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Music and Anti-Racism: Musicians' Involvement in Anti-Racist Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This article explores connections between music and anti-racism. Based on our analyses of recent anti-racist demonstrations and musical media productions, we have constructed an ethnographic description of musicians' involvement in anti-racism in Finland. Our study makes visible how in predominantly white societies, individual musicians' own relations to (anti-)racism, as well as different articulations and meanings of race in general, have become issues that an increasing number of musicians must negotiate. By relying on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, our study provides different approaches to the complexity and the multidimensionality of the meanings of race, racism, and anti-racism in music.

Introduction

There is plenty of research on the role of music in struggles against racism. However, most studies have focused on the interrelations among specific music cultures, genres, and political movements. In some societies, such as in the U.S.A. and the UK, music has played such a central role in mobilizing protest movements and creating and sustaining collective political, racialized identities that particular music genres cannot be understood without comprehending the connections between music and (anti-)racism (Eyerman and Jamison 74–105; Garcia 275). For example, “black music” refers to various musical styles created by people who have faced and fought against racism at different times and locations. The African diaspora, especially the black population, is considered as comprising communities, based not only on their real or imagined engagements with Africanness and experiences of and struggles against racism, but also on their music cultures linked to those struggles (Back 127–49). Despite the different theorizations concerning their origins and links to other music cultures (e.g., Gilroy 133–35; Zeleza 211), the social meanings of African and black diasporic music are studied and discussed in connection to racialized social relations (Hamilton 6–8). When the music genres originating in these cultures have travelled to new locations, they have often been embraced as signifiers of anti-racism and resistance to oppression. Blues, jazz, reggae, and hip hop can be heard all over the world, and even when their political dimensions are not emphasized or they have been transformed and

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reinterpreted in their new locations, as genres, they are known to be rooted in particular political fields.

This study's starting point is the idea that the connections between music and (anti-) racism are more complex and multidimensional than what has been shown in research focusing on the histories of specific music genres and their relations to particular political movements. We argue that because of the rapid demographic changes that have resulted from migration over the last decades, a growing number of music professionals are forced to think about the different meanings of race and negotiate their own relationship with anti-racism. Finland, along with the other Nordic countries, provides a good example of how racism has become a topic of discussion in predominantly white societies that have been characterized by denials of the existence of racism rather than by attempts to acknowledge and contest its different articulations (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 1–9; Rastas, "The Emergence of Race"). Changes in racialized social relations, populist movements, many of which are openly racist, and reactions to racism and xenophobia have made racism an issue that cannot be denied anymore. In addition to immigrant and other new ethnic minority communities, new racialized communities of non-white people who were born and have grown up in the predominantly white European societies have started to address and react to their experiences of racism through music.

In Northern Europe, demographic changes, the emergence of political and collective racialized identities, and anti-racist activities of ethnic and racial minority communities have created a new discursive climate where the normative whiteness has also become a topic of discussion (Keskinen and Andreassen 65–66; Rastas, "Reading History" 90, 100; Rastas, "The Emergence of Race" 372). These reactions to racism and anti-racism and individuals' negotiations of their racialized identities occur especially in the fields of arts and cultural production, including music. Regardless of their own positions in racialized social hierarchies, a growing number of musicians, producers, event organizers, and other professionals face the need to understand and reflect on the complex meanings and workings of racism and their own commitments to anti-racism.

Theoretical Background, Research Materials, and Methods of Analyses

In this study, we use broad definitions of racism and anti-racism. Racism refers to not only particular ideologies and intentional, oppressive practices based on them but also to racializing discourses and practices by which racial hierarchies and essentialist, oppressive ideas of some people and cultures are produced and reproduced. In cultural studies, race is a socially constructed, discursive category. The notion of racialization refers to the processes whereby "the discourse of race is employed in an attempt to label, constitute or exclude social collectivities" (Miles 73). By anti-racism, we mean policies and practices opposing racism, which comprise collective and individual interventions in those discourses and practices that are discussed as racism or racializing practices in the research literature and among racialized minorities. Studies on racism and anti-racism constitute a multidisciplinary field of research with various subfields, such as whiteness studies (e.g., Bonnet 181–89; Doane 3–18; Dyer 1–40) and theorizations on intersectionality (e.g., Collins and Bilge 31–42). Additionally, our discussion has been informed by visual

methodologies (e.g., [Rose 12–26](#)) and research on digital forms of cultural production, both of which can be considered particularly topical in studies on racism ([Buccitelli 2–4](#); [Nakamura 14](#)) and on music videos. Our analyses of music video productions have also been inspired by [Björnberg's](#) analyses.

Our approach and theoretical framework are built on the ethnographic tradition and discussions in cultural studies. To produce an ethnographic thick description of the studied phenomena, we use different methods of analyses (e.g., content and discourse) on selected pieces of our extensive materials and then bring our findings into the discussion with multidisciplinary theorizations concerning the questions under investigation.

To examine musicians' involvement in anti-racism, we have employed two approaches. First, we have looked for musicians' agency and the roles of music in what can be defined as "spaces for anti-racism" in Finnish society over the last couple of years when racism and anti-racism have become common topics of public discussions. Second, we have identified anti-racist discourses and practices in different scenes of Finnish popular music.

In addition to the materials selected for closer examination in this paper, we rely on the findings and the research materials produced during our previous ethnographic studies on racialized relations and identities in Finnish society, as well as on African diaspora communities and cultures. We have undertaken ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, both in the anti-racist spaces (e.g., demonstrations, nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], online, and other communities) discussed in this article and on specific sites for popular music, especially related to events and productions, where people who identify with ethnic and racialized minorities also perform a central role as artists and producers. Some of our projects have focused on musicians. Several have included collaboration with artists, for example, action research projects aiming at exhibiting and archiving knowledge of African diaspora music and African and black musicians' contributions to Finnish culture.¹ Besides our studies, our knowledge of anti-racism and certain music scenes in Finland results from our roles as activists and teachers in these fields.

The materials from which we have chosen our examples include over 30 music videos, field notes and other documents from our participation in dozens of concerts and other events, and hundreds of media texts from the internet. To find materials related to the media coverage of particular anti-racist events and to observe the reception of the events and the productions that are the focus of our analyses, we have undertaken what [Kozinets](#) calls netnography. We have also interviewed Finnish musicians, producers, and journalists to clarify musicians' roles in planning and organizing the discussed events and to obtain information that is usually shared only among insiders. Most of these interviewees ($n = 10$) wanted to remain anonymous. All these materials have inspired our analyses, but only those chosen for closer examination are included in the works cited list.

We first provide a general description of musicians' involvement in anti-racist spaces in Finland. We have examined the musicians' agency by paying attention to how their own positions in racialized social hierarchies matter in these contexts. Along with our analyses of (a) the significance of music in anti-racism demonstrations and (b) anti-racist music video productions, we discuss the meanings of race for the construction of

anti-racist spaces in music and the complex ways in which race matters and becomes an issue to be negotiated.

Musicians' Anti-Racist Spaces in Finland

Finland is a northern European country where rapid demographic changes due to immigration have occurred since the beginning of the 1990s. However, racism has only recently become a public topic of discussion in Finnish society. In the early 2000s, the discursive climate was still different, characterized by denials of the existence of racism and the lack of political movements focusing on anti-racism, although racism against particular immigrant groups and racialized minorities was common (Rastas, "Reading History" 90–91; Rastas, "Talking Back" 198–201).

The growth of ethnic minority communities and the number of Finns who identify with racial minorities have made it more difficult to ignore racism. Recent racist and xenophobic reactions to immigration have been followed by a rapid increase in anti-racist activities in Finnish society (Rastas, "The Emergence of Race" 368–372). Racial and ethnic minorities have started to speak for their rights in various forums, and other (white) Finns have also begun to react to racism. Notwithstanding this development, in predominantly white social spaces, racism and anti-racism are often still understood as issues that concern only non-white people and other racialized minorities. This view became evident when we approached white music professionals with our questions concerning musicians' involvement in anti-racist activities. White musicians, journalists, and producers usually started to offer us lists of non-white musicians' names as potential interviewees, as if questions concerning racism had no impact on white musicians' lives and work.

People who are positioned as racialized minorities can hardly avoid negotiating about and reacting to racism, which applies to both immigrants and the rapidly increasing population of non-white people who were born and have grown up in Finland. Therefore, the sites with the most potential for musicians' involvement in anti-racism are those spaces where non-white musicians can be found. Similar to all social spaces, music genres are racialized fields, but as shown by theorizations in whiteness studies, the normative whiteness creates false ideas of innocence that prevent people from acknowledging and discussing the whiteness of some spaces (e.g., *Wekker* 18). Practically all music scenes in Finland are predominantly white, but some music genres are more inclusive of non-white artists than others. Unsurprisingly, these genres are commonly categorized as "black music," especially hip hop/rap and reggae.

Until the 1980s, when the first few African immigrant musicians (most of them from Senegal and Tanzania) settled in Finland, the only black musicians in the country were a few jazz artists from the U.S.A. Currently, the presence of the rapidly growing new generation of young non-white Finns can be seen, especially in hip hop and rap genres. Although the first rap artists in Finland were white Finns, a photo exhibition on the history of rap in Finland (*Kädet ilmaan*) has made it evident that non-white rappers have also shaped this genre's history in the country since the 1990s. As illustrated in a video jukebox produced for another exhibition, focusing on the history and the social and the cultural contributions of the African diaspora in Finland, young rappers of African descent have in recent years become important voices of the new generation of

non-white Finns.² Artists such as Deogracias Masomi, *aka* Gracias; James Nikander, *aka* Musta Barbaari (Black Barbarian); and Iyouseyas Belayneh, *aka* Prinssi Jusuf (Prince Jusuf), whose videos were included in the jukebox, use hip hop to negotiate their situation as both African and black diaspora subjects and non-white Finns.³ Thus, in Finland, young people who identify with racialized minorities have primarily embraced those (black) music genres that are most commonly associated with anti-racism.

In contrast to hip hop, classical music has always been associated with whiteness, and the myth that race does not matter seems especially strong in the classical music scene. Even a pioneer of postcolonial studies, Edward Said, considers Western classical music universal, speaking to anyone regardless of ethnicity or race (Capitain 56). In an event where immigrant musicians' situations and work conditions in Finland were discussed, a famous Finnish orchestra's general manager explained that racism was not an issue in classical music because when new musicians were recruited, auditions were arranged in a way that the candidates could not be seen, only heard. This statement suggests that the meanings of race are limited to discrimination in job-seeking situations. It also illustrates what Leppänen describes as the persistence of romantic notions of the autonomy and the presumed abstract nature of classical music. According to Leppänen 2015, "Issues of race and racism are problematic in connection to the idea of musical autonomy, as the ideal holds that the music itself does not have anything to do with extra-musical phenomena such as gender, nationality, race and ethnicity" (19).

However, several initiatives promote (safe) spaces in classical music for black and ethnic minority musicians (see, e.g., Duchén), reminding us that race matters even in spaces associated with whiteness. The presumed neutrality of these spaces, constructed by the normative whiteness, ignores the meanings of race for non-white people; doing so may make the spaces unwelcoming and less attractive to this group.

If some music genres are unlikely spaces for musicians' involvement in anti-racism, what about those sites where minoritized musicians can be found? In predominantly white societies, where white people have occupied even the rap scene, the emergence of black rappers inevitably raises the question of how individual rap musicians' "hip hop literacies," to use Richardson and Pough's term, depend on their racial identifications. Furthermore, rap is shaped not only by the global hip-hop culture but also by local languages and cultures, as well as local expressions of racism and anti-racism. As mentioned, several young non-white Finns who identify with blackness and/or the African diaspora have now become active agents in the Finnish hip-hop and rap scene. Some of them have also become well-known anti-racism activists in Finland, talking about racism through their music, on media (including their own social media sites), in demonstrations, and as guest speakers in schools. A few young black Finns, such as the above-mentioned James Nikander and Iyouseyas Belayneh, have made discussions about racism and other issues related to the everyday life of ethnic minority youth in Finland practically their profession. They have provided Finnish audiences with new encounters with blackness that is shaped not only by the global ("foreign") black cultures but also by local experiences through their own YouTube channels and their popular TV show *Mamu-suomi-mamu* (*Immigrant-Finnish-immigrant*) in the

2015–16 season of the *Kioski* series, aimed at young audiences and produced by the Finnish Broadcasting Company. They have also been featured on other TV shows.

Musicians of color are also active in different genres of what is often categorized as ethnic or world music. These genres have very small markets in Finland, but some people have been able to employ themselves as musicians and music teachers due to their expertise in certain African music traditions. The increasing number of events supporting multiculturalism has offered additional work opportunities for these people, not only as performing artists but also as speakers and representatives of different cultures. Although in many festivals and other multicultural events, anti-racism is a self-evident context rather than an openly discussed topic (Rastas and Seye 88–89), these occasions have become important avenues for networking. Representatives of different NGOs, professional event organizers, and musicians of both ethnic minority and majority backgrounds who want to be involved in anti-racism meet and become acquainted with one another. Regardless of individuals' own positions in racialized relations, participating in these events can be interpreted as a political statement, as the willingness to promote certain ideas and policies and resist others. Although these celebrations of multiculturalism can sometimes be criticized for focusing on essentializing cultural views rather than questions of racism and power hierarchies, they have created new spaces for interracial encounters and negotiations about individual musicians' attitudes toward, knowledge of, and relations to racism and anti-racism (Rastas and Seye 89–92).

Since the mid 1970s, when the Rock Against Racism movement (studied by Dawson; Goodyer; among others) was founded in Britain, musicians in different European countries have similarly reacted to the increase in xenophobia and racist incidents. They have organized concerts, collaborated with NGOs that promote anti-racism, and publicly talked about racism as a social problem. For example, as shown by De Cleen's study in Belgium, concerts have been organized to oppose racism and extreme-right populism in other European countries as well. In Finland, very few musicians have participated in such activities until recently. Karri Miettinen, *aka* Paleface, a white Finnish hip-hop pioneer, is an exception in this case. With the choice of his stage name and his many political activities and collaborations with musicians of ethnic minority backgrounds, Miettinen has positioned himself as an artist for whom hip hop is not only an artistic and cultural but also a social movement. Unsurprisingly, he was the key person in organizing the musical program of Finland's first major demonstrations against racism, as discussed in the next section.

Music and Musicians in Anti-Racist Demonstrations

Two major anti-racist demonstrations in Helsinki (Finland's capital) have occurred in recent years. Both were reactions to the increase in hate speech in general and to specific instances of populist politicians' public statements and of racist violence. The first one, *Meillä on unelma* (We Have a Dream), was held in 2015, followed by *Peli poikki – rikotaan hiljaisuus* (Stop Racism – Let's Break the Silence⁴) in 2016. These large demonstrations were supported by smaller protests in many other Finnish cities. The same core group of people initiated both demonstrations, with musical performances playing a central role.

The first one was organized in July 2015 on short notice as a reaction to a Facebook post by Olli Immonen, a Finnish Parliament member under the populist party *Perussuomalaiset* (Finns Party). In his post, reminiscent of Nazi-German leaders' speeches, Immonen described multiculturalism as a "nightmare." The organization of the We Have a Dream demonstration similarly started on Facebook, when Aleksi Pahkala, a DJ, music producer, and event organizer, voiced the idea that "something should be done" to make visible the opposition to such racist statements (Miettinen). The demonstration took place three days later, gathering about 15,000 people on a square near the Parliament. The speakers comprised politicians, religious leaders, and other cultural figures, including several individuals belonging to ethnic and religious minorities. The musical program consisted of performances by a range of well-known Finnish pop, rock, and hip-hop artists. Apart from the two above-mentioned rappers/social media celebrities (Musta Barbaari and Prinssi Jusuf), the musicians represented the white majority. The famous musicians' participation in and comments on the event that were posted on social media received substantial media attention.

The second large demonstration (Stop Racism) was held in September 2016 as a reaction to a violent attack by a member of the neo-Nazi organization called Finnish Defense League (FDL) against a young man named Jimi Karttunen. Karttunen, who was attacked for expressing his contempt for an FDL gathering near Helsinki's main railway station, died a few days later from his injuries. According to Karri Miettinen, who actively participated in organizing both demonstrations, the 2016 demonstration was somewhat more carefully planned than the previous one; the first meeting was held a week before the event (see also Lahtinen). This demonstration attracted (according to different estimates) 15,000–20,000 people, who marched through the city center from the location of the previous demonstration in front of the Parliament to the historical Senate Square in front of the Helsinki Cathedral, where speeches and performances took place.

Miettinen told us that for the 2016 demonstration the organizers wanted to have a more balanced program, rather than a maximum number of musical performances by "front-line artists," as described on the Facebook event page for the We Have a Dream demonstration. As soon as the 2016 demonstration was announced, Miettinen received several performance offers from individual artists and their record companies. According to him, artists and their managers, usually wary of taking a public stance about anything, clearly remembered the previous demonstration, which had gathered thousands of people and gained significant media attention, and viewed the second event as an opportunity for gaining positive publicity. He explained his claim by comparing the situation with a recent concert in support of asylum seekers' demonstration against deportations: "The organizers of that event told me that it had never been as hard to find artists to perform." Since finding artists to perform at smaller political events with similar goals had been difficult, it seemed obvious to Miettinen that some artists offering to perform at the Stop Racism demonstration were more interested in promoting their new singles and albums than supporting the cause.

For the 2016 demonstration, the organizers wanted to limit the number of artists and allow more space to minoritized groups. Malang Cissokho, a Senegalese musician who has lived in Finland for about 30 years, was invited as the opening performer. His song with *kora* (a traditional West African string instrument) accompaniment was certainly

intended and received in the demonstration as a symbol of diversity in Finland, especially since many Finns would associate Cissokho's voice and instrument with J. Karjalainen (one of the most popular singer-songwriters in Finland) and his hit song "Väinö" (1996), which featured Cissokho. Significantly, not only was this key space allotted to a musician representing a visible minority, but the fact that he was also Cissokho further emphasized that black people and even traditional African musical styles had already become part of Finnish society and culture.

Another central musical performance at the Stop Racism demonstration was Miettinen's (or rather Paleface's) rendition of his recently released protest song "Emme suostu pelkäämään" ("We refuse to be afraid"). Set to the melody of an Irish folk song, it directly opposed racist and fascist groups, especially Soldiers of Odin that organized street patrols in several Finnish cities on the pretense of protecting women and children from immigrants. Right after its release in June 2016, the song and the music video were actively circulated on social media by anti-racism activists. Several of the demonstrations supporting Stop Racism that were held in other Finnish cities over the following weeks were even named after the song. Both the music video and the live performance of the song at the demonstration featured clowns from the Loldiers of Odin⁵ group that produced carnivalistic street performances, as well as media performances that were spread through the group's website, YouTube channel, and Facebook page in opposition to the Soldiers of Odin's patrols (see also "A Three-Ring Circus in Finland"). The Loldiers of Odin's main anti-racist strategy was to break down the threatening image of the Soldiers of Odin by embarrassing them and their aggressive masculinity.

However, in the Stop Racism demonstration, the musical performance that gained the most visibility in media reports was a symphony orchestra's rendition of the Finlandia Hymn. It is the last section of Jean Sibelius's orchestral composition *Finlandia*, which can be performed either by an orchestra alone or with a choir joining in for the hymn part, whose lyrics are known to most Finns.⁶ *Finlandia* carries historical associations with the country's struggle for independence in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries (see, e.g., "Finlandia by Jean Sibelius"). The Finlandia Hymn has also been repeatedly suggested as a replacement for the current national anthem, demonstrating its position as a national symbol in Finland.

The orchestra at the event included musicians from a few orchestras operating in the greater Helsinki area. Miettinen told us, "I had the megalomaniac idea of a symphony orchestra, and I called the manager of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra and presented the idea. They said that as an orchestra, they could not participate in demonstrations, but the musicians would be allowed to participate as individuals if they wished and that they could present the idea at the orchestra meeting. ... Jan Söderblom, the first violinist, then took the responsibility of organizing it."⁷

The instrumental version of the Finlandia Hymn was performed as the final number of the demonstration's program. There was a moment of silence in memory of Jimi Karttunen just before the orchestra started playing. A symbol of Finnish nationalism, *Finlandia* was turned into a massive performance with a more inclusive and welcoming Finnishness, which became a powerful statement in the context of an anti-racist demonstration. Judging by our own observations, as well as the video materials from the demonstration, this rendition embraced and touched everyone, including minorities

(“Finlandia Peli poikki”). It was the only musical performance at the demonstration that was mentioned in the website news by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (“Yli 15 000 ihmisen mielenosoitus”) and the major newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (“Rasisminvastaiseen mielenosoitukseen”).

If the We Have a Dream demonstration used music mainly as a tool to attract people and media attention with “front-line artists,” organizers of the Stop Racism demonstration selected musical performances more carefully to convey its anti-racist message. Among others, the strategies employed were giving space to black musicians (e.g., Cissokho), providing a direct verbal commentary via the lyrics of Paleface’s protest song, presenting a satire and a parody of racist groups, and reconstructing the Finnish nation’s image to include everyone regardless of background.

Musical Expressions of Anti-Racism on Social Media

Social media has become the primary channel for distributing new music, as reported by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), and sharing content on social media is one of the ways that people participate in public discussions and express their views on current topics. Over the last few years, several musical productions have contributed to public discussions on immigration, xenophobia, racism, and anti-racism in Finland. These have been circulated mainly via YouTube video links posted on social media, where they have also initiated (sometimes heated) discussions on racism, multiculturalism, and Finnishness. Therefore, we have approached musicians’ involvement in anti-racism by looking for video productions that comment on racism in Finland and have been circulated in anti-racist online communities. These video productions represent different music genres, although many of the pieces whose lyrics explicitly address (anti-)racism can be categorized as hip hop/rap. However, some of the most popular videos convey an anti-racist message by other means, as the following examples demonstrate.

For this article, we have more closely analyzed a few music videos that have been widely shared on various anti-racist social media sites and have received some media attention. With the help of our collaborators and the students who attended an anti-racism course at the University of Tampere in the spring of 2017, we have found several more songs with an anti-racist message, some by well-known Finnish artists, but most of them have not sparked broader public discussions. Therefore, we have chosen only four music video productions for our discussion here. The selected examples represent three approaches to presenting an anti-racist stance, which are also common in other productions.

First, we conducted a simple content analysis of the chosen videos by listing their song lyrics, main musical characteristics, and visual content in a table to observe how the verbal, musical, and visual elements are structured and combined in the videos. This was followed by a close reading of selected sections of the videos. Each video includes so many intertextual references and possible associations that full analyses cannot be presented here. Rather, we aim to point out the different devices used by these videos to articulate their anti-racist message or the reasons why the videos have been interpreted as conveying an anti-racist statement.

The most obvious and perhaps most common way to include an anti-racist message in a musical production is to verbally express its opposition to racism in the song's lyrics. The artists using this strategy include both white Finns and Finns who identify with racialized minorities. Despite some similarities in the lyrics, such as references to the racist and xenophobic discourses that are currently common in Finnish society, as well as to particular racist incidents, there are some differences based on the artists' racial identifications. Artists belonging to the white majority generally voice a direct message against discrimination and hate speech in their lyrics, whereas non-white artists often speak from a more personal standpoint and use their experiences as people of color to formulate their message.

An example of the direct verbal message by white artists is the 2015 recording of "[Stop urpoilulle](#)" ("Stop acting stupid") by the collective *Räppärit rasismia vastaan* (Rappers against Racism). It is also included in a CD compilation to support the Finnish Red Cross' work with asylum seekers and refugees. The CD comprises songs from 17 artists representing different genres of popular music, some as new or unreleased pieces and others as re-releases of older productions. Even in this collection, the cited piece is the most overtly anti-racist track. The collective includes several well-known Finnish rappers but none of the few commercially most successful ones. The music video ("[Stop urpoilulle](#)") combines images of the collective's rappers in the recording studio and sections with school kids talking about what racism means and what can be done against it. It was released on YouTube on 24 January 2016; only a few months later, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment awarded the collective with an honor for "campaigning for a multicultural Finland" (see "[Räppärit rasismia vastaan](#)").

This particular production mainly includes members of the older-generation white Finnish rappers who have created the current mainstream Finnish-language rap but acknowledge their debt to the historical developments of rap and hip hop in black communities. Nonetheless, Miettinen mentioned that "there were some more established rappers who did not want to participate in that piece, or someone [from their record company] advised them not to participate." Apparently, some major record companies do not consider standing up against racism to be a commercially viable move.

An example of a more personal approach by a black artist is a music video by Hassan Maikal. He is a young rapper with Somalian roots, whose piece "[Maan tavalla](#)" was published in early 2016, originally under his stage name Bizzyiam.⁸ However, it seems that Maikal uses only his real name now. He is also active as a vlogger, and his YouTube channel bears the name Kontulan Hassan (Hassan of Kontula, an Eastern suburb of Helsinki with a large quota of an immigrant population).

The "[Maan tavalla](#)" video has been actively shared on social media among anti-racist groups. Maikal has since performed the song at several events, such as a multicultural street dance party in Helsinki on Finland's Independence Day (6 December 2016). The refrain and name of the piece is based on the Finnish saying "*maassa maan tavalla*" (equivalent to "When in Rome, do as the Romans do"), which can be interpreted as a requirement to act as local people do. Before the release of Maikal's piece, the saying had become a staple phrase used by populist politicians, who repeatedly insisted that immigrants should follow Finnish customs in the best way they could, and the failure to

integrate and “act like a Finn” should lead to deportation. In his lyrics, Maikal thus takes control of the saying that has gained racist undertones in public discussions. He presents his personal position as a young black man who has lived his whole life in Finland but is still not accepted as a fellow Finn or sometimes even as a human being. Rappers of African descent in other European countries have voiced similar sentiments (see, e.g., Green, “Musical Roots”).

The video shows Maikal singing and rapping inside (and sometimes outside) an iconic Finnish cottage on the countryside, with the winter landscape showing through the windows. Additionally, several scenes feature a soldier, imitating old Finnish black-and-white films depicting the Finnish wars against Russia. In the video, the soldier turns out to be a young black man. Toward the end of the video, a visual element shows someone lighting up a match in the dark and setting fire to what is likely a Molotov cocktail. Not only the song’s title but also the lyrics present the ways that racists talk about immigrants and people of color. The lyrics also mention a leading politician of the populist party *Perussuomalaiset*, who has had a major impact on the immigration policies’ restrictions.

If the music video by the collective of white Finnish rappers has a clearly expressed anti-racist message, the “Maan tavalla” video is more complex and multilayered in its social commentary. The lyrics concentrate on the personal reflections and experiences of being marginalized, not being accepted as part of Finnish society despite the individual’s dreams of becoming “a president, a doctor, a policeman” or maybe a performing artist, as implied in the scene where Maikal stands on the stage of an empty theater. Later in the video, a short clip shows Maikal being given a standing ovation by a rather small audience in the theater. All the other scenes depict him in solitude but seemingly not sad, which can be interpreted as a sign that he appreciates the peace and quiet and the surrounding snowy landscape. This setting is most easily interpreted as a symbolic representation of Finnishness, in which Maikal visibly feels quite comfortable (cf. Leppänen and Westinen 10–14).

An interesting feature of Maikal’s largely self-produced music video comprises the black-and-white “movie” scenes depicting the soldier. They connect to the line in the lyrics stating, “This Finnish Somali will come to fight your wars,” but the visual imagery clearly points to the past rather than the present or the future. It is as if Maikal wants to rewrite history or create an imagined past, where black Finns would also have fought against the Russians. In any case, Finnish independence and nationalism are often celebrated through military imagery, so it is unsurprising to find this type of image in productions that obviously aim to redefine Finnishness. However, the closing scene (setting fire to a Molotov cocktail) does not leave the audience with a hopeful message. Rather, it seems to imply that racist attacks, such as several attempts to set asylum centers on fire with Molotov cocktails in 2015, might be part of “acting like a Finn.” The aim is probably to remind the audience that racist attacks pose daily threats to anyone belonging to a racialized minority in Finland, but when combined with the refrain, it could be interpreted as implying that marginalized minorities might actually “act like Finns” by resorting to violence if they do not feel accepted in Finnish society.

The everyday racism experienced by some Finns is further emphasized through an additional voice speaking in the beginning and at the end of Maikal’s video. The voice is taken from a video clip showing an older white Finnish woman who verbally abuses a

black woman at Helsinki's city center. In broken English, the former tells the latter that she does not even consider her human and that the black woman should leave "her" country. The mobile video of this attack was actively shared on social media before the publication of Maikal's video and possibly opened the eyes of some white Finns, who rarely witness such attacks.

The question of who can be considered or accepted as a Finn, as implied in Maikal's video, is also central in another music video, "Olen suomalainen" ("I am a Finn"), from 2014. Ironically a translation of an Italian song, it is a very popular Finnish *schlager*, originally published in the 1980s. In the production considered here, the song is performed by 12 singers of various ethnic backgrounds, and many more non-white Finns are included in the video (Kansalaiset feat. Medborgare, "Olen suomalainen"). The performers use the collective name Kansalaiset feat. Medborgare, which means "citizens" in both Finnish and Swedish (Finland's official languages). The name points to the fact that most of the people featured on the video are Finnish citizens, which is also explicitly stated in the closing credits. The information text of the video on YouTube similarly states, "On the video you can see over fifty Finns" but mentions some of their backgrounds as refugees, immigrants, adopted children, or children of mixed heritage. In the black-and-white video scenes, these individuals are shown in their homes and workplaces and other everyday situations.

On YouTube, comments have been disabled for "Olen suomalainen," but the video was certainly widely known because Finnish newspapers and magazines wrote about it soon after its release. Among others, several of the singers and other people who participated in creating the video were interviewed about their views on Finland and Finnishness for an article written by Pekka Mykkänen, the project's producer. The article ("Minäkin olen suomalainen") was published in the largest Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. Within a week, the video had been watched 150,000 times on YouTube, although it was also included on the *Helsingin Sanomat* website in the newspaper's own HSTV service instead of a YouTube link. The video was widely recognized as a welcome statement about contemporary multicultural Finnishness, but contrasting views were also voiced on social media and in the comments on the *Helsingin Sanomat* article, where the Finnishness of the performers "with foreign names" was called into question by some readers. Here, the anti-racist message is not at all included in the song's lyrics but in the statement that the performers with various ethnic backgrounds and accents are also Finns.

Another music video with a similar concept was published in 2015, but unlike "Olen suomalainen," it was a commercial production. This video was commissioned by HOK-Elanto, a Helsinki-based cooperative that is part of the S-Group that owns the largest chain of supermarkets in Finland. The video was released on YouTube with the title "#joulurauhaa" ("Christmas peace") on 5 December 2015, a day before Finland's Independence Day. It was also shared widely on social media in both private profiles and anti-racist groups' accounts, in addition to HOK-Elanto's online channels. On YouTube, the viewers' comments include both thanks for a "wonderful" and "touching" video and statements about "never [shopping] again" in the supermarkets owned by the S-Group because the video includes people "who do not belong here." However, in this case, it is not immediately obvious why this video has been and can be interpreted as an anti-racist statement.

The video includes the ballad “Murheellisten laulujen maa” (“Land of sad songs”) by Eppu Normaali, one of the most famous Finnish rock bands of all time. The song was originally intended as a parody of the deeply melancholic style of Finnish *schlager* songs but became an instant classic of Suomi-rock (literally “Finland rock,” an idiomatically Finnish rock genre) on its release in 1982. The lyrics present the story of an innocent young man who decides to “avoid the traditional fate of a [Finnish] man,” depicted as involving unemployment and alcoholism and resorting to domestic violence. However, the young man fails to find work and starts to drink. This overly tragic story is ultimately framed as an ironic depiction of the “land of thousands of sad songs,” where a person can drown oneself in “thousands of lakes” (pointing to Finland, never directly mentioned in the lyrics, that is often dubbed as the “land of a thousand lakes”) and the people’s “self-pity cannot be measured with common sense.”

In the new arrangement of the song heard in its commercial, the track’s lead singer is Ikenna “Ike” Ikegwuonu, a young man of Nigerian parents who has lived all his life in Finland. He had previously gained some fame by being one of the four finalists in *The Voice of Finland* competition in 2013. If listeners only heard the audio track of the video, they would probably not pay much attention to it. It is just a shortened and smoother version of the original ballad, sung in perfectly accent-free Finnish by Ikegwuonu. Only in the music video are viewers made aware that the singer does not correspond to the popular conceptions about a typical (meaning white) Finn. As many Finns would recognize Ikegwuonu from *The Voice of Finland*, a TV show where the competitors typically perform hit songs by other artists, his presence as a black man alone might not have caused the attention and the racist uproar triggered by the video. However, the video carefully highlights the presence of non-white people in the everyday life of Helsinki and defines them at the end of the video as *stadilainen* (a slang word for a native inhabitant of Helsinki) and HOK-Elanto as the store for all of them.

The video includes multiple short scenes depicting daily activities, such as fishing, chopping firewood, hunting, coming out of a sauna, waiting for a tram, and so on. Some of the locations are recognizable as the streets and the seashore of Helsinki. It also shows glimpses of a school class where a female teacher with a *hijab* and dark complexion talks to one of her pupils, a blond boy who is perhaps eight or nine years old. Another scene depicts a group of young (both white and non-white) men in soldiers’ uniforms sitting by a bonfire in the forest, with an obvious reference to the military service that is obligatory to Finnish male citizens. The majority of the characters in the video are non-white, and all but the schoolteacher and some of the children in the class are male, which fits the song’s lyrics about the deplorable fate of Finnish men. Nonetheless, the men in the video do not look like they would fear such a fate; despite their serious faces when first portrayed, everyone is happily smiling at the end of the video. Thus, the video does not only connect people of different ethnic backgrounds to Helsinki and to stereotypical notions of Finnishness but also contests these stereotypes and implies that living as a Finnish man (in Helsinki) may not be as terrible in real life as depicted in the song’s lyrics.

All the cases we have discussed here, as well as several other anti-racist music productions that we have come across, are reactions to racist incidents and public discussions on racism. Whereas artists belonging to the white majority passionately contest and proclaim racists’ stupidity in their songs, non-white artists use humor or

reflect on their personal experiences of racism in their lyrics, often also demonstrating an emotional connection to Finland or declaring their right to Finnishness in one way or another. Although the songs' musical styles rarely differ from those of mainstream Finnish pop and hip hop/rap, the visuals often include scenes that remind the viewers of old Finnish movies, as portrayed in the last three videos discussed here. In these scenes that play with nostalgic and immediately recognizable (and partly outdated) images of Finnishness, such as snow and winter, a red wooden cottage, as well as depictions of soldiers and war, the presence of "visibly different" people clearly creates what Ahmed calls "strange encounters." These encounters, where bodies are read as signs, "reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference" (Ahmed 8). In the music videos that we have discussed, as in the case of playing the Finlandia Hymn at an anti-racist demonstration, it is the idea of Finnishness that is questioned and redefined.

Conclusions

Similar to all social spaces, music is a racialized field of human agency. Different music genres carry racial connotations that have become (re)constructed and associated with them in the course of their histories. In these racialized, color-coded fields, musicians can be – or are not, depending on the discursive climate – perceived as racialized subjects. However, certain social and cultural transformations have made it increasingly difficult to ignore the meanings of race and have compelled more people in this field to reflect on their own relationship with (anti-)racism.

Currently, it is difficult to imagine popular music without the visual content that accompanies the sound. Racialized bodies usually appear with the visual element. In spaces determined by the normative whiteness, some bodies are not only differently but also more racialized than others. Nakamura describes the internet as "an extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counterhegemonic visual images of racialized bodies" (13). Along with the rapid demographic changes and transformations of racialized relations in many European countries, this issue requires more attention to the racist or the anti-racist meanings that can be included in music productions and their circulation. Our analyses of some of the music videos suggest that just changing a single racialized body into one that is differently racialized can construct new, anti-racist meanings in music.

In predominantly white societies, being "just a musician" can be difficult or nearly impossible for one who is positioned in a racial minority. Our previous ethnographic projects have confirmed that in Finland as well, some musicians of color do not want to be presented as racialized (black or non-white) subjects in the context of their profession. This preference does not suggest that race does not matter to them, but they want to preserve their right to be regarded as musicians above all. For white musicians, being "just musicians" is much easier. Nevertheless, similar to all social fields in multiethnic societies, music cultures are undergoing transformation. For racialized, minoritized subjects, such as young black Finnish rappers, becoming musicians can give them voices and active political citizenship. For them, it is easier to enter a field that embraces their differences and where they may even benefit from their particularities. This has certainly been the case for celebrity figures (e.g., Musta Barbaari) whose involvement in

rap seems to be more of a tool to have their voices heard than a result of artistic ambitions. However, young black rappers who clearly aim for a music career have likewise used their pieces to express their political opinions. Some do so directly (e.g., [Maikal with his song "Maan tavalla"](#)), several (e.g., Gracias) actively by contributing to other artists' anti-racist projects, and others more subtly in their music by including references to global black cultures and to local discussions on racism.

Until recently, racism had rarely been a topic of public discussion in Finland, and musicians with a white majority background had not necessarily considered racism an issue to which they should react. Musicians are usually not paid for charity gigs, and becoming public opponents of racism may decrease the artists' popularity and income in a society where anti-immigrant political parties have gained a significant percentage of the votes in recent elections. Along with the color blindness that prevents many white people from acknowledging racism and its consequences for other people, this situation may explain music professionals' relatively low participation in anti-racist activities. Nonetheless, the radical change in the discursive climate in relation to questions of racism – especially people's reactions to the increase in hate speech and racist violence – has clearly inspired some musicians to take a stand against racism.

In societies where racism has become a common topic of public discussions, white people are also expected to be aware of the issue and the complicated discourses concerning race and its various meanings. Some musicians may have adopted an anti-racist worldview and agency because of the genre of the music they perform. Encounters and collaboration with fellow musicians who are positioned differently in racialized social hierarchies provide opportunities to learn from their situation as racialized subjects. In the case of many, but not all, white Finnish rappers, this understanding, along with studying the histories and the social forces embodied in their music genre, has resulted in their commitment to anti-racism. However, an anti-racist agency is not limited to rap and other "black" music genres.

Many white Finnish musicians representing different music genres have recently commented on racism, either in their lyrics or by supporting anti-racist initiatives. In predominantly white societies with a xenophobic and racist discursive climate, even performing with non-white colleagues can be understood as a gesture against racism. Even some musicians, whose fans probably include supporters of populist politicians promoting anti-immigrant politics, have lent their voice in support of anti-racist actions. One such example is Pate Mustajärvi, a famous singer and the bandleader of the Suomi-rock band Popeda, whose statement is included in the YouTube channel of the We Have a Dream demonstration. We do not know the identities of those musicians who have refused to participate in anti-racist projects and events, but clearly, such a decision by a famous artist can also be interpreted as a statement. The two demonstrations discussed in this article were exceptional events because the preceding racist incidents were so extensively condemned in Finnish society. Therefore, the pressure to join these demonstrations and the related social media campaigns placed many musicians in a new situation that compelled them to take a stance against racism.

As our analyses of a few music videos show, it is difficult or almost impossible to analyze music as if it could be a race-free zone, at least when the audience members view a non-white body in a setting where they are used to seeing white people. An anti-racist message can sometimes be conveyed just by bringing a non-white body into a setting where whiteness is

the norm. However, when people step out of their white comfort zone, white bodies can also contribute to creating anti-racist spaces, such as the group of classical musicians who participated in a political event promoting anti-racism and multiculturalism in front of a Christian church. Their rendition of the composition that is known for its nationalistic meaning in Finland carried a strong anti-racist message.

Anti-racism is still understood as an issue that belongs, above all, to non-white people and/or to particular music genres. There is ample scholarly discussion on the role of music in particular anti-racist political movements, but our analyses suggest the need for further research on the meanings of race in different music cultures and social spaces and on the potentials of music in the fight against racism.

Notes

1. For information on research materials produced during our previous projects, see “Music as a Site for Africanness and Diaspora Cultures” (Rastas and Seye), “Afrikkalaisten muusikoiden historia” (Seye), “Society in the Museum” (Sancho Querol), and “Studying African Diaspora Communities” (Rastas).
2. Elina Seye and Uyi Osazee planned the video jukebox with over 20 music videos by Finnish artists who identified with the African diaspora and which was included in the *African Presence in Finland* exhibition at the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas in 2015.
3. The lyrics by some of these artists have been discussed in detail in the articles on the politics of belonging (Leppänen and Westinen) and on the ethnic otherness of a black man (Westinen and Lehtonen).
4. Our translation.
5. The name Loldiers of Odin is in itself a mockery of the Soldiers of Odin patrols, as the letter *s* in the first syllable *sol* is changed to *l* to form the acronym LOL (laugh out loud), often used in text messages and social media comments.
6. Some readers may know the melody of the Finlandia Hymn as “The Song of Peace” by Peter, Paul and Mary, but in Finland, most people know only the original orchestral composition by Sibelius, particularly the hymn part.
7. Translation from Finnish to English by the authors.
8. For a detailed analysis of the lyrics and the visual narrative of this video, see “Migrant Rap in the Periphery” (Leppänen and Westinen).

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