39. https://doi.org/10.30666/elore.79150

Sykäri, V., Rantakallio, I., Westinen, E. and Cvetanović, D. 2019. Johdanto: Hiphop Suomessa 35 vuotta. In V. Sykäri, I. Rantakallio, E. Westinen, and D. Cvetanović Eds. *Hiphop Suomessa. Puheenvuoroja tutkijoilta ja tekijöiltä*, Helsinki: Nuorisotutkimusseura: 7-32.

Tillmann-Healy, L. M. 2003. Friendship as Method. *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (5): 729-749. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403254894

Westinen, E. 2023. *Aina ollu tääl: Suomiräp 4.0*. Helsinki: Johnny Kniga.

Withers, P. 2021. Digital Feminisms in Palestinian hip hop. *Global Hip Hop Studies* 2 (2): 159-177. https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00042_1

Wolf, D. L. 1996. Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork. In D. L. Wolf Ed. *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*. Boulder (Colo.): Westview Press: 1-55.