

# Finnish and Swedish 'gangsta rap' as a window on the dismantlement of the Nordic welfare state

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## Abstract

Sweden, often cited as an exemplary welfare state, has experienced a significant increase in gang-related gun violence in recent years. In parallel, Finland debates the growing problem of youth violence and street gangs. The media discourse surrounding these issues often focuses on 'gangsta rap' and certain artists within the genre. Despite rap music's popularity and expression of underprivileged and racialised youth globally, it has earlier been subject to policing and criminalisation, now introduced in the Nordic countries. Using Finnish and Swedish media discourse and rap lyrics and videos as data, this article contributes to prior understanding by 1) linking narratives of 'gangsta rap' to the dismantling of the Nordic welfare state, 2) highlighting the racist targeting of ethnic minorities through the public discussions of rappers and 3) discussing similarities and differences between Sweden and Finland, adding nuance to understanding how rap and its criminalisation vary across countries.

## Keywords

Nordic welfare state, racial neoliberalism, gangsta rap, drill, street gangs

## Introduction

In October 2021, a 19-year-old Swedish rapper, Einár (Nils Grönberg), was shot dead in Hammarby Sjöstad, an upper-middle-class neighbourhood in Stockholm. The incident was covered extensively in Swedish and Finnish news, and gained traction in the wider Nordic region, but also globally. Authorities and the Swedish media linked the killing to local gangs and Swedish 'gangsterrap'<sup>1</sup>

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circles, which had previously been associated with kidnapping, blackmailing and publicly shaming the young artist (see e.g., Nilsson, 2021). These incidents before his death were followed by the press like a real-life crime series and were discussed widely on different media platforms. Einár's privileged background – his mother is a famous actress – attached to his stereotypical 'everyday-like' Swedish appearances, and also, his whiteness, allowed the media to paint him as a victim lured into a nihilistic gangsta rap life by 'dangerous others' (referring to gang members who glorify violence and crime). This demonstrated that the success of rap music, given its purported link with crime in wealthy Stockholm suburbs, posed a new threat to Swedish society, young middle-class consumers, and their parents and even similar groups in neighbouring welfare states, such as Finland.

European and Nordic media discussions of rap music and its association with gang life differ from those of the U.S. because of their different sociocultural pasts. Life in the Nordic suburbs is not comparable to 'the hoods' that U.S. rappers reference. Furthermore, despite some similarities, Finnish (Ruonavaara et al., 2020; Vaattovaara et al., 2018) welfare and housing policies are not identical to those of Sweden (Grander, 2020). Despite the 'Swedish model' of the welfare state is often used as an example of successful of social development, it also has made some welfare-reducing choices during its time. For example, several studies have shown that Swedish housing policy has sharpened societal segregation in Swedish cities within different geographical areas as well as different groups of people (see e.g., Andersen et al., 2016; Grander, 2020). Furthermore, in recent decades, the 1990s basic education reform to emphasise freedom of choice has led to school segregation. Sweden has developed a comprehensive school where native Swedes seldom attend schools in immigrant-intensive suburbs, and educational outcomes diverge (Beach and Sernhede, 2011; Imsen et al., 2017; Kornhall and Bender, 2019). This social, economic, ethnic and racial segregation has led to 'ghettoisation' (Söderman and Sernhede, 2013: 366) and suffering among the 'utsatta områden' (Sernhede et al., 2019: 10), vulnerable neighbourhoods, from many socioeconomic problems. For example, different forms of violence against and among suburban men from migrant backgrounds has been on the rise, affecting the overall well-being of local communities and society. Increased violence is often linked to gangs, whose influence in Sweden has grown considerably in recent years (see e.g., Salihu, 2021; Sturup et al., 2019). The same neighbourhoods built in the 1960s and 1970s as part of welfare state policies have become symbols of inequality, fuelled by neoliberal social reforms. These neighbourhoods are often represented in rap music, providing an unseen picture of Sweden as a welfare state.

The commodification of 'gangsta' culture (Rose, 2008), the allure of the 'hustler' image (Urbanik, 2021), and the aesthetics of 'road life' (Bakkali, 2022; Ilan, 2015, 2020) have long been prevalent in rap music. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the Swedish context, as evidenced by the recognition of gangsta rap's appeal to white Swedish youth two decades ago (Sernhede, 2000). However, it is worth noting that the association of rap music with the rapid escalation of gang violence in Sweden is considered a more recent development. In Finland, the issue of gang violence in Sweden has garnered significant media coverage (Kanerva, 2021; Kantola, 2021; Kantola and Gustafsson, 2021; Kirsi, 2021a, 2021b). Einár's affiliation with gangs has been regarded as a crucial element contributing to his authenticity (Nilsson, 2021), celebrated career, and substantial financial and social rewards. The Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* stated that Einár's career could be seen as a prime example of how in public discourse lyrics associated with a criminal lifestyle are more likely considered as 'fantasy' (Sippola, 2021), and detached from

authentic auto-ethnographic experiences within the realm of white artistry. This perception may be influenced by Einár's privileged background, demographic similarity with journalists, and the media's tendency to predominantly associate the term 'gangsta rap' with individuals from Black, Brown or migrant backgrounds. Consequently, this discursive stigmatisation distances rappers from their predominantly white audiences, especially in Nordic countries with predominantly white populations, where audiences actively encourage or even *expect* these artists to continue rapping about illegal activities and notoriety for the sake of *their* excitement (Cakar, 2020; see also Rose, 2008; Stuart, 2020). Despite controversies, rap music in this genre maintains a vast listener base and regularly tops Nordic charts with songs centered around themes of gangs, crimes, guns and drugs (Kirsi, 2021a; Mankkinen, 2021; Sarnecki, 2020).

Against [or, in contrast to] media associations of rap with violence, rap lyrics and videos have been appreciated for their rich 'ethnographic qualities' (Barron, 2013; Bramwell and Butterworth, 2019; Fatsis, 2019a; Urbanik and Haggerty, 2018); they map lived experiences, give voice to the marginalised and legitimise the use of locally othered languages and expressions. While addressing rap music through its language and harmful stereotypes, academic research in sociology and criminology have focused on grime and drill<sup>2</sup> (see e.g., Fatsis, 2019a; Ilan, 2020; Stuart, 2020), which partly draw on the original gangsta rap tradition. These later approaches aim to reintroduce music as a 'public counter culture' rather than a 'criminal subculture' (Fatsis, 2019b). Thus, such research illuminates how the discourse around this artistry should be seen as a continuum of the criminalisation of contemporary musical genres that originate from Black communities and cultures (see e.g. Rose, 2008). Scholars have addressed the criminalised, but emancipatory dimensions of these genres in the Scandinavian (Sweden, Denmark, Norway) context (e.g., Berggren, 2013; Dankić, 2019; Qvotrup Jensen et al., 2022; Sernhede, 2000; Söderman and Sernhede, 2013). The Nordic welfare state socially unites the Nordic countries, but Finnish is not a Scandinavian but Finno-Ugric language, so it is often not included in these comparisons. Also, the use of Nordic rap music in for example court-hearings is under-researched in the Nordic context.

This article connects cultural criminology and sociological and welfare state discussions with hiphop research. After introducing rap music and the media sphere of Nordic countries, we are connecting the rising criminalisation of rap (and related genres) with the declining coverage of the welfare state. This argument is made both about a well-known welfare state, Sweden, as well as showing how this is happening in Finland. Using discourse analysis, we explore how the media has identified rap music as threat to public order, thereby allowing the state to police the symptoms of its own welfare disinvestments (Fatsis, 2021). We aim to demonstrate how Swedish media and state officials have influenced Finnish media and law enforcement, who now position policing rap music as a necessary intervention to prevent gang violence (Rigatelli, 2021). Similarly, it has also affected Finnish politicians' public opinion on how gang violence should be penalised, calling for rapid legislative changes (Lakka, 2021). It is also worth pointing out that these developments are in contrast to previous Nordic penal policies, which until recently have rested on the values of Nordic welfare state, where social policies, such as education, is seen as the best criminal policy and highlight the humane prison conditions (Lappi-Seppälä and Nuotio, 2019, see also Suonpää et al., 2023). Finally, in line with Fatsis (2019a), we argue that these discourses calling for more punitive penalties are connected to racial neoliberalism, which, despite the widely recognised and celebrated Nordic welfare state model (see e.g., Julkunen, 2017), characterise contemporary welfare state ideals both in Sweden and Finland.

## Translocal aesthetics and digital selves

Rap music is considered a cultural form that gives voice to marginalised identities (Söderman and Sernhede, 2013; Westinen, 2019, 2023) and ‘talks back’ (hooks, 1989; Kelekay, 2019, 2022) to different forms of cultural dominance. While gangsta rap commercialises tropes that are ostensibly harmful to its creators and seeks commercial popularity, the music also represents a radical social positioning (Quinn, 2004: 19–22), often associated with other rap subgenres such as socially conscious rap. However, these musical styles do not speak to issues that are completely alien to each other (Oware, 2014: 65), but can be thought of as reflecting them through different class positions, where authenticity is constituted through very different elements.

In Sweden, rap music that unpacks the migrant experience of marginalisation and otherness has been mainstream since the 1990s (Berggren, 2013; Lindholm, 2019); whereas white artists have dominated Finnish rap until recent years (see e.g., Malmberg, 2021; Westinen, 2023). Based on the genre characteristics, not just contemporary Nordic rap, but rap in general, is characterised by ‘translocality’ (Appadurai, 1996, see also Bramwell and Butterworth, 2019), whereby place-based identities are constructed in specific locations, informed by performances in other localities. Accordingly, places like Rinkeby and Hässelby in Stockholm and Itäkeskus, Pikku Huopalahti, Leppävaara and Koivukylä in Greater Helsinki are often mentioned, and multiple languages are used (e.g., Arabic, Somali and English alongside Finnish or Swedish) to describe diasporic life in Northern European cities. This juxtaposition of different features, built environments, clothing, movements and other globally familiar aesthetics in hip-hop captures the lived experiences of the racialised youth by simultaneously emphasising the narratives of belonging and multiculturalism (Lindholm, 2019; Westinen, 2019).

The perceptions of proximity, similarity and equality have transformed as the speed and intensity of connectivity with digital technology have altered experiences of migration and physical distance. These perceptual changes are tangible in unity between territory, nationhood and the state, remediated through new forms of ‘diasporic digitality’ (Ponzanesi, 2020), where the digital connection across diasporas is connected to privileged terms of spatiality, belonging, and self-identification. While previous studies on diasporic digitality have focused on, for example, Somali diasporic women (Ponzanesi, 2021) and Turkish-Dutch migrants (Alinejad, 2019), similar bondings of diasporic youth can be identified within Nordic rap artistry and its online commentary.

New digital technologies and social media channels have also enabled aspiring artists to record, produce and distribute their artistry without extensive financial resources or having to compromise their artistic freedom to appeal to the music industry gatekeepers (Fatsis, 2019a, 2019b; Ilan, 2012, 2020; Stuart, 2020). Drawing from Bourdieu’s work, Stuart (2020: 6) argued that new technologies helped construct the (digital) self, facilitating possibilities of reclaiming artistic value and accumulating (sub)cultural capital (see also Ilan, 2012, 2015, see also Bakkali, 2022; Qvotrup Jensen et al., 2022). In the sphere of rap music, subcultural capital is often created by positively using previous stereotypes associated with different intersections that have been the basis of structural discrimination against them. Thought outside US and UK, Danish sociologist Jensen (2006), who investigated young men of non-Danish origin, associates this previous ‘brutal lack of recognition’ (Jensen, 2006: 270) with four factors: the stigma associated with their area of residence, ethnicity and ‘race’, low family economic and social capital and, finally, negative images

associated with 'Muslim masculinity'. To overcome these negative stereotypes, these young men can rely on alternative systems of appreciation by investing in what Jensen (2006) calls 'expressive masculinity', a 'bricolage of integrating different elements from different environments' (p. 270), including hip hop cultural tropes, are used in constructing a distinctive form of subcultural capital (for integrating elements of Islamist and jihadist symbolism in this bricolage, see Qvotrup Jensen et al., 2022).

However, this subcultural capital may also threaten to become what Woods (2022: 2) calls a 'morally problematic catalyst for self-directed entrepreneurship' because the dominant aesthetic of drill emphasises various forms of criminality and illegality. This entrepreneurship, combined the social media 'attention economy' (Stuart, 2020), drives lyrical-aesthetic production towards increasingly extreme content for competitive appeal. In relation to the former, although several studies have confirmed that the 'gangsta' character has no real-life counterpart and can be said to be mainly based on exaggeration (Utlely, 2012: 4–5; see also, e.g. Rose, 2008; Stuart, 2020), audio-visual content is nevertheless factually used as evidence in courts in the U.S., and the U.K. Perhaps rather predictably, the judicial authorities who read the lyrics and go through the videos are often 'street illiterate' (Ilan, 2020; Lee, 2022); and they disregard the fact that online presentations and discussions of crime are primarily intended as commercial entertainment and are not authentic descriptions of reality. In this case, rapping about criminal activity cannot without further contextualisation be seen as an indication of real-life criminality, but a quest for commercial success by accentuating the most distressing elements imaginable of young racialised men (e.g. Rose, 2008; Stuart, 2020). Cases where the police have used defendants' gang affiliations to justify higher bails in the U.S. have been linked with mislabelling and mistreating youth of colour (Babe Howell, 2011); the risk is higher in rap music and related social media content in criminal investigations and trials. It has been suggested that policing against rap music should be seen as a misrecognition or misreading of artists' personas (Fatsis, 2019a; Ilan, 2020; Nielson and Dennis, 2019), a continuum in the unsuccessful dialogue between police and grime or drill artists in other countries, and an example of racial profiling and racial injustice within broader society.

## Swedish and Finnish welfare state politics and racial neoliberalism

Sweden is an interesting point of reference for Finland societally and culturally, as the countries have a long and close history together. Finland was part of the Swedish Empire for over 500 years until 1809. Linguistically and culturally, close contact has continued to this day. Approximately 5% of the population of Finland report Swedish as their mother tongue (Official Statistics Finland, 2019) and Swedish is one of the official languages of Finland, along with Finnish and Sámi. Furthermore, Swedish Finns constitute Sweden's third largest immigrant group, with over 150,000 people. A broader count, where at least one of the grandparents is Finnish, results Swedish Finns being the largest immigrant group in the Nordic countries. Finnish is even one of the minority languages of Sweden since 2000 (Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The status of Finnish language in Sweden is particularly linked to the working class labour immigration in the second half of the 20th century (Vuonokari, 2017; Wahlbeck, 2015). In contrast, Swedish was historically an upper-class language in Finland before the development of the dominance of the Finnish language in the 20th century with the independence. The use of Swedish and Finnish, therefore, has particular social importance on both sides of the Gulf of Bothnia.

These historical and contemporary aspects that bind Sweden and Finland's welfare states, also provide a long-term perspective on immigration in the Nordic welfare state model. The Swedish welfare state has emphasised universalism, multiculturalism, and openness, eradicating 'all social and economic barriers' between people to overcome the risks of child poverty and segregation (Andersson, 2009). These good intentions made Sweden the leading example of the Nordic welfare state model that has been praised for decades worldwide. Before the establishment of the Finnish welfare state's public service support network in the 1970s and 1980s, the largest migration in Finland's history was to Sweden, which by then was already a recognised welfare state. The success of the 20th-century Swedish welfare state has traditionally been seen as the outcome of a national consensus and shared values aiming to increase everybody's well-being. In reality, socially critical activities such as strikes have played a significant role in welfare state reforms (Julkunen, 2017). However, the idea of Sweden as a prime example of social cohesion is time-specific; the welfare project has undergone several neoliberal reforms in recent decades that has changed Sweden's societal structure (Andersson, 2009; Beach and Sernhede, 2011; Grander, 2020; Imsen et al., 2017).

These developments are tied to segregated and disadvantaged neighbourhoods located outside wealthy inner-city cores, as is often the case in European contexts (see Kotzeva, 2016). These residential areas are labelled 'vulnerable' in Swedish contemporary discourse and are overrepresented in terms of social unrest (Sturup et al., 2019). The spatial inequality and housing debate in Swedish cities has long been associated with suburbs such as Rinkeby, which were built in the 1960–1970s as part of the 'Million Program' to provide good housing for all (see e.g., Hall and Vidén, 2005). Regarding housing issues and spatial segregation, Sweden's decentralised schooling system has been cited as one of the most neoliberal globally, where parental choice of children's schooling led to remarkably high segregation between schools in different areas, affecting those with less-educated parents and/or those from immigrant backgrounds (Kornhall and Bender, 2019). Consequently, people from immigrant backgrounds tend to attend schools in poorer suburban areas (Grander, 2020) located in the edges of cities.

In addition to residential and basic education segregation, the exceptionalism of the Swedish welfare state has been contested in several ways in recent years. For example, the latest child poverty rate (i.e., the ratio of 0–17-year-olds whose family income falls below the poverty line) across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021) countries is approximately 13%; it is about 10% in Sweden and 4% in Finland. Moreover, child poverty in Sweden is over seven times higher among children with a foreign background and is concentrated in residential areas with large immigration populations (Salonen et al., 2021). Furthermore, gun violence among young men in Sweden has increased sharply over the past 20 years (see Sturup et al., 2019); in 2022, there were 391 shooting incidents in Sweden, the highest number observed between 2017 and 2022. In addition, 62 of these shootings were fatal, which was 17 more incidents than in the previous year (Polisen, 2023). According to the Swedish National Council for the Prevention of Crime, while the European average is 1.6 deaths per million people, Sweden accounts for four deaths per million people (Brottsförebyggande rådet, Brå, 2021: 5). The report linked the increase in gun homicide to 'criminal milieux in socially disadvantaged areas', which focused on people aged 20–29 years and those primarily associated with conflicts linked to illegal drug markets, criminal gangs and a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system (Brottsförebyggande rådet, Brå, 2021: 6–7).

While terms referring to race are mostly absent from public institutional discourse, they are strikingly evident when it comes to defining threats and social unrest (Goldberg, 2009; Kapoor, 2013). This is tangible in the Nordic media debates referring to the 'war on gangs', where the role of 'race' and 'ethnicity' is highlighted. In addition, there is regular implicit reference to the new threat (Kuokkanen, 2020) faced by the Finnish police, or later, 'gang beefs' (Nousiainen, 2023) where immigrant background or 'non-Finnishness' and also 'gangsta rap' is seen as an essential marker of danger. The simultaneous debate on welfare state issues, crime crisis and race nexus can be seen as evidence of racial neoliberalism, restructuring the role of the state from offering welfare to its citizens to securing the needs of those in the most powerful positions (Goldberg, 2009: 323). The privileges of the already privileged is ensured by defunding social welfare commitments (such as health care, education, subsidised housing) while investing in repressive state: promoting the need for police funding, and interventions targeted at the unruly and in this case, young people racialised as Black or Brown and rap music. Thus, the social control and targeted police attention to forms of Black music offers 'a periscope' (Lynes et al., 2020) into urban (structural) violence and perceptions of what is 'dangerous' (Fatsis, 2021) in society. The gang phenomenon that has fundamentally challenged the idea of welfare as the core of Swedish society has contested that 'To be modern is to be Swedish, and vice versa' (Andersson, 2009: 232). As the previous studies suggest, it is possible to view Nordic rap music in the 2020s as a testimony to a crumbling welfare states rather than a glorification of violence.

The closeness between Swedish and Finnish societies, cultures and people has been present in rap music since the so-called second wave of Finnish rap (Westinen, 2023), when the group Fintelligens made a song with Swedish rapper Petter called Stockholm-Helsinki (Sony Music, 2000). There are even numerous artists of Finnish background in the history of Swedish rap. Recently, musical cooperation between Finns and Swedes has become more common (Vedenpää, 2022): new versions of popular Swedish rap music are made by adding verses from those of Finnish rappers (e.g. Alawee's *Aktiverad* or A36's *Samma gamla vanliga*). Finnish rapper Kerza collaborated with Swedish 1.Cuz, Swedish-Finnish rapper Jami Faltin, who started rapping in Swedish in Sweden, is now making a breakthrough with Finnish rap and many Finnish rappers name Swedish artists as their musical role models (for role models of Finnish rap artists, see Westinen, 2023). The fusion of Finnish and Swedish rap culture offers a perspective on the Nordic countries as a mixture of many languages and cultures, an alternative to the nationalist idea of the past centuries of nation-states with one people, culture and language. Furthermore, it has political potential in offering a critique of Nordic neoliberal welfare systems.

An example of the challenge to a homogeneous national identity is migrant language discussion in the Swedish and Finnish media, referred to as 'Rinkeby Swedish' (Jonsson et al., 2020) or 'Varissuomi' (Bernelius and Huilla, 2021) well-known multicultural Swedish and Finnish suburbs, Rinkeby and Varissuo. These dialects are used in 'enregisterment' (Agha, 2007; Milani and Jonsson, 2012), which associates a socially recognisable linguistic repertoire and a certain residential area in the media with negative images. However, the same urban vernacular can also express 'membership' of local or hyperlocal suburban identity in hip hop (Stæhr and Madsen, 2017). Similarly, language can make way for new perceptions and definitions of citizenship (Kelekay, 2019), as well as express narratives of belonging (Lindholm, 2019; Westinen, 2019).



## Exploring the (non)ideal citizen

We used discourse analysis to identify the prevailing (political) ideologies and hidden agendas that inform and frame certain topics in the media, showing a neglected relationship between the criminalisation of rap and displacing blame of the potential and already visible problems associated with austerity politics in Swedish and Finnish welfare states to individuals. This goal is achieved by showing how the formal choices of media naturalise specific representations or identities and address a specific audience using discourses (Fairclough, 1995: 18) characterised by asymmetries in capacity to attribute meaning or limit the possibility of producing and consuming different media. By extending this method to mainstream media discussions and audio-visual artistry, we explore how media coverage favours certain welfare state ideals, such as market orientation or state competitiveness (Koskinen and Saarinen, 2019) that shape the perceptions of preferable citizenship also concerning Nordic rap music. Furthermore, we explore how the othering or stigmatising discourse and racial profiling in Swedish media echoes in Finland.

The novelty of this research lies in assessing the fluidity of media representation and mainstreaming neoliberal politics between different societies. Moreover, it shows how the state selects those seen as worthy of protection by legitimising fear and labelling the artistry and a whole generation of young men of colour.

## Methods

The media examples gathered for this article were published between 2020 and 2022, including 9 from Sweden and 17 from Finland. The chosen print media platforms were the most read daily newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden) and *Helsingin Sanomat* (Finland), Swedish and Finnish public broadcasting services SVT and Yle, and tabloid media *Aftonbladet*, *Ilta-lehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*. The audio-visual artwork were chosen for their popularity and for representing themes associated with 'gangsta' trophy. Although it usually refers to the musical style of Los Angeles between the 1980s and 1990s, 'gangsta rap' has been widely applied to the contemporary Nordic context. This is due to its alleged connection to the gang-related violence in young men, especially in Sweden and Denmark, and now, in Finland. We acknowledge that most music discussed in this article would, in some situations, would be defined as drill (-influenced rap music), still some of the referenced music does not aesthetically fall under that category. However, because the term 'gangsta rap' (or 'gangsterrap' in Swedish) is widely used in media discussions regarding this topic, we use it in quotation marks throughout. Simultaneously, we aim to distance ourselves from any racialised stereotypes associated with the term.

## Data collection

The data collection was primarily conducted during COVID-19 lockdown in Finland; therefore, our contextual knowledge relied on digital 'deep hanging out' (Geertz, 1998: 69) in the musical scene and following public media discussions in Finland and Sweden. Throughout 2021 and early 2022, we listened to, watched, discussed and read about Nordic rap music, and followed different social media rap music platforms on Instagram (see Swedish *Orten Sverige*, *Dopest.se* and Finnish *A Media*, *Klangi Media*) and the Finnish and Swedish mediascape daily. Our everyday immersion,



frequent meetings to scroll through the videos, lyrics and comments or discussing topics online, constituted the majority of the data analysed. The data were complemented with field notes inside and outside three concert venues in Finland between October and December 2021. Next, the clubs were shut due to the COVID-19 pandemic until the spring of 2022, after which we continued our on-site field notes. Additionally, we were interested in how the music challenged neoliberal connotations reinforced by the media.

We do acknowledge the problematic nature of consuming this artistry voyeuristically and hence, we try to not interpret it in any harmful way. We note the artist's criminal history only when necessary; otherwise, we do not assume any criminal associations. In the following section, we describe how the phenomenon has been approached and described in the media's 'loops and spirals' (Ferrell et al., 2015: 155–158).

## 'Gangsta rap' in the Nordic welfare state Rap music and its associations with violence in the media

One of the most well-known and reoccurring people referenced in relation to Swedish 'gangster-rap' is rapper Yasin. The media has mostly focused on whether the widely successful, award-winning rapper's music should be removed from streaming services and whether his music awards be revoked because of his gang-related crimes. During the early stages of writing this article, Yasin was serving time for abetting in Einár's kidnapping in spring 2020 (see Laurell et al., 2021).

Before he was convicted, Yasin commented on the connection between rap music and gang activity in an interview for SVT in the summer of 2020 (Cakar, 2020). He noted that naming his music as 'gangsterrap' was not truthful in the Swedish context because the original 1990's 'gangsta rap' narratives could not be compared to life in Sweden. He recommended distancing from the term – what could be called 'gangsta rap' elsewhere should be called 'something else' in Sweden. He insisted that 1980's and 1990's gangsta rap in the U.S. affected Swedish rap rhythmically and sound-wise but had a different 'feeling' and meaning in contemporary Sweden (Cakar, 2020). However, like U.S. rappers from the 1980s and the 1990s (Rose, 2008), he saw music as a way of bringing job opportunities to the suburbs through music and social cohesion. More precisely, he saw music as a way of 'showing affection within a culture that has not thus far expressed feelings publicly' (Cakar, 2020). In the interview, he hoped that his music could evolve from pleasing the privileged audience and their thirst for consuming misery narratives, even though this was what initially made him famous. He concludes that for him and people like him 'writing about this reality is a way to get away from this reality' ['Jag skriver om den här verkligheten för att komma bort från den här verkligheten']. This music did not glorify 'gangsta life' (Salihi, 2021), but created jobs (Cakar, 2020), visualised alternative life views for the artists and the youth in the suburbs escaping the 'ghetto' (Bucierius and Urbanik, 2019) or, as Swedish rapper 1. Cuz said in his interview, 'as a way of being someone else' (Kvartoft and Karlsson, 2020).

One way in which Nordic exceptionalism and lack of understanding regarding their institutionalised racism is exemplified is through the use of 'words that wound' (Hübinette, 2012: 43) as a response to Swedish rap music and gang violence, which has also garnered attention in Finnish media (e.g. Sippola, 2021). While Einár's case aroused extensive media interest, deaths of young men and boys with migrant backgrounds, who died due to gang rivalry (SVT, 2021),

were referred to as 'social contagion' or 'epidemic' in the media (see Henley, 2021). The extensive media interest in commodifying the mourning of the specific death of a non-migrant, well off white Swedish musician demonstrates how artists' popularity, but also whiteness, affects and changes the tone of coverage into its own form of 'discursive subordination' (see Alcoff, 2005; White et al., 2021). It also shows, how media debates advance fear and danger, aiding populist political uses of crime imagery and media discourse that normalises systemic racial inequalities (Mondon and Winter, 2020).

The fact that some rappers who dominate the Swedish charts, and more recently, also those topping the Finnish charts, have been convicted of serious crimes has been used by authorities to justify or claim causality between rap lyrics and criminality. According to the Swedish media (Lindkvist, 2021; Sarnecki, 2020), police and prosecutors have used rap lyrics and videos in their criminal investigations and have connected suspects with each other and evidence of gang affiliation through rappers' music videos. Indications for similar developments have been discovered in Finland, where media sources verified that local police associated rap music with 'roadman culture and rap music' that glorified 'violence and create confrontation between gangs' (Kantola, 2021; Pikkarainen, 2021). The similarities between these state officials' discussions are notable: following the videos, lyrics and 'below the line' internet discussions around artistry has been a part of their investigations.

Furthermore, after Einár's murder, media attention in Finland increasingly focused on racialised young men and their possible involvement in gangs. In December 2021, *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland's largest daily newspaper, published an article on youth street gangs and the measures taken by police to prevent them. In this article, youth researchers and youth workers said there were no visible street gangs in Helsinki, only 'groups of friends' (Kantola and Gustafsson, 2021). They further noted that individual young people had mental health problems and other challenges, and that these measures should focus on helping them access support services. Despite this criticism, as covered here in the article, the ongoing gang debate seemingly marginalised young people on the streets and put rap music into spotlight. Referencing encrypted documents, the interviewed police said there were 'several street gangs', and following the example of Sweden, they had especially targeted youth's 'rap crews' and studied their social media profiles, lyrics and music videos. Thus, the public discussion repeated a certain pattern: asking different people about gangs, the role of immigrants, and rap as a descriptor of crime, and the answer depended on who answered.

Following this article, *Helsingin Sanomat's* legal journalist pointed out that the proposed new intelligence law in Finland would enable police to listen to the calls of those not suspected of crimes (Gustafsson, 2021). According to Gustafsson, young people from migrant backgrounds are at risk of being the subjects of such investigations. This fear was, in fact, already reinforced in the so-called 'gangsta rap trial' linked to a criminal spiral that took place during the summer and autumn of 2021, where the defendant's car was monitored, and the conversations in the car were used in court as evidence of their 'bad character' (Owusu-Bempah, 2022; Schwarze and Fatsis, 2022). An interesting detail about this example was how the suspects verbalised how, 'to their credit', Finland has become or is becoming similar to Sweden in terms of violence (Kirsi and Koivisto, 2022). If the court had wished, it could have interpreted this (even partly) as situational bad humour. However, they did not, and the same literal interpretation of the defendants' dangerousness was further promoted in the media. From this, it can be interpreted that their gang

affiliations and rap music were used as if to justify broader intentions of obtaining stricter intelligence laws and to set a cautionary example, as Gustafsson (2021) suspected.

## Rapping about the imposed threat of a privatised Nordic welfare state

The sound world of Nordic rap, or drill, is somewhat different from the traditional sound world of the US and the UK. However, its soundscape is very close to some of the UK collaborators popular also in Northern Europe, such as M Huncho, Headie One or D-Block Europe, being auto tuned, melodic and borrowing Afro-Caribbean sounds, but bringing its own distinguishable 'Nordic vibe' to it.<sup>3</sup> Despite minor sonic differences, the penetrating attitude in the lyrics and videos connects the aesthetics to those of the global drill: themes like violence, drugs, the police and lived experiences in the suburbs are commonplace. Internationally popular artists and slang expressions omnipresent in the drill vernacular inspire most lyrics. This may make the lyrics susceptible to misinterpretation, and cynically, in literal terms by authorities. Moreover, the flashy cars, globally recognised luxury clothing brands (Balenciaga shoes, Moncler jackets, LV bags, Fendi or Dior shirts and Gucci caps), face-hiding balaclavas, (finger) guns, local 'bodegas' and racialisation as Black or Brown attaches rappers to the aesthetic choices of the earlier international drill artistry.

However, visual differences between Finnish and Swedish rap music videos exist; most notably, Swedish videos are often gloomier and appear more threatening than Finnish videos. The artists are also more graphic in their lyrics, referring to shootings and their friends' deaths, whereas the Finnish lyrics more performatively refer to 'opps', 'bandos', their jailed friends and racism within the local juridical system. It is noteworthy that while more recent Swedish videos seem to be produced with a bigger budget for larger audiences, key players in the early production of Finnish rap music videos with violent imagery and luxury lifestyle were two white men in their early twenties (Römpötti, 2021). Against this background, perhaps not surprisingly, previous literature has argued that one-dimensional, stereotypical and even damaging tropes, are the most marketable to white audiences (Canton, 2022), expressing an unattainable mirage of 'the total pleasure where lust and death meet' (Sernhede, 2000: 312). The appeal of such imagery for these audiences described above is aptly captured in Swedish rapper Guleed's song 'Har du vatt här' (2020):

*Baby har du vart här? Bland guns och keys och droger, baby jag är fast här. Bland höghus och demoner. Habibti, de är fucked här. De skjuter först, sen ställer frågor. Tro inte allt är designers och dyra klockor [Baby have you been here? Among guns and keys [kilograms] and drugs, baby I am stuck here, among tower houses and demons. Habibti, it's fucked up here. They shoot first and then ask the questions. It's not fashion designers or expensive watches]*

Despite the flashy aesthetics, as Guleed's quote shows, buying expensive fashion items, cultivating a 'roadman style' (i.e. clothing style associated with criminality) (see Pikkarainen, 2021), and gaining street credibility is not the first thing that comes to mind in the socially stigmatised suburbs. In Guleed's other song 'Illegala' (2021), he says instead of being seen as people who want to earn living, they are seen as inhumane wild animals, captured in the racist phrase 'gorillas with bananas', who are constantly under police surveillance.

We also claim that young people's lives get inextricably linked to other intersectional inequalities of gender, place, race and ethnicity, where social categorisations are fluid and changing, but also linked to the social conditions perpetuated by state officials. This one-sidedness of perception is often unnoticed; Swedish music critic Nicholas Ringskog-Ferrada-Noli (2021) stated in his column in the *Dagens Nyheter* newspaper while defending the incarcerated rapper Yasin: 'He is a criminal, but also a talented artist. People seldom are only one thing'. This demonstrates that immigrants, visual minorities and racialised youth are often seen through their most visible attributes. Here, perhaps boyhood or masculinity is one intersection, but others, such as sexuality or social class, remain invisible. Thus, the broader structures and society's inequalities fade into the background because it is seen solely as a matter of the individual.

These contradictions are tangible in, for example, the intertextual cultural references in Yasin's lyrics (references such as, Mona Lisa, Maya Angelou, Frida Kahlo, Hawo Tako, etc.), which diversify the perceptions of the cultural capital and interests of young suburban men. This is exemplified further in Yasin's 'DSGIS' (2019):

*Gucci, Gucci, Guccibältet matchar Guccimössan, Han liknar Omar från The Wire med sin hagelbössa, Hon är på han, han är kapabel, Det som blodet han har spillt, det för alltid* [Gucci, Gucci, Gucci belt matches the Gucci hat, he reminds Omar from The Wire with his shotgun, she is on him, he is capable, The blood he has spilled, it's forever].

These lyrics can be referenced to young men of colour looking up to the stereotyped images of commodified black masculinity often associated with criminality within popular culture, consumption, and the media (Kantola, 2021; Pikkarainen, 2021; for commodification and accumulation of 'road' aesthetics see Bakkali, 2022; Ilan, 2012; Urbanik, 2021; Woods, 2022). These criminal representations are also celebrated in mainstream media through headlines such as 'In 2021 gangsters took over the Swedish media' (Lundsström, 2022), referring to 'Gangfluencers', Netflix hit *Snabba Cash* or Swedish 'gangsterrap', that was massively consumed that year. However, only a few popular representations are available for young men in the suburbs. This example also demonstrates that criminal masculinity is sexually desirable. Despite the success of violent imagery in streaming services, imitating such consumed stereotypes eventually harms them and increases the individualised risk of racial profiling by the media or police (Nielson and Dennis, 2019).

Similar to their U.S. and U.K. counterparts, also Nordic rappers narrate marginalised experiences (Canton, 2022), 'talk back' (hooks, 1989; Kelekay, 2019) and respond to the stigmatising discourse and the results of such politics in their artistry. As rapper 1.Cuz (2021) puts it in his song 'Caravaggio':

*Jag har en gatubarns attityd, Jag har ett gatubarns telefon, Jag har ett gatubarns kokain, Jag är ba ett gatubarn från nån gård, ey* [I have a street child's attitude, I have a street child's telephone. I have a street child's cocaine. I am just a street child from just some block.]

These lyrics and the song's video are examples of lending voice and using music to project the prejudices faced by young migrant men in the media or by the police. They are seen as 'just some kids' from 'some block', whose crimes and arrests, even deaths, the police see as mundane, 'sanitation murders' (Salihu, 2021) or even inevitable (White et al., 2021). Despite the graphic nature

of the lyrics and videos and commodifying the negative stereotype of the street child ('gatubarn'), these stories are valuable in documenting the lived experience of the suburban boy ('förortskille') or life in the segregated suburbs ('traktenliv') in Sweden's most dangerous 'no-go zones', which effectively creates a counternarrative to the stereotypes shared in Swedish media.

One of the most powerful testimonies to the expressive power of rap music and its potential as a Scandinavian form of popular education, 'Folkbildning' (e.g. Söderman and Sernhede, 2013: 366–368) or 'counter publics' (Canton, 2022) criticising the public discourse, was Yasin's song V12 (2022), published during the time of writing this article. In the song, the artist directly addresses his final words to Swedish politicians, media, and The Swedish society in general.

*Ey hur fan ska en politiker gå runt och snacka skit om min lyrik, när det är samhället de skapade som skriver min musik? Och vart ska vi få hopp ifrån? De säger vi går på socialbidrag, vart fan ska vi få jobb ifrån? Och vart kommer alla dessa Glocks ifrån? Det är som att de vill att vi har ihjäl varann. Det har ett namn det heter självsanering. Öppna dina ögon min vän allt har en mening [Ey how the hell should politicians go around talking shit about my poetry when it's the society they created that writes my music. And where are we gonna get hope from? They say we're on welfare, where the hell are we gonna get jobs from? And where do all these Glocks come from? It's like they want us to kill each other, it's got a name it's called self-sanitation. Open your eyes my friend everything has a purpose]*

In the song, he is directly referring to how the society defines his lyrics which can be equated with bell hooks' (2006: 134–135) notion that rap reflects and also disobeys society's wider values, attitudes and inequalities. On the other hand, the piece also makes direct reference to the police attitudes documented by Salihu (2021) about not even trying to allocate enough funding to prevent or solve the murders of young people from immigrant backgrounds, but seeing them as a kind of natural law, a 'self-sanitation'. The lyrics also take a stand on the poor employment situation of immigrants in Sweden and the fact that they are often stigmatised for receiving social benefits.

Although few Finnish artists rap about similar topics, or are sometimes less professionally produced as Swedish artists, discussions about gangs and rap entered the Finnish media landscape in autumn 2021. The few artists who have been associated with violence or gangs can thus take advantage or 'capitalise' on the negative media attention they receive and, to some extent, build their 'gangsta' image through media and official attention. However, some artists have also criticised bringing gang narratives into the Finnish rap scene or talking about 'ghetto life' and participating in contemporary media discussions about rap music and gang violence. One example of these voices is Finnish rapper Kerza, who in his Gangsta psykoosi [Gangsta Psychosis] (2022) can be interpreted criticising his audience glorifying criminal life.

*Sä et oo gangsta, sä oot pikkulapsi. Vaik sul on sellane fiilis ku otat hatsin. Totuus tulee näyttää sen kohta Emmä tuu sun puheitas ikin nostaa. Sä et oo g, veli, sä oot psykoosis, veli [You're not a gangsta, you're a little kid, Though you think so after one puff. The truth will show it to you soon, I ain't never gonna raise your words, You ain't no G, you're psychotic, brother]*

Similarly, after the media had discussed rap artists' gang affiliations, Finnish rapper Turisti [Tourist], released a track called 'Gunshit' (2022), also criticising the 'gangsta life' narratives in the Finnish context:

*Sä puhut gunshit, gangsta sä et oo. Sä puhut rankast laiffist, Suomes ei oo ghettoo – Joo ne puhuu oppseist, ne koittaa blendaa. Ja ne puhuu shoteist mitä ei sendaa* [You're talking gunshit, you are not a gangsta. You are talking about rough life; there are no ghettos in Finland – they're talking about opps, they try to blend in. They talk about the shots they do not send].

Both songs can be understood as a challenge to the claims and attempts of living a 'gangsta' life in Finland, which is targeted at both other artists and the audiences who consume this culture. An article in *Helsingin Sanomat* echoes these criticisms. For example, the Finnish promoter and rapper Kevin Tandu said 'Do these violent young people want this to turn into Sweden? This is Finland. People will only ruin their own lives' (Ristmeri, 2022). Moreover, this public discussion can threaten all racialised rappers who may have to address such associations in their artistry. For example, rapper Cledos (2022) writes in the caption of his track 'G Check' on his YouTube channel: 'This is a joke, I am really a nice guy'. These examples portray how public discourse regarding street gangs and increased youth violence has led to a situation where migrant background rappers are forced to 'explain' themselves to avoid misinterpretation.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article discussed Swedish and Finnish 'gangsta rap' being associated with gang violence in the media and how these discussions relate to the Nordic welfare state's neoliberal politics. We argue that the subjects of gangs, crime and violence constantly associated with the contemporary Nordic hip-hop scene should be critically discussed and researched; they relate to social norms and historical events locally and globally connected to social, political and economic hierarchies. More importantly, they are firmly connected to the ideals of the neoliberal state and politics that designate how topics related to gender, age, race and ethnicity are represented in the media and furthered in political discussions and decision-making. Our analysis concludes that instead of legitimising preventive politics, such as allocating funds to youth services, the Finnish media uses Sweden's rap scene as a warning, thereby legitimising anti-gang laws and broadening local authorities' rights.

Secondly, we aim to highlight features of contributing to public thought and challenging and creating inclusive spaces (Canton, 2022) and 'folkbildning' (Sernhede et al., 2019; Söderman and Sernhede, 2013) in rap music: seeing it as a window to the other side of ideologies that emphasise the unity of contemporary welfare state politics, people and neighbourhoods that are negatively represented in public discourse (Barron, 2013; Kelekay, 2022; Sernhede et al., 2019: 90). Like Fatsis (2019a, 2021), we endorse the view that rap music offers a social commentary on the racial neoliberalism of the 'dangerous state' (Fatsis, 2019a) that these young men are victimised by, as well as the social and structural inequalities they are subjected to, rather than viewing it as advocating a violent, punitive lifestyle. As showed earlier, the music critiques public debates on for example, immigration, schooling and public housing policies and mental health issues, which are by their very nature stigmatising, talking about their lives and residential areas as an external and troubled part of society.

In the time since this article was written, the public debate on immigration has become more intense in Sweden and Finland. Gang crime was one of the biggest themes in the debates and campaigning before the Swedish elections, and the political right finally won the elections by a narrow margin. During this period, Finland and Sweden have also jointly faced the security threat posed by Russia's war in Ukraine and decided to apply for NATO membership together. Simultaneously, there has also been a fundamental shift in the Finnish debate about the link between 'gangsta rap' and gang violence. In the spring of 2022, the Helsinki district court sentenced a well-known social media 'gangluencer', Milan Jaff, to 10 years in prison and rapper Cavallini to 9 years in prison in the so called 'gangsta rap trial', where they were accused of several crimes, such as firearms offence or aggravated robbery (Kirsi and Helpinen, 2022). In its verdict, the district court applied a section of the Criminal code (Chapter 6, Section 5, Subsection 1, paragraph 2) that increased the length of sentences if the criminal act had characteristics of organised crime. The verdict is not legally valid at the time of writing this article. Despite being previously linked to the mislabelling and mistreatment of youth of colour in court (Babe Howell, 2011), the prosecution used rap lyrics, videos and other social media content as evidence of gang connections.

Without underestimating in any way the seriousness of the above-mentioned crimes, however, we would like to highlight a few details. During the trial, the Finnish Somali rapper Cavallini from West Helsinki was suspected of being 'a central figure' of a gang named Kurdish Mafia in East Helsinki (Kirsi and Helpinen, 2022; Kirsi and Koivisto, 2022). Such 'street illiteracy' (Ilan, 2015), racial and urban misidentification unveils the extreme global juridical injustice present in the criminalisation of rap music (Fatsis, 2019a; Ilan, 2020; Nielson and Dennis, 2019). Moreover, it's important to note that knowledgeable audiences could differentiate between the artists' intentions and target audience: one promoting his delinquent persona, the other (at least used to be) an artist.

Although public and institutional discourse predominantly avoids using terminology related to racial issues, in cases like this, institutionalised racism is legitimised as a 'necessary safety precaution' to perceived and defined threats (Goldberg, 2009; Kapoor, 2013: 1030) related to gangs and violence. Therefore, naming gangs as modern 'societal ills' in the media has toughened public opinion on the rapid penalisation of gang violence and called for large-scale changes in criminal law across the political spectrum (Lakka, 2021). One of the biggest Finnish media outlets, *Helsingin Sanomat*, has written about violent street gangs (Kantola and Gustafsson, 2021; Kuokkanen, 2020), and the Finnish police board has proposed a new criminal intelligence law that would allow police to gain access to citizens' communications without concrete suspicion of a crime (Gustafsson, 2021). Indeed, healthy criticism against these preventive 'zero-tolerance' legislations are needed.

In Sweden, but also exceedingly in Finland, populist right-wing public discourse emphasising individual responsibility and blames the rising gang violence on loose immigration policies, dangerous individuals and neighbourhoods, bad parenting or the lust for expensive consumer goods has become more commonplace. Simultaneously, the one-sided publicity that gangsta rap has received in Finland is being used as a political tool to toughen immigration policy. These allegations are made even though neoliberal policies divided Swedish neighbourhoods, primary education and many other welfare state institutions and populations within these systems. Despite the fact that Sweden is portrayed as a cautionary tale for Finland, the same means are seen as a



solution: increased police surveillance and harsh punishments in response to the way situations have evolved. As an example, the Swedish authorities urged Finns not to be 'as naive and conflict avoidant' as they were (Rigatelli, 2021). In May 2023, a report ordered by the Finnish Ministry of Justice and Ministry of the Internal Affairs was considering a ban on cultural products (naming rap music) that 'promotes crime' (Jukarainen et al., 2023).

The commonly asked question of how the Swedish 'epidemic' of armed gang violence related to drugs (Salihu, 2021) can be avoided in Finland, things to be learned from the unhealthy developments. Responses to this allegedly violent youth culture may initially seem justified or even desirable to avoid recurrence of the Swedish experience in Finland. However, it could also be interpreted from the viewpoint of 'Nordic exceptionalism' (see Lahti and Kullaa, 2020; Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2016), which uses false self-consciousness of 'good citizenship and colour-blindness' to hide the Nordic welfare state policies' racially non-inclusive characteristics. Finnish people show high trust in local authorities, including the police (Kouvo, 2011; Saarikkomäki, 2021), who may enforce authoritarian policing tactics, state regulation, and social control. In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, questions have been raised about the police's ethnic profiling and interventions as well as the rise of the private security sector (see Camp and Heatherton, 2016; Saarikkomäki, 2021). Moreover, the Finnish police has been found to use racist language in their private Facebook discussions (e.g., Kerkelä, 2017) describing police subcultures in terms associated with cynicism, conservatism, prejudice and social isolation (Korander, 2004; Reiner, 2010; see also Himanen, 2021). This foreknowledge should be addressed when justifying how the police behave with these artists, their friends and audiences.

Finally, with the Finnish 'gangsta rap trial' (Kirsi and Helpinen, 2022) starting in spring 2022, we found some differences between Finnish and Swedish media conventions. The Swedish media described the artists in detail, highlighted their gang connections, published criminal evidence and named the best-known suspects/rappers. In the Finnish context, journalists have so far relied on the practical guidelines of Finnish journalists to respect the privacy of the accused, and therefore did not speculate on the details of the crimes through possible famous suspects. In this sense, it was surprising that, exceptionally, the identity and real names of the artists were revealed in the media because of their 'reduced privacy protection', as they were seen as public figures. This criminal case was later the subject of an extensive article in the Helsingin Sanomat Monthly Supplement (Nousiainen, 2023), which also named artists who were victims of the criminal case but have otherwise received little media coverage.

It is noteworthy that the debate shifted from Sweden to Finland when Yasin, who at that time had four Swedish Grammy nominations, was arrested on suspicion of involvement in Einár's kidnapping. In Finland, the debate about rap's connection to crime started soon after (Kanerva, 2021; Kirsi, 2021a; Mankkinen, 2021). Instead of politicising music, it would be more fruitful to critically assess why young people turn to the 'attention economy' (Marwick, 2015; Stuart, 2020) to mimic and commodify existing harmful stereotypes by rapping about gangs, drugs and violence on social media. Thus, future research should assess the role of directors and producers of music videos that reflect the visual landscape of these artists. This representation is usually aimed at a more affluent, white audience that enjoys consuming such material, but at the same time encourages artists to build on the harmful stereotypes that have previously forced visual minorities to the margins (see Ilan, 2015; Rose, 2008; Stuart, 2020).

In terms of future research, in addition to focusing on the Finnish ‘gangsta rap trial’, it would be important to compare how rap music has been criminalised and used as evidence in different national contexts. It would also be of particular interest to study the audiences and crowd control at rap concerts, and to see whether there are differences in the security and force used at concerts by different artists. Furthermore, as several discussed artists identify as having Somali backgrounds, we suggest that Nordic rap could be examined as a part of global digital diasporic networks (Ponzanesi, 2020, 2021), a whole movement of ‘Somali sound’ (Abdigir, 2016; Denis, 2021; Finiin, 2020), or Nordic Muslim masculinity in rap music, in future research.

The ending conclusion of our article is that our data suggest that young Black and Brown men are pushed deeper into the margins of the Nordic welfare state in Sweden than in Finland. However, the media attention around Finnish ‘gangsta rap trial’ shows how racialised young men can be marginalised, because the ideal citizen of the neoliberal welfare state is an aspirational subject that enhances the competitiveness of the state (Koskinen and Saarinen, 2019), and artists are not seen in the mainstream media except as criminals or victims. Thus, we call for the Finnish media to be critical in their choice of words, and the same applies to national legislation and local decision-makers. The media’s lack of knowledge creates an image of this music, which translates into a right-wing political agenda. Preventing the ‘path of Sweden’ by anti-gang laws and the extension of municipal rights seems to be proven already unsuccessful in other Nordic countries, so the effectiveness of these measures here is very unlikely. Instead, the analysis in this article suggests that we are not following Sweden in terms of the link between youth violence and rap music, but rather replicating poorly targeted populist policies that create ‘parallel societies’ as Sweden is said to have done with, for example, the segregation of residential areas. The possible radicalisation of young people should be dealt with by a preventive, carefully constructed and monitored anti-racist social policy, not by suppressing and bypassing the decolonial potential of rap publics, that ‘can speak alone and in conversation’ (Canton, 2022: 76). To paraphrase Canton’s last words: ‘If only we would listen’.

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## Notes

1. 'Gangsta rap' originally refers to a specific style of hip-hop that reflects the conditions of American inner-city youth in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Stylistically, 'gangsta rap' relies on hard-hitting beats played over explicit lyrics addressing issues such as urban violence, drugs, overt sexism, misogyny and materialism. However, as feminist writer bell hooks (2006: 135) proclaimed, 'gangsta rap' does not appear in a cultural vacuum, but sees its topical choices as a reflection of the values of 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' in society.
2. Grime is an edgy, unadorned musical genre that fuses Jamaican dancehall culture with garage, jungle and hip hop (e.g. Fatsis, 2019a). U.K. drill is an adaptation of Chicago drill music, which is characterised by its stripped-down sound structure, the graphic nature of its lyrical content and music videos that circulate on various video-sharing platforms (e.g. Ilan, 2020). Typical of the early nineties and mid-late 2010s, these genres describe the harsh realities of inner city life and the artists' loyalty to their immediate locale, the topics and aesthetics prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s gangsta rap.
3. For examples of Swedish 'gangsta rap' or drill:  
Dizzy 'King of drill' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IVpB13bGn4>,  
Sticky 'No names' [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dU69PtpW\\_CM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dU69PtpW_CM),  
Finnish drill: Kerza 'First day out' [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Hb\\_xamE\\_Wc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Hb_xamE_Wc),  
Cavallini & BML 'En kommentoi' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46dLqVNf244>  
UK drill: 67 ft Giggs – 'Lets Lurk' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f10yTpZzuv4>,  
SR – 'Welcome To Brixton' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svxwla5mxjQ>

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