

The Emergence of Estonian Hip-Hop in the 1990s

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Abstract

In this article I trace the ways in which hip-hop as a global form of expression has become indigenized in post-Soviet Estonia. Hip-hop's indigenization coincides with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. After the dissolution of the USSR, dominant Estonian social discourses eagerly celebrated re-entering the European-American world and embracing its values. The uncensored global media outlets accessible after 1991 and rapid developments in information technology shortly thereafter were crucial to the history of Estonian-language rap. Hip-hop artists' extensive involvement with new media and technologies reflects an extremely swift transition from ill-equipped to fluent manipulation of technology, which affected cultural production and structures of participation in various sociocultural spheres. While hip-hop culture emerged in the South Bronx during the early 1970s as a radical voice against increasing economic hardship and social marginalization, Estonian hip-hop was established in the early 1990s and developed in the context of a rapidly growing economy, rising living standards, and strong national feeling within a re-independent Estonian state. Hip-hop artists' production vividly reveals both the legacies of Soviet rule and the particular political economy of post-Soviet Estonia.

Hip-hop, with its roots in expressive Caribbean, African-American, and Latino cultures, has become fundamental to millions of peoples' identities worldwide, a fact which necessitates making sense of the specific ways hip-hop functions in diverse communities and cultures. As Tony Mitchell states, "[rap] has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world" (2001: 1–2). Strong local currents of hip-hop indigenization have taken root across the world, including in Europe (e.g. Bennett 2000: 133–165; Krims 2000: 152–197; Mitchell 2003; Brown 2006; Helenon 2006; Barrer 2009; Helbig 2011). As proposed by James Lull, the process of the indigenization or reterritorialization of a musical genre from a globally available popular culture is a helpful framework for examining the appropriation of rap in Europe as the emergence of a new cultural territory. As Androutsopoulos and Scholz interpret Lull's concept, "an indigenized cultural pattern is integrated into the artistic repertoire of the host society, and, as a consequence, [...] the pattern is now appropriated as a native form of expression"

(2003: 468). To invoke Tom Boellstorff's notion of "dubbing culture" (Boellstorff 2003), indigenized rap "is more than just a quotation: it adds a step, first alienating something but then reworking it in a new context" (2003: 237, cited in Keeler 2009: 6). In this article, I trace the process of hip-hop indigenization in Estonia since the late 1980s by providing hip-hop community members' own insights about developments in hip-hop and society in general.¹

One significant reason behind the broad and rapid indigenization of the rap genre might lie in its readily available "fantasies of masculine power" (Keeler 2009: 9). Ward Keeler's captivating, if controversial, analysis of Burmese and U.S. rap stresses the importance of a certain "social" vision in which the MC,² and those who take pleasure in identifying with the MC, project a fantasy of absolute power over others, with no hint of accompanying obligation or responsibility" (Keeler 2009: 10). As bell hooks reminds us, the "notion that a real man proves his manhood by remaining rigidly attached to one's position, refusing to change [...] reveals the emotional immaturity that

¹ I am deliberately ambiguous about the identity of my interlocutors in order to protect their privacy. A selected list of formal interviews and a selected list of correspondence with my interlocutors are to be found at the end of this article.

² MC (sometimes spelled emcee), short for Master of Ceremony, is an alternative title for a rapper. MCing forms one of the five pillars of hip-hop culture (other four being graffiti, Bboying, DJing, and knowledge).