

CHAPTER 8

“We’re Not All Thugs in the East”

The Racial Politics of Place in Afro-Finnish Hip Hop

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Abstract

This chapter explores the discursive construction of East Helsinki as a racialized and classed space in the Finnish cultural imaginary through an analysis of Afro-Finnish hip hop. Based on a critical discursive analysis of four songs by the rapper Prinssi Jusuf and the duo Seksikäs-Suklaa & Dosdela, I examine how rappers from East Helsinki challenge and negotiate the stigma associated with the district via their music. Using Loïc Wacquant’s (2009) framework of *territorial stigmatization*, I show the ways in which these rappers deploy different discourses about East Helsinki that resist the stigmatization of East Helsinki, while also creating new discourses that transcend efforts to mitigate stigma. I argue that in addition to challenging the mainstream media-produced stereotypes about East Helsinki as a dilapidated and crime-ridden problem area, the rappers also “talk back” by producing counter-discourses about “the East” as a sphere of belonging, home and freedom, juxtaposed against broader experiences of exclusion. East Helsinki’s reputation as the home of immigrants and

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low-income residents is also claimed as a point of pride, as a source of collective identification and as a sphere of belonging.

Keywords: discourse, East Helsinki, territorial stigmatization, hip hop, urban studies, Black studies

Introduction

Consider the following descriptions of East Helsinki, as provided by Finnish news media:

“*Maahanmuuttajalähiö*”—“Immigrant suburb”

“*Stadin dissatuin alue*”—“The most dissed part of the city”

“*Lähi-itä Helsinki*”—“Middle East-Helsinki”

“*Ankea betonilähiö*”—“Desolate concrete suburb”

“*Se on kuin Somalia*”—“It’s like going to Somalia”

“*Suomen väkivaltaisim lähiö*”—“Finland’s most violent suburb”

“*Ongelmalähiö*”—“Problem suburb”

“*Maahanmuuttajavaltainen alue*”—“Immigrant-dominated area”

The above quotes come from a range of sources, including politicians, journalists, researchers and residents. Whether the focus is its ethnic composition, urban development or social outcomes, the eastern district of Helsinki is most often depicted negatively in Finnish news media discourses. Indeed, even positive depictions of the district are usually framed with reference to these negative discourses, illustrating the salience of what has been called *territorial stigmatization* (Wacquant 2009).

Scholars across disciplines and national contexts have examined the discursive stigmatization of urban spaces associated with immigrants, people of color and poor people, including in Australia (Birdsall-Jones 2013), the United Kingdom (Hancock and Mooney 2013) and Denmark (Waaddegaard 2019). Within the framework of territorial stigmatization, Loïc Wacquant (2011) has also proposed a differentiation of the myriad strategies that residents of stigmatized neighborhoods fashion to manage stigma, ranging from submitting to and reproducing the stigma to defying and deflecting the stigma (Wacquant 2011). Previous studies have also examined the ways in which residents of stigmatized urban communities around the world are impacted by (Peters and de Andrade 2017), mediate the effects of (Horgan 2018) and respond to (Cuny 2019) territorial stigmatization. In the case of youth from stigmatized

urban communities, studies have found hip hop culture to function as a kind of informal curriculum for making sense of territorial stigmatization, as well as a source of empowerment in the face of marginalization (Sernhede 2011).

This chapter explores the discursive construction of East Helsinki as a racialized and classed space in Finnish cultural discourse through an analysis of how Afro-Finnish rappers from East Helsinki negotiate the stigma associated with the district. Based on an in-depth analysis of four songs and their accompanying music videos by the rapper Prinssi Jusuf and the duo Seksikäs-Suklaa & Dosdela, I examine the ways in which these songs can be seen as a product of—and challenge to—the negative portrayals of East Helsinki in Finnish popular discourses. To do so, I approach hip hop as a living archive for the study of racialized lived realities and as a site for the production of counter-hegemonic discourses (Kelekay 2019). Using Wacquant, Slater and Borges Pereira’s (2014) framework of territorial stigmatization in action, I show how these rappers deploy different discourses about East Helsinki that both resist and transcend stigmatization through the strategies of stigma inversion, rejection and defiance. In doing so, the rappers not only challenge the mainstream media-produced stereotypes about East Helsinki as a dilapidated and crime-ridden problem area, but also “talk back” (hooks 1986) by producing counter-discourses about “the East” as a sphere of belonging, juxtaposed against broader experiences of exclusion. As such, I argue that these rappers not only confront the territorial stigmatization of East Helsinki, but also challenge the discursive construction of East Helsinki as outside the Finnish national imaginary.

In order to contextualize the discursive context within which Afro-Finnish rappers make their interventions, in the following sections I describe the racial landscape of Finland and the terrain of Finnish racial discourses. I then introduce hip hop as a vehicle for alternative discourses and situate my study of Afro-Finnish rap within the broader fields of African diaspora studies and Finnish hip hop studies. Finally, I present my analysis and conclude with final remarks on the significance of Afro-Finnish hip hop for understanding “the racialization of space and the spatialization of race” (Lipsitz 2007: 12) in the Finnish popular imaginary.

The Finnish Racial Landscape

Finland is often considered one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries, even among the Nordics. For most of its young history, Finland was mainly a country of emigration rather than immigration, with Finns mostly emigrating to neighboring Sweden or former European settler colonies like the United States and Australia (Korkisaari and Söderling 2003). Those who did migrate to Finland were either returning Finnish emigrants from Sweden and Russia or

from elsewhere in Europe (*ibid.*). As such, as is the case with most of Europe, the racial landscape of Finland has been significantly shaped by patterns of post-colonial migration (Blakely 2009). Yet, unlike major former colonial powers like Britain and France, the communities of color residing in the Nordic countries do not come from their former colonies. Instead, the majority of non-European immigrants to Finland have been refugees, which has structured both the population dynamics and the local discourses around race, ethnicity and migration.

Although non-European immigrants had settled in Finland in smaller numbers for several decades, it was not until the early 1990s that a consequential number of refugees began to arrive from Africa and the Middle East. During the first half of the 1990s, an unprecedented number of African asylum seekers—mostly from the Horn of Africa—arrived in Finland, overshadowing all other refugee populations (Korkisaari and Söderling 2003). As conflicts in East Africa calmed, the number of refugees from Africa began to settle, with the majority of refugee arrivals in the 2000s coming from the Middle East, primarily from Iraq and Afghanistan (*ibid.*). Still, Somalis remain the largest non-European ethnic minority in Finland (Statistics Finland 2019). The rapid change from a society perceived as untouched by non-European immigration to a society suddenly becoming home to growing communities of Black, Brown and Muslim people caused a backlash that journalist Esa Aallas termed “Somali Shock” (Aallas 1991). “Somali Shock” was used to refer both to Finnish society’s inability to adjust to the sudden presence of an African, Black and Muslim refugee population, but also, consequently, to that population’s struggles to integrate into Finnish society. Decades after the arrival of the first African refugees, Finnish society appears to still be grappling with the “shock” of diversity, both in its acceptance of the East African refugees who arrived throughout the 1990s, as well as more recent refugee arrivals from Africa and the Middle East. It should be noted, however, that although Finnish society has undoubtedly experienced a rapid diversification over the past three decades, the historical struggles of the Sámi and the Roma communities remind us that the notion that Finland was a racially, ethnically and culturally homogenous nation prior to arrival of African refugees is more myth than reality. Yet, despite Finland’s complex historical relationship with nation, ethnicity and identity—or perhaps precisely because of it—Finnishness remains normatively defined as whiteness in mainstream discourse (Rastas 2016).

Today, an estimated one in ten residents in Finland have a foreign background, with the number increasing to one in five in the greater Helsinki metropolitan area. Indeed, approximately half of all people in Finland with a foreign background reside in the greater Helsinki area (City of Helsinki 2019). While the former Soviet Union and Estonia are the most common countries of origin among immigrants overall, Somalis make up the largest non-European minority group in the country and the largest immigrant population

in the Helsinki area. Since 2015, people of Asian descent are the fastest-growing immigrant population, with the majority of new immigrants coming from Iraq, but also from Syria and the Philippines (Statistics Finland 2019). Finns of African descent, or Afro-Finns, are also the largest group among so-called second-generation immigrants, with Somalis making up the clear majority of people of African descent (*ibid.*).

Researchers have examined the experiences of Finland’s African diasporic communities through studies of ethnic and transnational identities (Rastas 2013), African diasporic cultural production (Rastas and Seye 2016; Westinen and Lehtonen 2016) and experiences of racism (Rastas 2009; Zacheus et al. 2019). Research reports have consistently highlighted the prevalence of anti-Black racism as an institutional phenomenon in Finland, including through “ethnic profiling” by police (Keskinen et al. 2018), discriminatory practices in education and the workplace (Non-Discrimination Ombudsman 2020) and the impact of racial discrimination on health outcomes (Rask et al. 2018). In 2018, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published a report titled *Being Black in the EU*, which named Finland as one of the most racist European countries for people of African descent, highlighting that more than half of all Afro-Finns report experiencing racist discrimination, harassment or violence.

The Discursive Construction of East Helsinki

With over one-quarter of the nation’s population residing in the Helsinki metropolitan area, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that most (although not all) non-European immigrants arrive and choose to stay within the capital region (Statistics Finland 2019). Furthermore, immigrants have also historically tended to reside in Helsinki’s outer peripheries, with the neighborhoods of the Eastern district having become home to the largest concentration of immigrant populations (Kortteinen and Vaattovaara 2000). Indeed, within the Helsinki metropolitan area, roughly one-third (30 percent) of the city’s population with a foreign background live in the city’s eastern district, nearly double the city total of 16 percent (City of Helsinki 2019). For example, in 2016, over 34 percent of the East Helsinki neighborhood of Meri-Rastila’s population was of foreign descent (Malmberg 2017). East Helsinki is also colloquially considered to be the main home of Black communities in Helsinki, as suggested by cultural references connecting East Helsinki to African immigrants. One of the most notable examples includes the short-lived 2006 comedy series dealing with the everyday lives of immigrants in East Helsinki entitled *Mogadishu Avenue*, a reference to the nickname of the main street in the Meri-Rastila neighborhood where many Somalis live (Marttila 2006). When Somali refugees first began arriving in the early 1990s, many were placed in social housing estates along the main street cutting through the neighborhood, earning the street its nickname.

Although no longer commonly used in a serious manner, the reference has nonetheless maintained its cultural salience among different populations and age groups (Ainiala and Halonen 2011).

East Helsinki has also historically been a working-class area, with the construction of several social housing estates contributing to the area's urbanization post-Second World War (Stjernberg 2015). The concentration of immigrants and people of color in the area is similarly a result of social policies placing newly arrived refugees in these social housing estates (Vaattovaara et al. 2010). As a result, the eastern district has accumulated disadvantages in the form of lack of access to resources and social services, higher rates of unemployment, lower rates of educational attainment and lower median income (Kortteinen and Vaattovaara 2000). These disadvantages disproportionately impact residents with foreign backgrounds, both compared to their fellow East Helsinki residents and the people with foreign backgrounds residing elsewhere in Helsinki (City of Helsinki 2019). This has sparked both public and scholarly debates about economic and ethnic segregation (Stjernberg 2015; Vaattovaara et al. 2010; Vilkkama 2011), as well as unequal urban development (Kortteinen, Tuominen and Vaattovaara 2005; Kortteinen and Vaattovaara 2000). Researchers have also examined the impact of residential segregation, including notions of “social disorder” (Varady and Schulman 2007), so-called “white flight” (Vilkkama, Ahola and Vaattovaara 2016) and the impact of urban renewal and transformation efforts (Kallio et al. 2019; Tuominen 2020).

News and popular media narratives about East Helsinki tend to perpetuate stigmatizing discourses about the district, often relying on its working-class and immigrant-dense reputation to construct it as a problem area. Indeed, East Helsinki is not only constructed as a hub of immigrant communities, but it is framed as a problem by describing it as an area dominated or “overtaken” by immigrants. This is illustrated in the common and uncontroversial use of the label “immigrant suburb” in media discourses, as well as the more loaded term “immigrant-dominated suburb.” The perception of East Helsinki as somehow “overtaken” by immigrants is exemplified in recent far-right-staged manifestations at various locations in East Helsinki. In 2016, the neo-Nazi political party *Suomi Ensin* (Finland First) staged a protest at the shopping center *Puhos*, located in Itäkeskus, which is known for its immigrant-owned businesses and, consequently, its non-white clientele (Oksanen 2016). The protest, which was framed as an attempt to “stop Islamization,” was held next to the mosque at Puhos. A similar protest was staged at Puhos in 2018 by the same group, following another protest outside the shopping center in the East Helsinki neighborhood of Kontula—a series of protests that the group framed as an attempt to save “Middle-East Helsinki” on behalf of the Finnish residents of the area and the Finnish nation as a whole (de Wit 2018). That same year, the neo-Nazi vigilante group *Soldiers of Odin* was reported to be “patrolling” Puhos, striking fear in shop-owners and visitors alike (Salmi 2018; Suomi 2018). Such neo-Nazi manifestations have even targeted elementary schools in East Helsinki, with the

Nordic Resistance Movement staging protests outside schools in both Kontula and Meri-Rastila in 2017 and 2018, respectively (Pietiläinen 2017; 2018).

Another narrative that is prominently featured in discourses about East Helsinki is that of East Helsinki as an unsafe place. The idea of East Helsinki as poor, dilapidated and immigrant-dominated often feeds into these discourses of the area’s dangerousness. Kontula, another East Helsinki neighborhood well known for its immigrant-dense population, is often discursively constructed as the “worst of the worst” when it comes to Helsinki’s urban peripheries (Juntunen 2019). As a result of a study mapping incidents of violent crime by neighborhoods in Finland, Finnish media framed Kontula as “the most violent suburb in the country,” while highlighting the several East Helsinki suburbs ranking among the top ten (Lähteenmäki 2018; Vehkasalo 2020). Other media narratives have focused on residents’ fear of crime and feelings of unsafety in East Helsinki, which are reportedly getting worse (Kääriäinen 2002; Paastela 2019; Tuominen 2013). Residents—usually white residents—are interviewed and describe feeling particularly unsafe in public spaces such as near shopping centers and metro stations, with Kontula again as the primary focus (Koskela 2020). These discourses about East Helsinki as unsafe have also been tied to the “white flight” phenomenon, with reports indicating that the area’s reputation for social issues is listed as one of the reasons that (presumably white) residents tend to leave the area. One of the ways in which media discourses frame this white flight without explicitly discussing race is through the emphasis on “Finnish-speaking residents” moving and “Finnish-speaking school children” leaving the area’s schools (Paastela 2020). Less subtle reports declared this trend as an “escape from immigrant-dominated schools” (Moisio and Mäkinen 2009). Indeed, the social issues that cause residents to want to leave East Helsinki have been attributed to “tensions brought on by multiculturalism” (Jaskari 2018).

Resident-produced and -influenced media discourses often attempt to counter the territorial stigmatization of East Helsinki, for example through articles countering claims made in previously published negative news stories (e.g. Virkkunen 2017; Vuorio 2013) or through the production of positive news stories about the area (Lehtonen 2018; Mokka 2014). East Helsinki has also commonly been depicted in popular cultural narratives, including in film (Pirttilahti and Takkala 2016; Tujula 2012), television (Marttila 2006) and hip hop (Kärnä 2008). East Helsinki has been a staple in Finnish hip hop since the genre’s mainstream popularization in the early 2000s, with narratives about “the East” both affirming and challenging the common stereotypes about East Helsinki.

Hip Hop as Alternative Discourse

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has highlighted that hip hop music and culture has historically served as a tool for intervention into dominant discourses that

often render racialized communities as simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible—hypervisible in that they frequently become the subjects of discourse, but invisible in that their own narratives are excluded from such discourses (Collins 2006: 7). Scholars of the global spread of hip hop have also emphasized the ways in which hip hop has historically and globally been a crucial cultural sphere in which to engage experiences of race and racism, gender and national belonging (Bennett 1999; El-Tayeb 2003; Mitchell 2000; Morgan and Bennett 2011; Prévos 1996; Weheliye 2009). In her book *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, Fatima El-Tayeb argues that the new generation of European youth of color and activists have

appropriated hip-hop as a tool of intervention that allows racialized communities across the continent to formulate an identity negated in dominant discourses; an identity that transcends mononational assignments through its multiethnic and translocal frame of reference, but that nonetheless, or arguably because of it, effectively challenges minorities' expulsion from national discourses. (El-Tayeb 2011: 19)

El-Tayeb highlights that it is imperative that we look beyond state-oriented definitions of racial others in Europe, urging that we instead center European racial minorities' experiences, perspectives and forms of cultural production in our inquiries about race and racism (2011). As numerous scholars have illustrated, hip-hop music and culture has played an important role in the development of African diasporic identities and communities (Morgan and Bennett 2011; Perry 2008). Scholars across the world have also long examined the relationship between hip hop, racial/ethnic identity, community and political consciousness in various contexts, including Germany (El-Tayeb 2003; Weheliye 2009), France (Prévos 1996), Canada (Ibrahim 1999) and South Africa (Hammett 2012). Indeed, hip hop is often considered to function as “the lingua franca of the African diaspora” (El-Tayeb 2011: 29). While hip-hop culture's global circulation has highlighted its translocal relevance and appeal, the myriad ways in which hip-hop culture has been translated to fit local contexts also illustrates the centrality of place and space for understanding hip hop. In *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip Hop*, hip hop scholar Murray Forman reminds us that “Rap music takes the city and its multiple spaces as the foundation of its cultural production” (2002: xviii). Forman points out that “the vast majority of spatial articulations within hip-hop emerge from within the contextual boundaries of the urban sphere, a factor that has remained consistent since the culture's inception and remains true even as hip-hop's forms and expressions have circulated globally” (2002: 26). Following El-Tayeb (2003) and Collins (2006), I approach hip hop as a living archive for the study of racialized lived realities, as a tool for constructing collective identities and as a site for the production of counter-narratives that “talk back” to stigmatizing

mainstream discourses (Kelekay 2019). By focusing on rap music produced by Afro-Finnish rappers *from* East Helsinki and *about* East Helsinki, I also heed Forman's (2002) call for scholars to pay more attention to spatiality and the relationship between race, space and place in analyses of rap and hip hop.

Centering Afro-Finnish Rap

Since its arrival in Finland in the 1980s, hip hop music and culture was, until recently, almost entirely dominated by white Finnish men, with little acknowledgment of cultural appropriation or discussion of its African-American roots (Tervo 2014). As journalist Koko Hubara discusses in her 2017 collection of essays about race and the experiences of "Brown" girls in Finland, US hip hop became almost universally embraced by the first generation of Finnish youth of color in the 1990s, providing them with what was often the only source of both the visual representation of Black and Brown bodies and the discursive representation of narratives about and by members of racialized communities (Hubara 2017). This has been affirmed by studies highlighting that US hip hop culture provides Finnish youth of color with tools to navigate identity work (Nieminen 2015) and make sense of their relationship to Finnish society (Himma 2016). Hip hop culture has no doubt had a particularly significant impact on African diasporic youth in and from East Helsinki. Journalist Pietari Peutere (2008) has rationalized that this is because the increased popularity of hip hop in the 1990s coincided with when the first significant number of young Somalis were growing up in the area, which provided them with a cultural reference they could relate to and translate to the local context of life in the urban periphery. Moreover, Peutere argues that it also helped develop a generation of young white allies who might have been more hesitant to associate with the growing number of Black youths in their midst if it was not for their admiration for the increasingly popular Black cultural form. This, Peutere argues, facilitated the creation of a unified hip hop culture among urban youth that positioned itself in opposition to the white supremacist skinhead subculture that was simultaneously growing during the 1990s.

Finnish hip-hop scholars have previously examined the way in which East Helsinki has been crucial for the development of Finnish hip hop and how, in turn, hip hop has played an important part in shaping East Helsinki in the Finnish social imaginary (Kärnä 2008; Tervo 2014). East Helsinki hip hop has been recognized as a subarea of Finnish hip hop with a reputation for being particularly authentic, gritty and socially conscious (Kärnä 2008; Westinen 2014). While such analyses have highlighted the class critique and social marginalization that white East Helsinki rappers often center in their discourses, they have not explored the relationship between race, class and place in constructions of East Helsinki. Furthermore, while Finnish hip hop scholars

have also begun to explore so-called “migrant rap” (Leppänen and Westinen 2017; Westinen 2017; 2018), these analyses have not engaged with race as a historically, materially and socially constructed reality. With this study, I seek to contribute to the growing field of hip hop studies in Finland by placing critical analyses of race at the center. I approach the study of hip hop from a sociological perspective informed by the interdisciplinary fields of cultural studies and African diaspora studies.

The Present Study

Using an interdisciplinary critical discourse analytic approach, I examine a selection of songs and music videos released by Black rappers from East Helsinki to examine how they construct (and respond to) discourses about the area. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) as an analytical approach examines “the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance” (van Dijk 1993: 249). While CDA has its underpinnings in linguistics, the critical discourse analytic approach has been utilized by scholars working inter- and trans-disciplinarily to examine power relations through discourse (Phelan 2017), including studies of how racism influences and is evident in news media (Teo 2000), political discourses (Capdevila and Callaghan 2008) and institutional discourses (Trochmann et al. 2021). CDA has also previously been used to study racialized discourses in reality television (Giannino and Campbell 2012), sports commentaries (Lavelle 2010) and hip hop (Helland 2018). In this study, I deploy CDA as a tool to interrogate the cultural “production of difference and its relation to power, exploitation, and the persistence of inequality” (Kelley 2020: 4).

To examine how rappers construct discourses about East Helsinki as racialized and classed space, I focus on Afro-Finnish rappers who are both from and rap about East Helsinki. I do so to emphasize the ways in which these rappers, as Black men, who are often the subject of racialized discourses about East Helsinki, understand, negotiate and produce their own discourses about “the East.” I specifically analyze a sample of songs by Josijas Belayneh, Luyeye Konssi and Hanad Hassan, better known by the rap alias Prinssi Jusuf [Prince Jusuf] and as the duo Seksikäs-Suklaa [Sexy Chocolate] & Dosdela, respectively. These artists were chosen in part because they have over the last several years made a mark on public discourses about immigration, Finnishness and racism through both their music and their social media productions. As East Helsinki natives, the district has also been prominently featured in their lyrics, music videos and social media content.

Since his debut in the early 2010s alongside fellow Afro-Finnish rapper Musta Barbaari [the Black Barbarian], Belayneh, who is of Ethiopian heritage, has maintained a steady presence in the hip hop scene with music that

often explicitly comments on issues of identity, national belonging and racism. Rising to the public consciousness primarily through their social media skits about life in East Helsinki, Congolese-Finnish Konssi and Somali-Finnish Hassan have also translated their comedic talents into careers as rappers and entertainers more broadly. Although these men are not the only Black rappers on the Finnish hip-hop scene, they have become active media personalities, using their platforms to push forth a conversation about immigration, racism and what it means to be Finnish.² All artists also rap in Finnish, although they often infuse Black-American vernacular with Finnish urban (and specifically youth-of-color) slang.³ As part of the first wave of a burgeoning Afro-Finnish hip hop scene, these rappers have also received a great deal of attention from Finnish hip hop scholars, most of whom have focused on sociolinguistic analyses of their construction of themselves as the “Other” (Leppänen and Westinen 2017; Westinen 2017; 2018; Westinen and Lehtonen 2016).

I have previously examined Afro-Finnish rappers’ articulations of racial and ethnic identifications as a resistance to erasure and racism, their negotiations of imposed racial, ethnic and national narratives, and the salience of place for establishing spaces of community and belonging in the face of national exclusion (Kelekay 2019). Shifting from individual identification to collective identification, I focus here on how Prinssi Jusuf and Seksikäs-Suklaa & Dosdela articulate discourses around East Helsinki. In nearly all their songs, references are made to the eastern district of Helsinki, which is considered the primary home of African immigrants in Finland, and where all the men themselves grew up. Place is more central in some songs than others, and references vary, from different names to different modalities. The district is referred to as “East Helsinki,” simply “the East” or by reference to individual neighborhoods within the district. East Helsinki is also prominently featured in their music videos, whether it is included in the textual narrative of the song or simply serves as a visual backdrop. This is illustrative of the way in which East Helsinki is inextricably tied not only to the individual and collective identities of the rappers, but to the production process itself. It is where the men live, so it naturally becomes part of their everyday lived experiences, which also makes its way into their music. It is where they write, and often where they record. It is where they set their music videos even when not explicitly trying to communicate locality. But by virtue of both the space it has come to occupy in the cultural imaginary, and the ways in which it is tied to their individual and collective identities, East Helsinki is featured as a common theme in their songs.

Although these themes are present in a larger body of these artists’ songs, I have chosen to undertake a qualitative in-depth analysis of a small sample of songs and music videos to facilitate a closer and more nuanced look at how both the songs’ lyrics and music videos reflect and engage with the racial (and classed) politics of place. For the purposes of this chapter, I explicate this

through an analysis of the lyrics and music videos of four songs; *Denssi*,⁴ *Mis Asun*⁵ [Where I Live], *Myönnä*⁶ [Admit It] and *Niiku97*⁷ [Like 97].⁸ I have chosen these songs because of the ways in which they contend with the notion of East Helsinki as a stigmatized place. As such, I use Loïc Wacquant's (2009) framework of *territorial stigmatization* to analyze the ways in which these songs can be seen as a product of—and challenge to—the negative portrayals of East Helsinki in Finnish popular discourses.

Challenging Territorial Stigmatization

The stereotype of East Helsinki as a problem area that is unsafe, dilapidated and undesirable is widely perpetuated in Finnish popular discourse. Within the framework of territorial stigmatization, residents of stigmatized neighborhoods deploy a range of tactics to manage stigma, ranging from submitting to and reproducing the stigma to defying and deflecting them (Wacquant 2011). Which strategies residents deploy depends on their “position and trajectory in social and physical space,” varying depending on age, ethnicity, gender and other factors (Wacquant, Slater and Borges Pereira 2014: 1276). While many (white) East Helsinki rappers have historically internalized the territorial stigma associated with “the East” and claimed it as a badge of honor for the sake of “street cred” to grant them hip hop authenticity (Kärnä 2008; Westinen 2014), Prinssi Jusuf and Seksikäs-Suklaa & Dosdela seem to take a different approach. Instead of internalizing the stereotypes associated with East Helsinki to establish some type of hip hop credibility, they either challenge them using humor to invert the stigma, outright reject them or defy them by deploying counter-narratives celebrating “the East” as a sphere of collective identity and belonging. This constellation of discourses aligns with the strategies Wacquant (2011) frames as “stigma inversion,” “defense of the neighborhood” and “studied indifference,” respectively.

Stigma Inversion: Humor as a Stigma Management Strategy

Humor has had a complicated place in Finnish hip hop. When hip hop first arrived in Finland, white Finnish rappers used parody as a tool to navigate their lack of credibility as performers of the African-American cultural form (Kärjä 2011; Tervo and Ridanpää 2016). However, these humorous adaptations of hip hop also caricatured African-American culture as a way to “secure the ethnic Other” and thereby rendering the specter of racial difference—and the racialized politics of hip hop—non-threatening to white Finnish performers and consumers of hip hop alike (Kärjä 2011). Indeed, the parodic style exemplified in early Finnish hip hop can be seen as rooted in the tradition of Finnish

adaptations of Black face and minstrelsy, which were also adopted into local Finnish culture from the United States, with “some of the first rap performances [aiming] to parody African-American culture” (Tervo and Ridanpää 2016: 621).

Furthermore, by making their appropriations of hip hop humorous, early Finnish rappers managed to bypass the politics of authenticity (Kärjä 2011). The 2000s saw the rise of a more earnest Finnish rap scene, with groups like *Fintelligens* translating US hip hop culture for local youth culture (Tervo 2014). Despite the original caricatured version of Finnish humor rap’s loss of mainstream favor, it still remains part of the Finnish rap scene (Tervo and Ridanpää 2016). These Afro-Finnish rappers, however, use humor in a different way. Both in their social media content and in their music, Prinssi Jusuf and Seksikäs-Suklaa & Doslada use humor to navigate stereotypes about immigrants, Africans and Black people more broadly (Kelekay 2019; Westinen 2018). Indeed, humor is commonly used as an anti-racist counter-strategy in response to racist stereotypes, both by Black entertainers and in Black social settings (Weaver 2010). As such, we can understand Afro-Finnish rappers’ deployment of humor as a counter-strategy with which to contest what Stuart Hall called “racialized regimes of representation” (1997: 269; Westinen 2018: 135).

Seksikäs-Suklaa & Doslada are also particularly known for their social media sketches playing with stereotypes about East Helsinki as ghettoized, poor, dangerous and crime-ridden. This has also made its way into their music. The song *Mis Asun* [Where I Live] is a prime example of this. The narrative of the song describes scenarios where the men experience rejection by women who find out where they live. The chorus sums it up:

<i>Olit lähtemäs mukaan</i>	You were about to leave with me
<i>Sit sä kuulit mis asun</i>	Then you heard where I live
<i>Ois voinu olla jotain</i>	This could have been something
<i>Sit sä kuulit mis asun</i>	Then you heard where I live

<i>Sä sanot tääl kaikki on hankalaa</i>	You say everything is difficult here
<i>Ja mikään ei saa sua Kontulaan</i>	And nothing will get you to Kontula
<i>Meil ois voinu olla juttuu</i>	We could have had a thing
<i>Mut nyt sä kuulit mis asun</i>	But now you heard where I live

The line “you say everything is difficult here, and nothing will get you to Kontula” drives home the point that it is not just a matter of the woman not wanting to leave with him because he lives in the periphery of the city, but that it is because of the stigma associated with the particular neighborhood he lives in. The first verse delivers the painstaking story of how Doslada journeyed to the city center for a night out on the town.

<i>Muistan vielä sen illan</i>	I still remember that night
<i>Tulin yli Kulosaaren sillan</i>	I came over the Kulosaari bridge
<i>Astuin baariin</i>	Stepped into a bar
<i>Näin kuuman daamin</i>	Saw a hot dame
<i>Jota aloin heti vaanii</i>	I immediately began to prowl
<i>Ei</i>	No
<i>Kysyin nimee</i>	I asked for her name
<i>Nimi oli Tuula</i>	Her name was Tuula
<i>Läppä lensi niinkun Arsi Harjun kuula</i>	Our jokes flew like Arsi Harju's shotput
<i>Kerroin sulle et mä asun Kontulassa</i>	I told you I live in Kontula
<i>Sanoit hyi niinku Adi L Hasla</i>	You said eww like Adi L Hasla
<i>Et korkokengilläkaan bussiin halua astua</i>	You don't even want to step into a bus with heels on
<i>Bussilattiat on täynnä sipsilastuja</i>	The floors of the bus are full of chips
<i>Et suostu mennä jatkoille ilman taxia</i>	You won't go to an afterparty without a taxi
<i>Ilman taxii mulla ei käy flaksii</i>	Without a taxi I'm out of luck
<i>Sä etsit seurapiirin rakkautta</i>	You're looking for high society love
<i>Meil ei oo kai tulevaisuutta</i>	I guess we have no future
<i>Yht juttuu en osannut aavistaa</i>	One thing I couldn't have predicted
<i>Kuulin myöhemmin et reppaat Rastilaa</i>	I heard later that you rep' Rastila

The music video features Seksikäs-Suklaa & Dosedela, along with producer and featured artist VG+, riding the Helsinki metro from its eastern end to the west. Scenes show the rappers hanging out at various metro platforms, in front of the Kontula shopping center and inside the train. The reference to “crossing the Kulosaari bridge” signals the crossing of both a physical and a symbolic boundary between East Helsinki and central Helsinki as “the East” is colloquially understood to begin on the other side of the Kulosaari bridge, even though the formal boundaries of the eastern district have been drawn in various ways over the years. Once in the bar, Dosedela meets a (Finnish, as indicated by the name) woman, with whom he gets along well (the line that “jokes flew like Arsi Harju’s shotput” is a reference to a celebrated Finnish shotput athlete).

However, when he reveals that he lives in Kontula, the tone changes (the line “you said eww like Adi L Hasla” is a reference to a song by the rap artist). The woman’s resistance to going to Kontula is framed as a question of socioeconomic stigma, with her refusing to take the bus—a reference evoking stigma all on its own, as the night buses running from the city center to East Helsinki after the end of metro services are colloquially thought to be filled with noisy, messy and drunk people. Instead, “Tuula” only agrees to go with him if he can afford

a taxi. Her classed expectations are affirmed with the line “you’re looking for high society love,” which he concludes renders them without a future.

Tuula’s joint rejection of him based on his lack of class status is complicated by the last line, which reveals that she is actually from Rastila, another East Helsinki neighborhood. In the video, Dosdela waves his hand in disapproval of her hypocrisy when uttering the line, after which the chorus repeats. The revelation that the woman is from Rastila can be interpreted in different ways. She seems to “rep” Rastila without inhabiting the expected collective identification, perhaps indicating that she has internalized the stigma about East Helsinki and is only interested in dating “up” the social ladder. It also, however, evokes the hyper-stigmatization of Kontula even within East Helsinki, suggesting that her aversion to joining him is not about an unwillingness to go to “the East,” but is specifically about an avoidance of Kontula. This interpretation is supported by the earlier line that “nothing will get you to Kontula.” The narrative of unsuccessful attempts at wooing women because of the stigma associated with being from Kontula is juxtaposed against the upbeat vibe of the song’s Afrobeats production. It is the combination of the music, text and video that establish the humorous tone of the song, thereby displaying a simultaneous inversion of, and indifference to, the stigma.

Another way that Seksikäs-Suklaa & Dosdela use humor is by creating and playing out over-the-top narratives based on common stereotypes about East Helsinki and its residents. Playing with the stereotype of East Helsinki as crime-ridden and dangerous, they released the single *Denssi* in 2018. *Denssi*, which is a slang term for snuff, is derived from the name of the popular snuff brand Odens. Although the sale—but not the use—of snuff has been banned in Finland since 1995, it remains commonly used by Finnish male youth and men, and is today more commonly used among youth than cigarettes (Ruokolainen and Raitasalo 2017). As a result of the sales ban, people commonly travel to buy snuff for personal use or illicit re-sale in Finland (Collin 2019). It is against the backdrop of this legal and social climate that the song *Denssi* was produced. Lyrically, the song parodies gangsta rap narratives about drug dealing, portraying themselves as successful dealers of the strongest “black dirt.” The music video takes the parody further by making cultural reference to the popular Netflix drama *Narcos*, which depicts the story of Colombia’s drug trade through the lens of infamous cartel kingpin Pablo Escobar. The first frame displays the date and location as the year 2045 in Helsinki. The opening scene shows a man sitting down in front of the camera to be interviewed, his face blurred out, telling a story in Spanish about two infamous Helsinki drug dealers:

The year 2018, we had a really difficult situation in the Helsinki area. Two dudes dominated the markets at that time. Their names were El Chobo aka Seksikäs-Suklaa and his partner the Eagle. Those times were really hard for all of us. We lost a lot of good men during that time and the atmosphere in the city was really tense all the time. Really hard times ... A lot of people were traumatized because of the situation.⁹

Next, Seksikäs-Suklaa—his face also blurred—sits in the interviewee’s chair. Switching to Finnish, he explains:

Yeah, the snuff trade got out of hand, if someone tried to get in on our territory, we immediately hit them with a brick to the back of the head, you know. The business was really dirty, you know. But it’s no big thing, you know, if you try to be on our territory, you try to do your own thing, you were hit in the head. Right away, hit with Timbs in the face. The competition was eliminated, we dominated this, you know, this is completely next level. I don’t know what the snuff situation is like right now but then, *back in the days* [in English], but then it was a brick to the back of the head if your opponent tried something. *I don’t give a shit ni**a, straight out of Kontula man* [in English]. The black loose stuff, fuck.

Seksikäs-Suklaa’s interview elicits depictions of urban gang warfare over drug territories. Yet, while talking about violently “eliminating the competition,” he does not talk about “hits” in terms of shootings; instead, he describes literally hitting opponents in the back of the head with a brick or hitting them in the face with Timberland shoes. The second-to-last line, spoken in English, summons the gangsta rap group N.W.A. by appropriating their hit song *Straight Out of Compton* and localizing it by reference to the Kontula neighborhood.

After the interview scenes, the screen reads “East Helsinki, 2018,” before switching to the next scene. The rest of the video features scenes parodying depictions of drug dealing, beginning with scenes of clients coming to Seksikäs-Suklaa’s house to purchase this especially strong snuff, after which they are seen to have an overwhelming, overdose-like physical reaction. The lyrics to the chorus proclaim “fuck, denssi hits you like a fist”. Another setting shows Seksikäs-Suklaa sitting in front of a red-velvet curtain behind a table topped with towers of Odens containers and a comedically oversized bottle of cognac while Doslada stands beside him in a guarding position, casting Seksikäs-Suklaa as the man in charge and Doslada as his right-hand-man. Men come in and out of the room to exchange bags of cash for disks of snuff. They wave toy guns around while planning their next conquest on a paper map of the city. In one scene, police officers (one of whom is incidentally played by Prinssi Jusuf) enter the building in a raid-style operation, surprising the dealers with guns drawn. However, rather than arresting them, the officers laughingly throw some cash on the table and walk away with a few towers. Having left the building, the police officers are seen excitedly opening one of the containers of snuff and happily using it. One of the lines in the song begs “Can this dirt be legalized... Cigs have never been Suklaa’s thing”. While the theme of the song and the music video align with the stereotype about East Helsinki as a hub of criminal activity, the humorous low-budget portrayal of themselves as drug kingpins deflates the seemingly hyperbolic claiming of the stereotype. The fact

that the entire scenario of the music video—and the topic of the song—is about a form of tobacco rather than illicit drugs effectively elevates the caricature to the level of ridicule. In carefully curating this purposefully ridiculous depiction of the stereotype, they successfully invert the stigma while also stripping it of its power.

Rejecting the Stereotype

In other cases, the rappers also challenge territorial stigma through straightforward rejection of stereotypes. This can be seen in Prinssi Jusuf’s song *Myönnä* [Admit It]. One of the stereotypes evoked is that of “the East” as crime-ridden and, by extension, its residents as criminals. The other, albeit discursively related, stereotype is that of residents of “the East” (and particularly immigrant men) being lazy and relying on unemployment benefits rather than working. The song is an aggressive assertion of his status as a determined and hard worker, with the title repeated throughout the chorus of the song as a demand for recognition:

<i>(Myönnä)</i>	(Admit it)
<i>Kaikki mitä mä teen</i>	Everything that I do
<i>Mitä mä teen veli</i>	That I do bro
<i>(Myönnä)</i>	(Admit it)
<i>Kaikki mitä mä teen</i>	Everything that I do
<i>Se on pressii veli</i>	It’s press bro
<i>(Myönnä)</i>	(Admit it)
<i>Kaikki mitä mä teen</i>	Everything that I do
<i>Mitä mä teen veli</i>	That I do bro
<i>(Myönnä)</i>	(Admit it)
<i>Ei välii kuka teki ensin</i>	It doesn’t matter who did it first
<i>Vaan veli kuka teki parhaiten</i>	But bro who did it best

Both the sound and the music video have an aggressive, dark and grimy feel to them, amplifying the forcefulness of his message. However, rather than channeling the aggression into a hyperbolic claiming of the stereotype about Black men as threatening, he deploys it as a way to claim mainstream social status (“Everything that I do, it’s press”) and to illustrate his determination for success (“It doesn’t matter who did it first, but bro who did it best”).

The first verse continues with the theme of braggadocio and hard work, ending with the shouted declaration “my home is in the East” before going into the chorus, which now begins with a repetition of the line “I’ve got this euro and a dream”. The placement of these lines creates an association between being from the East and socioeconomic status. Rather than the line

simply communicating being poor by referencing having a single euro, the combination of a euro and a dream paints the picture of a driven underdog declaring his intentions to overcome his conditions. Prinssi Jusuf continues along these lines in the second verse:

<i>En mä tullu leijuu</i>	I didn't come to show off
<i>Mä vaan kerron miten se on</i>	I'm just telling it like it is
<i>Ei kaikki oo reiluu</i>	Not everything is fair
<i>Mä vaan kerron miten se on</i>	I'm just telling it like it is
<i>Jos haluut mukaan mun reissuun</i>	If you want to join my journey
<i>Mä kerron miten se menee</i>	I'll tell you how it goes
<i>Mee duuniin boi</i>	Get to work boy
<i>Ei me luoteta vaan tuuriin boi</i>	We don't just trust luck boy
<i>Ei uusiintoi</i>	No reruns
<i>Täällä tehään vaan toistoi</i>	Here we only do reps
<i>Toistoi</i>	Reps
<i>Eikä mietitä kunpa meitsi ois toi</i>	And we don't think about I wish I was them
<i>Ois toi</i>	Was them
<i>Ei tääl Idäs oo vaan roistoi</i>	It's not just thugs here in the East
<i>Roistoi</i>	Thugs
<i>Ei tää ghetoks muutu vaik toivois</i>	It won't turn into a ghetto even if you hope so

The first parts of the verse continue to assert Prinssi Jusuf as hard working and unassuming (“we don't just trust luck boy”). The second part turns the narrative from the individual to the collective, using weightlifting as the metaphor for hard working, asserting it is the way “we” do things here (“here we only do reps”). The line “and we don't think about I wish I was them” also constructs a narrative about focus and dedication, creating distance from the stereotype of the lazy welfare recipient. The last two lines directly challenge the common conception of the East as a ghetto and a place overrun by crime. While the first line appears as a direct statement of fact that contradicts the stereotype (“it's not just thugs here in the East”), the second line goes a step further by suggesting there are those who would hope for the East to become a ghetto, directly implicating the producers and recyclers of stigmatizing discourses. In this way, Prinssi Jusuf explicitly rejects stereotypes about the East and—by extension—about men like him as a strategic maneuver to challenge territorial stigmatization.

Defying Stigma through Counter-Narratives

In addition to inverting stigmatizing discourses and out-outright rejecting stereotypes, Prinssi Jusuf and Seksikäs-Suklaa & Doslada also deploy

counter-narratives that are seemingly indifferent to territorial stigmatization, instead celebrating the East as a sphere of belonging and home, often juxtaposed against broader narratives of exclusion. In Prinssi Jusuf’s song *Myönnä* [Admit It], this ranges from explicit declarations of “the East” as home, such as the previously discussed line “my home is in the East,” to more nuanced framings of the East as a sphere of belonging. Later in the same verse, Prinssi Jusuf announces:

<i>Meil on kossei ja somppui</i>	We’ve got Kosovars and Somalis ¹⁰
<i>Meil on romanei ja kinkkei</i>	We’ve got Roma and ch**s ¹¹
<i>Meil on kurdei ja arabei</i>	We’ve got Kurds and Arabs
<i>Oma koti kullan kallis</i>	Home sweet home

The different ethnic groups listed are a reflection of the racial landscape of East Helsinki. While there are other immigrant groups who are more numerically dominant among the population, it is the local Roma and refugees from the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia who make up the racialized communities associated with East Helsinki. The summarizing line “home sweet home” illustrates the collective identifications formed through common experiences of racialization and marginalization. Indeed, the rappers often refer to East Helsinki in both racialized and spatialized terms. Rather than accepting it as a stigma, it is claimed as a source of collective identification and pride.

The first single released by Seksikäs-Suklaa & Dosdela, *Niiku97* [Like 97], perhaps serves as the most explicit example.¹² The title, as well as the chorus of the song, serve as a reference to the area code and corresponding bus line, which runs to the East Helsinki neighborhoods of Kontula and Mellunmäki:

<i>Bussi täynnä somalei</i>	Bus is full of Somalis
<i>Somalei</i>	Somalis
<i>Bussi täynnä somalei</i>	Bus is full of Somalis
<i>Somalei</i>	Somalis
<i>Bussi täynnä somalei</i>	Bus is full of Somalis
<i>Somalei</i>	Somalis
<i>Niiku 97</i>	Like 97
<i>Niiku 97</i>	Like 97
<i>Niiku 97</i>	Like 97
<i>Kontulan kentällä</i>	On the Kontula field

The music video to the song features a bus full of young Black passengers—including many other Black/Afro-Finnish rappers—driving around in circles on this field as they dance along to the trap beats of the song. The use of the bus—a racialized and classed public space in its own right—to represent the social dynamics of the broader community is not only relevant to the

extent that it serves as a marker of who may be represented as passengers on a given bus line, but it also speaks to local common-sense understandings of what George Lipsitz refers to as the racialization of space and the spatialization of race (2007: 12). Indeed, bus lines in Helsinki are overwhelmingly (although not exclusively) numbered according to the area codes they serve in the northern and eastern working-class suburbs, thus symbolically marking bus lines as extensions of the communities they serve. The bus line someone takes, then, serves as a colloquial signifier of the community they are from. From this perspective, the staging of the 97 bus as a Black social sphere is not that unusual.

At the same time, “Like 97,” in combination with the reference to the Kontula field, also invokes the infamous 1997 attack in which a group of Nazis assaulted Somali youngsters playing football on a field in Kontula—an attack which reverberated throughout Finland’s Black communities (Sarhimaa 2016). The seriousness of the racial violence is thus juxtaposed against this celebratory image of community. It is also illustrative of the tongue-in-cheek spirit of the song, as exemplified by the first verse’s commentary on going “clubbing” as an illustration of classed differences:

<i>Koko maa, koko squad</i>	The whole country, the whole squad
<i>Klubil täyttyy kokonaan</i>	The club fills up completely
<i>Sä tulit tilataksil</i>	You came with a pre-ordered cab
<i>Me tultii yödösäl</i>	We took the night bus
<i>Sul on 50 tonttuu</i>	You got 50 thou’
<i>Meil on 50 somppuu</i>	We got 50 Somalis
<i>Bussi täynnä somaleit ku Kontulan kentällä</i>	Bus full of Somalis like the Kontula field
<i>Elämä on kovaa Kontulan kentällä</i>	Life is rough on the Kontula field
<i>Ne ei pysäyttäny meit ees maihin-nousukengällä</i>	They didn’t even stop us with combat boots
<i>Bussi täynnä somaleit, iso kolari</i>	Bus is filled with Somalis, big accident
<i>Puhokses ne riitelee</i>	At Puhos they’re arguing
<i>“Onks Puff Daddy somali?”</i>	“Is Puff Daddy Somali?”

The image of leisure is again juxtaposed against the “rough life” of Kontula. With another reference to the ’97 attack, this verse also asserts resilience in the face of militant racism (“they didn’t even stop us with combat boots”). Indeed, the music video continues to show the young passengers of the bus getting out onto the field and enjoying an impromptu block party complete with games, dancing and barbequing. The juxtaposition of the field as a symbolic site of the struggles of Black communities in Finland against images of celebration, then, signals a deliberate reclaiming of embattled public space. The song’s reading as an ode to East Helsinki as a Black/African diasporic space is made explicit in the second verse, as they call out various eastern neighborhoods:

<i>Tää lähtee kaikille Kontulast Itiksest, Vuosaarest mis vaan on somppuja</i>	This goes out to everyone from Kontula From Itis, Vuosaari, wherever there are Somalis
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These creative re-imaginings of marginalized spaces as spheres of community and belonging represent a core feature of Black community-making in the African diaspora, as well as a central component of hip hop culture.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the discursive construction of East Helsinki as a racialized and classed space in Finnish cultural discourse through an analysis of the ways in which Afro-Finnish rappers from East Helsinki negotiate the stigma associated with the district. Based on an in-depth analysis of four songs by the rapper Prinssi Jusuf and the duo Seksikäs-Suklaa & Doslada, I have shown how the rappers not only challenge the mainstream media-produced stereotypes about East Helsinki as a problem area, but also “talk back” (hooks 1986) by producing counter-discourses about “the East.” Using Wacquant, Slater and Borges Pereira’s (2014) framework of territorial stigmatization in action, I have illustrated how these rappers deploy different discourses about East Helsinki that both resist and transcend stigmatization through the strategies of stigma inversion, rejection and defiance. Indeed, rather than simply critiquing exclusionary discourses, the rappers instead (re)claim East Helsinki’s reputation as the home of immigrants and low-income residents as a point of pride, as a source of collective identification, and as a realm of socio-spatial ownership and belonging. In this way, their work not only provides a critique of the racialized and classed politics of place in Finnish discourses, but also (re)articulates stigmatized territories as spheres of belonging and possibility.

Through this work, I have tried to heed hip hop scholar Murray Forman’s call for more nuanced analyses of spatiality in hip hop by approaching rap texts as “the product of particular kinds of spatial relations and spatial histories” (2002: 17). I outline the terrain of mainstream media discourses about East Helsinki to illustrate the active production of territorial stigmatization. These discourses not only represent the symbolic marginalization of East Helsinki, but have social and material consequences that impact the daily lives of its residents. They are part of the spatial relations and spatial histories that produce the immediate context in which Afro-Finnish rappers from East Helsinki live and, as such, the cultural space from which they produce their music.

Rather than simply representing a new generation of East Helsinki rap or an instance of what scholars have defined as “migrant rap” (Leppänen and Westinen 2017), Afro-Finnish rappers are carving out a particular space for themselves in the hip hop scene that is defined by both the hybridity and translocality that is illustrative of African diasporic cultural production, as well

as the “hyperlocality” that is paradigmatic for hip hop (Forman 2002). These spatial dynamics are also reflected in the discourses of identification deployed by Afro-Finnish rappers. I have previously illustrated that hybridity is central to articulations of racial, ethnic and national identifications in Afro-Finnish hip hop, as well as the ways in which Afro-Finnish rappers use US American Blackness as a resource for constructing their own identities and strategies for navigating racism in Finnish society (Kelekay 2019). In turn, I have here explicated how “hyperlocality” is discursively deployed in the form of neighborhood identification. What distinguishes Afro-Finnish rappers’ discourses of neighborhood identification from that of earlier generations of white East Helsinki rappers is the ways in which their ideas about place are intertwined with discourses about not only class, but also race.

Instead of internalizing the territorial stigmatization of East Helsinki in order to establish some notion of hip hop credibility, the rappers either outright reject the stereotypes about East Helsinki, challenge their power through the use of humor or deploy counter-narratives celebrating “the East” as a sphere of collective identity and belonging. Given hip hop’s origins as an African diasporic cultural form, they do not need to highlight their association with a stigmatized territory in order to gain credibility as rappers—their Black bodies already grant them this credibility. Moreover, the discursive construction of East Helsinki as a racialized space—and particularly a Black space—alongside its construction as a rough urban periphery also means that they effectively embody the stigma associated with East Helsinki in addition to the stigma associated with race. This is emblematic of “the racialization of space and the spatialization of race” (Lipsitz 2007: 12). Rather than internalizing the stigma, the rappers in this study deploy discourses that manage, challenge and defy the territorial stigma. In doing so, they also challenge the discursive construction of East Helsinki—and by extension its racialized residents—as outside the Finnish national imaginary. As such, these works not only provide a critique of the racialized and spatialized boundaries around the discursive construction of Finnishness, but also an assertion of who, what and *where* is Finnish. Finally, these rappers can be seen as actively inventing, producing and rearticulating not only an *Afro*-Finnish hip hop scene, but also a diasporic yet localized Afro-Finnish culture, more broadly.

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Notes

- ¹ The term, “lähiö”, translates to the English word “suburb”. Derived from the Finnish word “lähellä” meaning “close”, it connotes areas on the margins and yet in relative proximity to urban centers. The term is culturally and politically associated specifically with working-class suburbs with high-rise dwellings, historically constructed in parallel with the development of the Finnish welfare state in the 1960s and ‘70s. In Helsinki, in particular, the term is also particularly associated with residents with immigrant backgrounds. For further discussion of the development of the term and its representation in Finnish cinema, see Viitanen 2018.
- ² See e.g., Kuusela 2016, Kytölä 2015 or Mansikka 2018 for news media interviews with Seksikäs-Suklaa and Prinssi Jusuf about racism in Finland.
- ³ For a linguistic analysis of some of Musta Barbaari and Prinssi Jusuf’s songs, see Westinen 2017.
- ⁴ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTkfNY-3s5s&t=88s&ab_channel=SeksikasSuklaaVEVO
- ⁵ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2W4oCv56BZ0&ab_channel=SeksikasSuklaaVEVO
- ⁶ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SrVdeJAv7M&ab_channel=PrinssiJusufVEVO
- ⁷ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRQT_aWvqaw&ab_channel=Seksik%C3%A4sSuklaa%26Dosedla
- ⁸ All lyrics are translated from Finnish to English by the author and, as such, include a level of personal interpretation.
- ⁹ The music video subtitled the spoken Spanish in Finnish, which the author then translated to English.
- ¹⁰ In the original Finnish, Prinssi Jusuf uses the slang terms “kossei” and “somppu” for Kosovars and Somalis, respectively.
- ¹¹ In the original Finnish, Prinssi Jusuf uses the racial slur “ch*nk” as a slang term for Chinese people.
- ¹² The analysis of this song was previously published in *Open Cultural Studies* 2019; 3: 386–401 as part of my article “‘Too Dark to Support the Lions, But Light Enough for the Frontlines’: Negotiating Race, Place, and Nation in Afro-Finnish Hip Hop.”

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