

I Spit Therefore I Am: Rap and Knowledge

Wanda Canton (she/her)

Abstract

Rap is not an epistemology because it has no central theory of knowledge. However, it is epistemic, and its musical method has decolonising properties. This paper is presented as a working through of three propositions to better understand how rap can engage with academia, public discourse and to what extent it can be considered decolonial. Although lyrical content challenges dominant signifiers such as policing and rap-publics platform and share such ideas, there are problematic representations which are in part dictated by commercial markets. I offer suggestions as to how rap can contribute to academia as speaking with and alongside, rather than being engulfed by existing standards. This requires defending rap from censorship and criminalisation.

Keywords: rap, decolonial, epistemology, discourse, publics.

Introduction

Who *cares*¹ whether rap is a decolonial epistemology or an episteme with decolonial methods? I ask myself. Some forms of rap are increasingly present in academic discussions, such as the growing field of hip-hop scholarship. We must be careful not to limit it by existing academic frameworks which, despite the best of intentions, may fall short of realising the extent of rap's disruptive qualities. Further, if we are to adequately defend rap, both to elevate it as a form of knowledge, and against its criminalisation such as the ongoing censorship of UK Drill, we must critically attend to what rap *does*. Rap has always been embroiled in struggles over censorship and criminalisation, disproportionately affecting people of colour as the majority of artists. Rap phobia tends to conflate Blackness with violence and gang culture. I have long been concerned with the racialised demonisation of rap, which is positioned as a threat to society rather than individual listeners (Nelson and Dennis, 2018). It feels urgently necessary to understand what knowledge is being lost when rap is removed from public space and why it is so scrutinised and policed.

Decoloniality is an appropriate framework with which to do this, given its attention to hierarchies in knowledge and the marginalisation of racialised groups. Decoloniality is an epistemology meaning that it is a theory of knowledge. I will distinguish this from postcolonialism which considers *what* is known, instead highlighting that decoloniality asks *how* we know and what social relationships are produced as a result. This includes consideration of non-written text such as music, and how forms of knowledge are shared.

This has shaped the way in which I present this paper in two key ways. Firstly, I prioritise referencing rappers rather than conventional philosophers. "Intellectual decolonization...cannot come from existing philosophies and cultures of scholarship," Walter D. Mignolo explains, even where this is "well intended, comes from the left, and supports decolonization" (2002, 64). Rather than applying philosophy onto rap, perhaps forcibly so, my intention is to locate rap speaking *alongside*. This is in part a dilemma I return to; can rap speak on its own terms, and how does it engage and develop *with* other forms of knowledge? The title of this paper plays on René Descartes's (1637) *I think therefore I am*. To crudely condense his argument and the wealth of philosophy debating it, he claimed that thinking is proof of one's existence. Even when in doubt, one must be thinking and can subsequently know, as an absolute truth, that they exist. This became the foundation of modern Western thought, particularly concepts of reason and rationality. I will explain the significance of these concepts of modernity when discussing the difference between post/decoloniality. My title alludes to the

¹ I have used italics throughout this text to place emphasis as I would in speech.

assumptions made of rappers as to *spit* is a colloquialism meaning to rap; *I rap; therefore, this is how I am perceived*. Referencing Descartes reflects my positioning of rap as knowledge whilst offering a tongue-in-cheek double meaning (a key component in rap lyrics), of spitting on something metaphorically, to dismiss or disregard. In this case, challenging the referential pedestal of modern philosophy.

Secondly, I present this paper as a working-through in action, hoping to engage the reader in the *process* of my argument, not just its conclusion. I am reminded of maths exams in school, where we are asked not just to provide an answer, but to ‘show your working out.’ I am inspired by Katherine McKittrick’s undoing of the written format and the use of footnotes, citations, digressions, and poetry “not to master knowing and centralize our knowingness, but to share *how we know*” (2021, 17, original italics). I have therefore structured this work to present a story of sorts, showing the working through of my initial assumption, its subsequent reframing, and final negotiation. I conclude that rap is praxis; the meeting of action and ideas, where theory and knowledge are embodied and shared. I offer an invitation to you, reader, to journey together in reaching this conclusion, via the following junctures:

1. Rap is a decolonial epistemology
2. Rap decolonises epistemology
3. Rap is epistemic and its methods have decolonising properties.

Rap Ancestry

Rap is a method and not a genre. For example, UK Grime has a higher Beat Per Minute (BPM) than US hip-hop, but they are both forms of rap. I examine the decolonial properties of rap as a musical method, common across UK and US genres. Although these genres each have their distinct history and socio-political contexts from which they speak, common themes include inner-city life, experiences of the police, and the use of rhythmic speech. Despite geo-political differences, I will focus on these recurring topics and methods. A full history of rap is too rich to be fully explored here but to understand its methodological and political developments, it is important to contextualise its origins. Like any art form, new styles and generations would go on to be developed, and influenced, however distantly, by the arrival of American hip-hop. I think of this as mapping a family tree – there is a lineage or ancestry, within which inter-generational attributes are shared or passed along, albeit embodied and experienced uniquely to each relative.

Rap was created by African Americans during the 1970s in New York. An expressway had recently been built through the Bronx, causing the middle classes to leave *en masse* in what has been called the ‘White Exodus’ (Chang, 2005, 11).

Houses were demolished for the Cross Bronx Expressway, leading to the construction of poorly maintained tower blocks and a crash in property value. The Bronx became home to the most marginalised and therefore impoverished communities of American society, primarily Latinos and African Americans, unable to afford to live in other boroughs. The architectural decisions made by Robert Moses who designed the Expressway, dramatically changed New York, leading to the formation of so-called slums, which segregated communities according to class and consequently, colour (Caro, 1974). This may be the root of common rap references to the 'ghetto.' Poor housing conditions and social inequalities exacerbated unemployment and poverty, creating the ideal environment for the drug trade and subsequently organised crime. These areas effectively produced captive markets for the crack epidemic in the 1980s which would further devastate such communities through mass incarceration. Rappers acted as cultural observers commentating on this socio-economic context, described as creating a "contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless" (Rose, 1994, 101). Rap became a vehicle to express Black disenfranchisement. Meanwhile, DJs gaining popularity began hiring emcees² to bolster their performances and engage with growing audiences. They used rhythmic speech already established in other traditions of the African American South, including preaching, oral storytelling, and melodic speaking over reggae or 'toasting' (Keyes, 1996). Hip-hop producers in the 80s commonly practised *sampling*, the use of other songs, melodies, or basslines in a new track. Sampling brings history into the present and obstructs the erasure of Black artistry, by curating and preserving music in collective memory (Rose, 1994). Collaboration and sampling have always been a cornerstone of rap, which continues today. This returns to my earlier mention of the family tree, as rap has always been referenced and borrowed from different generations and genres in relation (pun intended) to real-time experiences which are specific but inherited.

1. Rap is a decolonial epistemology

To argue this proposition, rap should have a coherent theory of knowledge which is informed by and engages with a decolonial framework. This requires defining decoloniality from postcolonialism. This is not to suggest that they are necessarily incompatible or in contradiction to each other, but to acknowledge some distinct, if subtle, differences. Gurminder Bhambra (2014), who recognises post/decoloniality can operate in connection nevertheless distinguishes

² This is where the synonym for rapper, MC (Master of Ceremonies), originates.

postcolonialism as an intellectual movement via diasporic scholars from the Middle East and South Asia, with an attention to material and socio-economic circumstances from the 19th century onwards. Whilst both postcolonialism and decoloniality are concerned with the histories of colonialism, empire, and enslavement, decoloniality questions the very logic of modernity and concepts produced within its limited imagination. By casting a wider analysis as early as the 15th century, modern articulations of race, gender, and sexuality are revealed as products of colonial domination. Thus, via Aníbal Quijano (2000), the colonial matrix of power includes the continual reproduction of economy, authority, gender/sexuality, and knowledge constructions. Described as the colonial wound, racialised groups have historically been side-lined as economically and intellectually underdeveloped, in need of guidance as benefactors to knowledge but not producers (Mignolo, 2009). The Global North as an “epistemic master” (Mitova, 2020) and moderniser, assumed its Eurocentric perspectives were universal, and could, or should, transcend cultural and historical differences. Also written as modernity/coloniality, this is akin to power/knowledge in Foucauldian writing, an aesthetic-linguistic indication that the two are entwined (Alcoff 2007). Decoloniality problematises *coloniality* as an ongoing, intellectual, cultural domination, not just *colonialism* as a historical period (Mignolo, 2002). Further, whilst ‘post’ (meaning after) suggests that something has ended, *decolonial* to me evokes a sense of movement and an ongoing struggle far from over – something is yet to be undone.³ A colonial hangover persists, which excludes some experiences over others. To put this another way, the concepts we take for granted as developments of modernity cannot be divorced from their colonial origins. Rather than objective or universal truths, so-called ‘rationality’ and ‘knowledge’ are themselves constructions which shape how we live in and through the world. Decoloniality asks not simply *what* we know but *how* we come to know it.

This brings into question the privileging of academia as a key site of creating and disseminating knowledge. Therefore, I consider rap’s relationship to academia. There are common criticisms (and memes) of academic scholarship focusing on ‘dead, White, men,’ which are disconnected from the lived experience of most people and their material realities. Disciplines such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), are elevated as objective and universal, widely recognised as dominated by White men. In 2020, 65% of the UK STEM workforce were White men who are also overrepresented in academic science (APPG, 2020; Woolston, 2020). In the UK, Black academics are seriously underrepresented across academia, constituting a meagre 1% of professors (White, 2022). Diversifying representation in academia, however, would not be enough to serve the disruptive aims of decoloniality if only reinforcing epistemic

³ For a broader discussion on the debates surrounding what the ‘post’ of postcolonial signifies, see Stuart Hall (1995).

monopolies. “It is not enough to change the content of the conversation... it is of the essence to change the *terms* of the conversation” (Mignolo, 2009, 162; original italics). More Black representation would not necessarily subvert the colonised subject as a consumer of modernity and not a producer. Although there are movements to decolonise curriculums in universities, this must involve more than changing reading lists; formal reading and debate in academic spaces may be part of the problem. Hence postcolonialism is criticised as changing the narrator but not the story. Decoloniality is not satisfied with adding more voices to the same platform but listening to those which may sink it altogether.

Word⁴

Decolonising knowledge requires a disruption of discursive norms. I will outline what ‘discourse’ is, with an example of how rap lyrics change social meaning given to institutions like the police. This not only gives voice to Black experiences but is decolonial if it challenges the fundamental logic of the institutions it calls to account. However, rap is not a decolonial epistemology if it is extracted to complement existing frameworks. This includes reinforcing academia as a site of knowledge (see the following section, ‘Knowledge is Power’). Although well intended, it may tokenise Black inclusion without considering how such structures themselves need dismantling.

Discourse is speech which creates and reproduces social relationships. Speech is most radical where it facilitates change and disruption. This is *significant* (an academic quip to savour later) to both decoloniality and epistemology. Louis Althusser (1970) explained ideology as a system of ideas which shape social organisation. Such ideas are not simply enforced through oppressive state practices, but garner legitimacy through other means such as culture and communication, therefore including language. Ideology is not the same as knowledge because it pertains to ideals and values. But in the context of the colonial matrix, ideology privileges forms of knowledge to legitimise particular social practices. Ideology *produces* meaning. Production being the key word, because meaning is not inherent, as decoloniality explains, but rather requires constant repetition and development. To articulate what an object is, we use words to describe it, also known as *signifiers*. Without these signifiers, the object would have no meaning. For example, ‘house’ gives meaning to bricks and mortar, but ‘prison’ produces entirely different connotations to the same material. Institutions and political subjectivity are also endowed with signification. For example, ‘the police’ would not have meaning without the corresponding signifiers such as justice, discipline, protection, and security. These values are legitimised and reproduced through other institutions such as law, education, the family, and

⁴ A double meaning to refer to rap lyrics and ‘word’ in slang meaning to agree.

media. However, defining what something *is* means defining what it is *not*. These boundaries are necessary otherwise the object would lose comprehension. Yet these boundaries also expose the limits of any *meaning-full* ideal and show the impossibility of them being fully realised, as they only make sense by the existence of its opposite (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). If the ideal were to be fully realised, it would also cease to exist. The police can only be meaningful as upholding the law by the existence of crime. Without danger and threat, there would be no need for security. Language is central to organising and maintaining social practices but is constantly vulnerable to destabilisation and change.

Rap (predominantly) is an articulation of lived experiences by Black people, but this in and of itself is not necessarily decolonial unless we ascertain what these narratives *do*. Dominant discourse is interrupted when rap produces alternative signifiers. Through repetition, this has the potential to radically change the existing meaning of institutions such as the police. When rappers share a critical account of the police, they challenge their existing logic. What follows are lyrics by the UK Drill group, OFB. It is an example of preserving collective history, sampling, and sharing genres and experiences across geo-political contexts. The acronym stands for Original Farm Boys, referring to Broadwater Farm, an estate in Tottenham, North London which is famous for two major incidents. The first was a riot in 1985 following the death of Cynthia Jarrett, a 49-year-old Jamaican woman, after police raided her home near the estate. The second was the murder of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old Black man, by police in 2011. He had grown up on the Broadwater estate and his killing led to riots all over the UK. One of the members of OFB is Duggan's son, who uses the moniker Bandokay. Their track 'BLM' (Black Lives Matter) calls to account racist policing practices. It samples a Coldplay song, demonstrating cross-genre collaboration, and references cases of African American men being killed by police in the US, citing Eric Garner's last words, *I can't breathe* and referring to George Floyd who was killed after police knelt on his neck for a prolonged period. This draws comparisons between the American and British experience of policing, alongside OFB members' personal losses including that of Mark Duggan and the history of their borough. Even though there will inevitably be differences between experiences of policing around the world, the song clearly highlights similarities. The texture of the rap is different to US hip-hop, but the lyrical topic is the same. The *signifiers* of policing are violence and racism. Throughout the song, these include *segregation, killing, evil, it hurts, haunts, no remorse, execute*. OFB addresses the police directly, which is significant in demonstrating rap's role in demanding that those too often marginalised, silenced, and even killed, are heard. Rather than waiting for an invitation to speak, they use music as the medium to do this. As decoloniality champions, they have created their own platform.

Black lives matter, they act like they don't know this (hey, hey)

Just because we kill off each other don't give you an excuse to do it too, no,
no
Mr. Officer, I can't breathe 'cause you've been pressin' my neck wit' your
knees,
For years now
We're no different to other generations, growin' up fightin', all the
segregation (...)
And free all my guys on the wing, if you're doin' life or just got recalled (ayy)
I just got a call from bro and he just got life,
Got me feelin' stressed (free him) (OFB, 2020).

Other notable rap songs discussing police misconduct and harassment include *Sound of the Police* by KRS-One (1993), *Ridin'* by Chamillionaire⁵ (2005) and *Routine Check* by the Mitchell Brothers (2015) among many others. These span different genres and eras of rap. One of the most famous rap songs related to the police is NWA's *Fuck Tha Police* (1988). It has since become an iconic pop culture reference, with its lyrics chanted on protests of all kinds and featured in social/media content. The repetition of lyrics such as these disrupts dominant discursive chains by changing the language around policing and, by associating it with injustice and racial profiling, calls into question its institutional place and legitimacy. I propose this is decolonial because it seeks to displace the police entirely, not just diversify it: "don't let it be a Black and a White one, 'cause they'll slam ya down to the street top, black police showin' out for the White cop" (NWA, 1988). However, the song's representation in TV and film includes featuring in the popular adult animation series, *South Park* (2015). The show depicts white people behaving mildly unruly such as pushing their shopping carts into officers in supermarkets whilst the track plays. This undermines the serious political point of the song by suggesting it is an anthem of the *petty* bourgeoisie.⁶ There have been observations that rap is predominantly listened to by White middle-class teenagers (Krim, 2000; Stuart, 2020). These may be intended to demonstrate rap's mass appeal, but in the case of *South Park*, it might be used to dilute the political potency of black self-organisation. This parody does not reflect the original sentiment of the song but nonetheless shows how significant it is within popular culture. The struggle over perceptions of police is elevated in the public consciousness through rap.

In fact, parodies and appropriation have been used repeatedly to disregard rap and to displace it from its radical roots. When the vernaculars of rap are spoken by those perceived to be outside of the 'authentic' community, or non-members of rap *publics* as I will later discuss, the same speech which had political potency,

⁵ A chart-topping hit with less noted lyrics referring to 'crooked cops' and a vehicle stop.

⁶ A wordplay on *petit* bourgeoisie meaning middle classes.

descends into mockery or clout chasing.⁷ Authenticity or ‘realness’ is highly valued in rap, which reinforces the importance of (group) identity and history. In the UK, rappers will typically speak their own name at the beginning of a track, affiliated groups, and the producer ‘on the beat.’ I suggest that this is a declaration of ownership but also affiliation. There are often ‘shout outs’ to regions, typically working-class, inner-city areas where the MC is from and ‘represents,’ therefore marking their membership to these communities. They affirm their authenticity. Rappers who fabricate their identities do indeed get a bad rap. For example, Rick Ross bragged about dealing drugs and was then exposed as a former prison guard (Kreps, 2008). Iggy Azalea has been ‘cancelled’ after appropriating cultures other than her own such as wearing Indian dress, twerking,⁸ blackfishing,⁹ using a blaccent¹⁰ when she is a white Australian and even referred to herself as a slave owner (Barlow, 2018). She recently quit the music industry citing that she doesn’t want to share her personal experiences – demonstrative of how crucial realness is within the genre (Azalea, 2021). The backlash she has received for cultural appropriation exposes her as an inauthentic, non-member of the hip-hop community. Elevating White rappers for commercial success is criticised if it profits from Black culture without crediting or equally recognising Black artists. As rapper Azealia Banks explains, this erases rap’s Black origins and history; “so this little thing called hip-hop, that I’ve created for myself, that I’m holding onto with my dear fucking life – it’s like... snatched away from me or something” (Banks, 2014). It is not just the words spoken in rap which are of central importance, but *who* speaks them.

Knowledge is Power

Although rap may make political statements, particularly pertaining to the police, it has no central ideology. However, some rap has explicitly pedagogic aims and includes calls to action. Akala is a UK rapper known for exploring politics and history in his lyrics. His discography includes *Knowledge is Power* (2012) and references to Shakespeare, to which he compares hip hop. Akala’s lyrics offer imperatives by directly addressing the listener. He also places importance on education as a means of freedom:

But if I teach a kid to be a mathematician, messin’ with the schism
How they gonna fill a prison when materialism is nothing but a religion? (...)
One of my homeboys did a ten straight in the box in yard
Now, what’s he doing? Passin’ his doctorate
Don’t tell me that it’s too hard!

⁷ A popular term to refer to seeking power and influence through association with public figures, such as respected rappers.

⁸ A dance form.

⁹ Changing one’s aesthetic to appear black.

¹⁰ African-American accent.

Who trained you to believe that you're inferior? (...)
So read, read, read!
Stuck on the block, read, read!
Sittin' in the box, read, read!
Don't let them say what you can achieve
'Cause when people are enslaved
One of the first things they do is stop them reading
'Cause it is well understood that intelligent people will take their freedom
'Cause if we knew our power we would understand that we can't be held
down (Akala, 2011).

Akala is consistently critical of other rappers, noting “I do quite literally own a library, that definitely costs more than your chain” (Akala, 2011). This not only reinforces his high valuation of literature and education as discussed above but feels somewhat moralistic. He criticises the vanity and apathy of rappers, urging them to reconsider their priorities and explore music as a form of education. This raises a tension in decoloniality. Can structures of power be dismantled without engaging with them? Although Akala has a clear intention to address inequalities in resources and does so through historicising colonialism, he also values reading and formal education as the source of knowledge. For example, highlighting the doctorate as the opposite of prison (‘yard’) and prestigious ambition. Whilst many PhDs would baulk at his claim that it’s not too hard (!), it is intended to encourage Black educational ambition and attainment. Many rappers including Akala, Chuck D, P Diddy, and Kayne West have received honorary doctorates. This demonstrates a willingness for rappers to be acknowledged as experts and scholars. The cynics among us may query why Universities offer honorary degrees to rappers and whether this is to pay lip service to inclusion without offering structural change. Stormzy recently received an honorary degree from the University of Exeter. His brilliantly personable speech (2022) was read to a noticeably White majority audience. He was awarded his degree for his philanthropy including the ‘Stormzy Scholarship’ for Black students at the University of Cambridge, again encouraging educational ambition, although he is yet to receive an honorary degree there... I note that Exeter’s Vice Chancellor refers to honouring *Michael* (Stormzy’s birth name) and hearing *Michael’s* speech, describing him as an ‘outstanding musician and wordsmith’ but not a rapper (Blandford, 2022). This subtly distances his rapper identity from the academic space as though it has no legitimacy there. I consider this an example of epistemic injustice via Veli Mitova (2020). Firstly, *testimonial injustice* undermines credibility based on the identity of the person giving testimony. Erasing Stormzy’s credentials as a rapper could be an example of this, especially as it minimises the fact that rap was the medium with which he was able to pursue his philanthropic goals. It is also an example of *epistemicide*: the extermination of knowledge and practices. By refusing to recognise, explicitly, Stormzy as a Grime MC, his achievements are stolen from the Grime community

who can absolutely be said to be a part of Stormzy's success. Instead, it separates and rewards Michael The Philanthropist, without acknowledging Stormzy's musical heritage.

On the other hand, there are now hip-hop archives and classes around the world. Some have argued this is only legitimate if it is taught and maintained by those with direct (authentic) ties to 'The Culture' (Grewal, 2020). Only hip-hop heads should teach hip-hop, so the argument goes. Otherwise, rap may be colonised and forced into professionalised academic disciplines such as Literature, which embeds rap into the very standards it subverts. It may become clinically objectified in the classroom, fetishising urban communities as unusual objects of study requiring interpretation (Rose, 1994). Arguably, the inclusion of rap in academia would diversify its professorship and potential students. This is not consistent with decoloniality's aim to deconstruct the privileged sites of knowledge such as the University, though arguably this is difficult to do if nobody is there to do it. This also bypasses the radical ability of rap to engage listeners in philosophy and politics outside of academic spaces. In Stormzy's graduation speech, he says:

Some of our destinies is to [sic] save one life. Some of us are destined to build nations and build schools. Some of us will focus on raising our families and those closest to us. Some of us will help our local community; some of us will help the neighbour next door. Some of us will help the world; some of us will help a friend. My point being that we should always share and support and uplift and help in whatever capacity we are able to (Stormzy, 2022).

It would have been impactful to add *some of us make music*. "Growing up as a white kid in the suburbs nobody was teaching about Black politics in school," reports one participant in a documentary on the rap group, Public Enemy (BBC, 2011). He states he wouldn't have known who Malcolm X was if it wasn't for rap records. This suggests that music itself is an epistemic site independent of academia. As an aside, it would be unreasonable to expect rappers to be simultaneously at the top of their game musically whilst also building an academic career to a teaching level. Both require a significant arsenal of resources which is in contradiction to hip-hop being rooted in disenfranchised communities.

These debates as to where, if at all, rap should be included demonstrates that there is no singular ideology nor consensus as to rap's role within academia. It does not have a unified epistemological position. Although this does not detract from its decolonial attributes, it would be inaccurate to say that rap *is* a decolonial epistemology. Rappers who have received degrees and doctorates are being recognised as contributing to scholarship, but not because they are rappers. Yet it is precisely *because* of rap and its public platform/s that academia took

note and should give credit where it's due. The fact that rappers did not gain their knowledge in the University (hence honorary degree), demonstrates that rap creates an independent space – a public.

2.

Rap

is a decolonial epistemology decolonises epistemology

Although rap has no singular message, it does share a medium. This medium decolonises epistemic sites if it changes how knowledge is produced and disseminated. Even if it is not a theory of knowledge per se. I have already explained that discourse *does* something. Rap actively produces publics which are spaces to contest and validate knowledge. This does not require a singular ideology to be impactful, because there is no criterion for membership. This could be consistent with decoloniality, by diversifying *who* and *what* constitutes a public, without regulating participation – at least on the part of rappers, though there are certainly ongoing attempts to censor and de-publicise rap. Rappers and songs have been censored and criminalised throughout the entirety of its history. The earliest radio bans began in 1987 (Rose, 1994). Public Enemy had their records banned from stores and TV (BBC, 2011). Rap lyrics have been used as criminal evidence since 1991 (Nelson and Dennis, 2019). Individual artists have been banned from social media platforms as well as venues (Stuart, 2020). In the UK there is an ongoing campaign against Drill which has led to orders against its creation (Cobain, 2018). These artists have varied in their genres, country and lyrical content but nonetheless have faced significant obstacles in their expression and distribution. As Nicki Minaj (2022) said: “rap is the only culture that from the beginning of time has been vilified... I just don't think that any culture that's predominantly White, ever deals with that.” Even if an artist achieves a high profile or record deal, they are often still vulnerable to surveillance and criminalisation. Meek Mill has been subject to intense supervision through probation, parole, house arrest and even ordered to attend etiquette classes (Solotaroff et al, 2019). His growing popularity as a rapper did not protect him from the relentless control and bureaucracy of the courts. These continuous obstructions suggest there are fears about what rap does or can do in the public realm. And, as we will see, this is controlled in the commercial scene.

A Public Enemy¹¹

Rap genres including hip-hop and UK Drill may constitute *publics* according to Michael Warner's (2002) definition. These are self-organised groups built around a text, including music, whose membership is based on attention to this text rather than any other classification, identity, or political belief. Imagine a crowd at a DJ set. The personal experience and significance of the music will vary, but there is nonetheless a belonging and inclusivity which is centred on collectively experiencing the music. The popularity of rap genres around the world has given a platform to inner-city, working-class, Black communities, arguably on a scale like never before. This means not only contributing to public thought but creating the spaces themselves. That there is no demand for a singular identity or dogma can be a strength given that it expands the possibility of multiple publics and discursive interventions. More precisely, rap produces *counter-publics* which,

...maintains at some level, conscious or not, an *awareness of its subordinate status*. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the *speech genres and modes of address* that constitute the public and to the *hierarchy among media*. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but *one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility* or with a sense of indecorousness (Warner, 2002, 86, italics mine).

Black artists disturb the peace¹² of polite (White) society by interjecting different meanings and interpretations (discourse) to the cultural-political landscape and by staging publics around them. Cultural identity is continuously revised and created (Krim, 2000) as is discourse and the music itself. This embraces new members in reproducing or changing the characteristics of the public. Through the audience listening, sharing, mimicking, and repeating the discursive chains, the rap public can begin to influence institutions such as social media, record labels, and broadcasting. One of the biggest selling records in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder was 'The Bigger Picture' by Lil Baby (2020):

I never been a fan of police
But my neighbourhood know I try to keep peace
So it's only right that I get in the streets
March for a reason, not just on GP
Our people died for us to be free
Fuck do you mean? This was a dream
Now we got the power that we need to have
They don't want us with it and that's why they mad (Lil Baby, 2020).

¹¹ This refers to the hip-hop group who gave themselves this namesake as an intentional political statement, both naming and subverting the notion of hip-hop as a 'public enemy'.

¹² I use this term to reflect the criminalisation of rap by referencing the offence of disturbing the peace.

The video includes visuals of public demonstrations. The intro samples a journalist reporting on the murder of Floyd and subsequent protests. The song is structurally (commercially) unusual with subtle hooks and no climatic chorus, creating a monologue style which feels like both a pained stream of consciousness and a speech calling for action. This includes reciting ‘knowledge is power.’ The use of ‘our, us, we’ and ‘they’ heightens the sentiment of a *counter-public* by emphasising unity against the police. The song was compared to NWA’s *Fuck Tha Police* and elevated Lil Baby to Number 1 on the Billboard Artist and album charts (Freeman, 2020). Consider the industry reaction to Floyd’s murder; the Instagram campaign of black squares which represented solidarity with anti-racist movements (Patterson, 2021). Although it would be remiss to argue this seriously impacted racism, it does demonstrate an awareness on the part of major companies that they must publicly denounce racism in line with their audiences, given that rap has been one of, if not still is, the biggest selling genre since 1998 (Krim, 2000). This is an example of music as a *counter-public* as streaming and downloading expands its public spatiality, whilst subverting dominant discourse. Social media is a modern public space where speech, images, and text are used to *influence* (hence the term influencer). These rely on other users interacting with content. This democratises to some degree, which artists are elevated over others. Rap builds global *counter-publics* by bridging online and street spaces. It has been a vehicle for movements and campaigns for causes like those against police brutality. One of its strengths, then, is *not* maintaining a singular ideology. This widens the scope of its public membership and increases the likelihood of reaching those who may not otherwise have engaged with Black social commentary: “listening to and grooving to Black music provides the conditions to intellectually engage and love Black ethically” (McKittrick, 2021). To be *counter* (public) is to be *contrary to*, and this indicates an alignment with decoloniality.

However, the biggest social media platforms are owned by major corporations and billionaires who are motivated by profit, not by building counter-publics. Further, the music industry does not provide a level playing field. It would be naïve to ignore that many rappers rely on a commercial platform to generate influence, one which is certainly not decolonial given it is dominated by White, male, executives. In both this *Fire in the Booth* session and ‘Find No Enemy’, Akala repeatedly refers to commercial rappers as ‘clowns’ and to their ‘dick swinging’, meaning grandiose or arrogant:

Constant stereotypes are needed
So if I celebrate how big that my dick is, bricks that I’m flippin’
Clips that I’m stickin’, chicks that I’m hittin’, I’m playing my position (...)
If we knew our power, we would not elevate not one of these clowns
If we knew our power, we wouldn’t get arrogant when we get two pennies
(Akala, 2011).

We complain about racism and elevate clowns
With their trousers down swinging their dicks round
Maybe that is not quite literal
But everything they do is just as stereotypical (...)
Calling it black radio, don't make laugh
So is black music all about tits and arse?
You don't represent nothing, you're just pretending
When was the last time you ever played Hendrix? (...) (Akala, 2010).

This warrants some delicate unpacking. Only 6% of the UK's music industry executives are Black (Patterson, 2021). Like many artists, Akala is condemning the commodification of Black culture which becomes a stereotype and reinforces colonial tropes of Black performers. It is important to note that whilst rap has Afro-Diasporic roots, it does not mean that there is any singular 'Black culture' nor that it *is* rap. Blackness is not homogenous, and it is, therefore, problematic to see it only in the context of arts and culture which retains the Black man as a passive performer; "the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo Americans have science" (Mignolo, 2009, 160). Akala brings attention to this, as have other Black commentators who have criticised rap for representing harmful stereotypes of Black people in the public realm (Millz, 2020). As White men are over-represented in the music industry, they act as gatekeepers to control which rappers receive commercial acclaim. Nicki Minaj has recently highlighted this in the context of award categories, claiming that moving her from the rap category to pop effectively obstructs her from winning a Grammy award against the predominantly White nominees. It also means that Black music is forced to cater to White demographics and indeed, Minaj alludes to this by referring to another female rapper as a 'spray-tan Karen',¹³ claiming she is complicit in the erasure of Black women from rap (Willman, 2022). Both Akala and Minaj are arguing that the commercial scene favours 'palatable' rappers who may be White, comical stereotypes or tropes of gangsters. Examples could include mild-mannered 'clean' rapper LL Cool J, White artists like Macklemore and the infamous 6ix9ine who represents a one-dimensional image of people of colour premised on gangs and materialism. Therefore, these publics are damaging rather than decolonial if they reaffirm colonial tropes and are managed by elite White men.

However, to digress momentarily to consider those aforementioned chains Akala is so critical of, this may fall short of understanding the subversive impact of Black, working-class men participating in White spaces or wealth. The archetypal rap jewellery and flaunting expensive possessions is a symbol of power, status and economic mobility which has generally been reserved for the White middle-

¹³ A pejorative term for entitled white women.

classes (Rose, 1994). Warner has explained that counter-publics stage an awareness of subordination and representations which would be received with hostility in another context. Although it may not be the intent of the typical gangster rapper to inadvertently mock the monopoly of wealth, their sudden presence reveals a historic absence. Rappers may even actively play on racial caricatures to build capital, thereby profiting from the stereotypes that would otherwise persist without them benefitting. I am reminded of Cardi B's acceptance speech after winning Best New Artist at the iHeartRadio Awards (2018). After thanking those who had supported her success, she thanked her haters (critics) because, laughing, she says "they be downloading my songs so they can hear it and talk crap about it, but it benefits me!" Clearly, this would not meet the scope of decoloniality given that it maintains tropes of Blackness, consumerist culture and merely makes capitalism accessible to a select group of Black artists, who then reinforce these unattainable ideals. However, placing a burden on rappers to be consistently political and free of contradictions might neglect some valuable or transformative components. Indeed, Akala's own song 'I Don't Need' (2010) presents a list of stereotypical ideas of what he thinks women do to attract men, representing women as desperate and material. Although the preceding word is "inspiring," Akala refers to women as "creatures." This shouldn't be used to undermine the other messages he promotes but does demonstrate some potential hypocrisy in calling out other rappers for being problematic, holding them to righteous standards they may never have claimed to meet. And, given there is no rap dogma, the significance of a rap public is not just who creates the space, but what happens there. Even if the public figure is not decolonial, the space itself, and its expanding membership could be.

One reason for rap's mass popularity is the use of music via rhythmic or melodic speech. Rappers can be more engaging than politicians as they respond to current issues in an easily accessible, relatable, and sometimes humorous way (Rose, 1994). This can transcend class or racial barriers and has created, one of, if not the biggest public platform for Black representation. This may also explain why it is so threatening to existing power structures; rap generates massive audiences and has a stage to disseminate new ideas. To value rap only if it is explicitly and consistently 'radical' misses an opportunity to explore its decolonial elements which may exist *alongside* its problematic uses.

3.

Rap

is a decolonial epistemology

~~decolonises epistemology~~

is epistemic and its methods have decolonising properties

To say rap is epistemic acknowledges that it shares ways of knowing and experiencing the world, but without demanding that these conform to a particular framework or belief system. This allows for contradictions within rap without using one genre to dismiss another. We have seen that there are decolonial properties to rap including its discursive subversion which challenges institutions such as the police. Its creation of publics builds epistemic sites, but these can be manipulated by the commercial market and are not necessarily decolonial. Rap may meet its decolonial heights where it engages with, speaks alongside, and contributes to other epistemic and methodological projects. Although rap is not dogmatic and tows no party line, it is continually in discussion and development within itself. Irrespective of coherent political positions or genre-specific styles, rap is ultimately a *praxis*. It explores socio-political issues through the creation of music, and in turn, music enables new ideas to be explored. Decoloniality champions methods and practices of living, hearing, *grooving* (McKittrick, 2021). The musical/poetic component of rap publics compels listeners to join; the instinctive swaying, tapping of feet, bobbing of the head, and dance. This can surpass political differences. Brandon LaBelle's (2018) conceptualisation of *unlikely* publics may be more appropriate, as they form in everyday life rather than mass movements. According to Stuart Hall (1996), black popular culture is centred on style, music, and dance which are daily practices. Sound is a texture which moves. Between speakers and listeners, through different pitches, tones, and articulations, between the seen and the unseen, online and in person. Therefore, it may be rap's musical form which is most decolonial where it speaks to and through multiple epistemes.

Non-Text Text

Warner (2002) notes that *public discourse* is poetic, as is rap. Some rap simply doesn't translate when it is written, due to the accent and intonation of words. In some British accents, *been* is pronounced *bin*. An imperfect rhyme can be found within *I've been struggling*. If you reread this with an American accent or Queen's English, it changes the rhyme. Speech is always imbued with individuality and regional uniqueness, bonding the speech to speaker, thereafter the listener, embodying poetry in physical and linguistic histories and space. "Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition on the other hand demands...the audience to complete the community" (Brathwaite, 1984, 18). It is

distinct from creative or academic *writing* which requires both readers and writers to have resources available such as professional literacy, time, writing materials and ways to distribute. Referring to speech from conditions of poverty, Edward Kamau Brathwaite explains it

come[s] from a historical experience where [speakers] had to rely on their very *breath* rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines... the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves (1984 19, original italics).

McKittrick (2021) considers Black creative texts as rebellious and disobedient because they burst outside existing ideas and frameworks of what a text is. I use the term *bursting* to reflect Frantz Fanon's description of bursting outside the colonial-cultural matrix (1961, 177) and *being* burst apart by the White gaze (1952, 82). Metaphors are also a type of bursting if we consider McKittrick's (2021) description of them being capable of transcending or imagining future possibilities. These are disobedient where they do not adhere to dominant discourse and poetry as creative text is equipped to explore this. The multiplicity of rap enables a range of ways in which Black experiences can be expressed. Rap then does create epistemes (significantly, not the same one) which, I argue, are less based on a concrete set of principles, but a shared method which, through its *practices*, generates commonality.

I conclude by offering some suggestions as to how rap as creative text could be used to decolonise methods and assumptions within academia. It should be welcomed to engage with academia without being dictated by it and without monopolising academia as a site of knowledge. As bell hooks (1991) articulates, there may be liberatory functions in theory which, in its fully realised potential, can be consistent with social practice and unite the two. Academia provides tools to understand why rap is significant and why it is obstructed, in the music industry, the street, and in scholarship, whilst allowing rap itself to find and provide its own solutions. The problem comes when rap is left out of the conversation if it becomes an object of study devoid of context or without ensuring that rap can speak back, to or outside dominant academic disciplines. This means not co-opting rap into academia as it currently exists, nor should it be *used* (in the truest sense of the word, to exploit), to legitimise academic institutions. This includes tokenising honorary degrees. I suggest that a starting point is to appreciate rap as an interdisciplinary method. Without evading or disowning the Afro-Diasporic roots of rap, it should not be fixed to cultural studies and literature which could limit its contributions. In my own work, I explore rap in criminology for example. Rap has increasingly appeared in disciplines such as therapeutic practice, although this tends to uphold psychotherapeutic traditions which only *apply* rap, rather than operating in dialogue. To elaborate briefly, it has been used as a tool to engage 'hard to reach' groups who are not represented in

mainstream mental health services (Alvarez, 2012). There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but a decolonial approach would require addressing what rap might already know about mental health and therefore how it could shape the framework and interventions, not just as an afterthought or exercise. Several rap songs address suicidality for example, including Biggie's 'Suicidal Thoughts' (1994) and Tupac's 'So Many Tears' (1995). Research and epistemological questions could be informed by rap, moving it from an object of research to an agent of it. The mediums favoured in academic teaching, conducting, and presenting research could utilise music and non-written texts. When teaching criminology, I ask students to engage with what I call *non-text texts*: podcasts, films, songs, and visual arts. I have found this effective for engagement whilst deconstructing expertise in the classroom. Lived experience is promoted as knowledge, by communities directly affected by the themes discussed. Lastly in this list, which is by no means exhaustive, given that scholars already do, or may want to work with rap and rappers, there is a responsibility to acknowledge the context within which this praxis and knowledge is produced, and the struggles that come with it. Therefore, it must be visibly pro-active in resisting the suppression of rap through censorship and criminalisation.

Conclusion

Rap is not a decolonial epistemology because this requires a central doctrine which does not accommodate for its multiplicity and places an unreasonable burden on rap to produce a consistency it never intended. It is better described as epistemic because it does narrate marginalised experiences but is not always willing or able to dismantle the spaces within which these are shared. Therefore, rap can be better appreciated and supported as a method which can have decolonial influence both in and outside of academia. Rap is *praxis*, the combination of theory and practice, which can speak alone and in conversation. In regard to this issue's focus on recovering decoloniality, we must pay heed to who does the recovery. We should be cautious of pitting scholarship, the street and studio as so contrary they all become void. Rather than trying to squeeze rap into any one theoretical framework, its decolonial potential can be reached where it speaks across and between disciplines. It is not only the artist or the lyrical content which has decolonial attributes, but the actual rap itself, deserving further consideration. The flow, the poetry, rhythm. If only we would listen.

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