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“Pythagoras, Ptolemy, Socrates these people are thieves”: Afrocentrism and Classical Past in Rap Music

In this article, I will discuss the reception of the classical tradition within American rap music. It focuses especially on promoting Afrocentric views through rap lyrics written from the early 1990s to the early 2000s. In my research, I also examine the works of Afrocentrist scholars, and consider whether certain rap lyrics have been influenced by their writings. This topic relates to the valuation of the Classical past and the ways Classical tradition has been linked to controversial issues of race and ethnic identity. As a representative of popular culture, hip hop culture and Rap music have reached young audiences that are not necessarily reached by academic texts, and thus it offers intriguing source material within the study of divergent receptions of the Classical past.

The theme of this article originates from my musical interests when I was a teenager. In my case, I began listening to hip hop music when I was 11 years old, in 1995, when a friend lent me a cassette tape with the Beastie Boys’ *Ill Communication* album recorded on it. At that time, Finnish hip hop artists were scarcely available, and therefore enthusiasts mostly listened to American rap artists. The world described in rappers’ stories was situated far away from Finland, in the slums of large American cities. I realized that some songs offered alternative historical interpretations to convey the ideas and perspectives of the artists. One such song was “French Connection” by the rap artist KRS-One. In it, Greek philosophers like Pythagoras and Socrates were referred to as “thieves” that had appropriated their wisdom from dark-skinned people. I remember being astonished by this idea while not fully understanding what the reasoning behind this statement. Nevertheless, this claim did not affect my enjoyment of the song. After high school, I studied ancient history in university, and eventually defended my doctoral thesis in Tampere in 2017. While writing my book *Alexander the Great: Hero and Myth* (2021), I came across the ideology of Afrocentrism. This, in turn, reminded me of the aforementioned KRS-One’s song, which had puzzled me as a young boy and whose content I analyze in my present article.

As a scholar, I am aware that, as a White North-European male, I am an “outsider” to the topic. However, I believe this perspective does not diminish my scholarly contribution yet rather offers an opportunity to approach Afrocentrism in rap lyrics

with an objective and fresh viewpoint. By engaging with this subject matter, I aim to provide a respectful and rigorous analysis that acknowledges the cultural significance of Afrocentrism while fostering a deeper understanding of its impact on contemporary rap music.

Afrocentrism, classical past, and rap music

Afrocentrism originated in the late 1800s and early 1900s from the writings of African and African--American intellectuals. It can be characterized as an Africa-oriented worldview, positing that the origins of humans and human civilization began on the African continent. When it comes to the Classical past and its valuation, Afrocentric intellectuals have questioned the idea of ancient Greece as the birthplace of the most remarkable inventions and wisdom in history. They argue that Western, white-skinned Caucasian people borrowed or stole human civilization from Black people and presented the cultural achievements of African people as their own. Thus, the Classical tradition and its great inventions in science and art are seen as borrowing from Afro-Asiatic cultures, such as ancient Egypt. Since ancient Egyptians were dark-skinned, their high culture, which preceded that of the ancient Greeks and Romans, is considered a representation of Black civilization. Part of Afrocentric thinking also involves pointing a finger of blame at European intellectuals who have deliberately omitted the cultural achievements of Afro-Asiatic cultures from their schoolbooks and official histories. This falsified history has been used to justify “white supremacy” and racist politics.¹

In Afrocentric thinking, the question of race is fundamental. The pharaohs of Egypt were dark-skinned, even though European scholars have deliberately wanted to present rulers, such as the boy pharaoh Tutankhamun, as light-skinned to justify colonialism. Similarly, the Greek philosopher Socrates and Queen Cleopatra VII had darker skin, although Europeans have frequently imagined them as white-skinned. George James’s book, *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy* (1954), is considered influential in arguing that the Greeks did not invent philosophy but borrowed or stole it from Alexandria in Egypt. Onyewuenyi (1993) supports

¹ For an important study on the African origin of human civilization, see Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or reality*. Lawrence Hill Books, Chicago 1974; For an overview of the intellectual history of Afrocentrism and a critical approach to some of the claims made in Afrocentric works, see Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes*. Verso, London 1998; Molefi Kete Asante, *An Afrocentric manifesto*. Polite press, Cambridge 2007 offers definitions of Afrocentrism in research as methodology and research topic. For a survey on Afrocentric scholars, see Adeleke Tunde, “Afrocentric Intellectuals and the Burden of History Black”. *Intellectual Thought in Modern America: A Historical Perspective*. Edited by Brian D. Behnken. University Press of Mississippi, 2017, 206–236.

the same Afrocentric view regarding the Egyptian origin of Greek philosophy.² The Afrocentric view of ancient history was brought to academic circles by Professor Martin Bernal with his study *Black Athena* (1987). This work provoked strong reactions from some Classical scholars, as it argued that the emergence of Classical Greek culture was decisively influenced by settlements founded by Egyptians and Phoenicians, for whose existence some scholars felt there was insufficient evidence. Critiques of Bernal’s views can be found in Lefkowitz (1996) and Lefkowitz & Rogers (1996), while a counter-critique can be read not only from Bernal’s pen but also in Howe (1998).³

Even though some aspects of Afrocentric theories on the Classical past have been justly criticized by classical scholars, its critical approach to Greek and Roman history has been beneficial for Classical studies. It has forced scholars to reflect critically on the Eurocentric approach to world history and promote a more critical approach to the Classics.⁴ Undoubtedly, for centuries, there has been a tendency for White Europeans to own the Classical past and present themselves as the “true” representatives of the Greek and Roman legacy while neglecting other non-European ancient cultures. One could speak about the “whitewashing” of classical culture, which relates to the attempts to justify colonialism and European domination. Yet, it must be remembered that some of the Afrocentric views of the Classical past seem to be exaggerated and tend to function similarly as the Eurocentric views of the Classical past and Classical philosophy.⁵ It must also be remembered that, in the premodern world, race and skin color were not primarily considered reasons for oppression and segregation as much

² George James, *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy*. United Brothers Communications Systems 1954; Innocent Chilaka Onyewuenyi, *The African origin of Greek philosophy: an exercise in Afrocentrism*. University of Nigeria Press, Nsukka 1993. For a discussion on the roots of Afrocentrism, see Denise Eileen McCoskey, *Race Antiquity and its legacy. Ancients and Moderns*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, 178–181.

³ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Vol 1. The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785–1985*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 1987; Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*. New Republic and Basic Books, New York 1996; Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, *Black Athena Revisited*. The University of North Carolina Press, London 1996. Bernal responded to Lefkowitz’s criticism in the book review published in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (1996). Howe 1998, 9–12 offers critical analysis of Lefkowitz’s book. For a survey on Bernal’s arguments and its reception, see Howe 1998, 193–215; McCoskey 2012, 170–178.

⁴ Cf. Bassey Samuel Akpan and Charles Clement Odohoedi, “Afrocentric Views on the Origin of Philosophy”. *International Journal of Modern Research and Reviews* 4, 12, 2016, 1431–34; Timothy Gerber-Mellish, “How did ‘Eurocentrism’ assume the status of a Euro-North American theory of human history that privileges the Greek–Roman classical world as the cradle of human civilization in the process overshadowing the reality of Africa as the certified cradle of humankind?”. *Journal of Global Faultlines*, Vol. 6, No. 1, August–October 2019, 9–16; Wim van Binsbergen, “Black Athena Ten Years After”. *Talanta* 28–29, 1996–1997, 63–64.

⁵ Cf. Akpan and Odohoedi 2016, 1434.

as they have been from the early 19th century to our contemporary world. On the other hand, the debate over “who owns Classical tradition” has by no means been forgotten, especially since far-right circles use the glorification of “white” Classics to promote White supremacy. Recently, there has been strong critique in schools and universities in the USA against the way the Classical past has been taught to defend European colonialism and segregation.⁶

Besides books, journals, newspapers, and documentaries, Afrocentric ideas have been conveyed in popular music. Rap music, in particular, has been a genre where Afrocentrism was prominently promoted, especially in the 1990s and discussed later.⁷ Rap music and hip hop originated in New York City.⁸ Although it has become a global cultural phenomenon over several decades, it originally emerged among young Black people living in the neighborhood of South Bronx in the late 70s and early 80s. DJs such as Kool Herc started to arrange street parties for the young people of the suburbs, where they could dance and socialize together. Later, White Americans became an important part of this audience, and some young White men started to make rap music as well.⁹ However, it seems that in recent decades, African-American/Black adolescents have shown the highest commitment to rap compared to White or Latino youth.¹⁰ Rap music places a lot of emphasis on lyrics, which are much lengthier than in other musical genres. Rappers, known as MCs, are expected to be charismatic storytellers and masters of rhyming and wordplay, sharing their real-life experiences, street knowledge, and wisdom with their audience.

⁶ Cf. Dani Bostick’s article “The Classical Roots of White Supremacy” which was published in *Teaching Tolerance*, Issue 66, Spring 2021, 46–49; Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2018 offers a survey on the way Classics have been misused to support the ideologies misogynistic of certain online communities associated with far-right.

⁷ For a previous study of Afrocentricity in rap music, see Melbourne S. Cummings and Abhik Roy, “Manifestations of Afrocentricity in Rap Music”. *The Howard Journal of Communications* 13, 2002, 59–76. It focuses more on the poetical and verbal ways rappers have made their claims than the content of the lyrics related to Afrocentrism.

⁸ Even though in common terminology hip hop and rap are sometimes used as synonyms to describe a musical genre, often they are separated to each other. According to much cited view hip hop culture consists of four elements: DJ:ing (turntablism etc.), break dancing, graffiti art, and rapping. As a survey of research regarding hip hop and Rap music, see Alridge and Stewart 2005. For important studies on history of hip hop see, Tricia Rose, *Black noise: Rap music and Black culture in contemporary America*. Wesleyan University Press, Hanover 1994; Jeff Chang, *Can’t stop won’t stop: A history of the hip hop generation*. Picador, New York 2005 and more recently Questlove and Ben Greenman, *Hip-Hop Is History*. Orion Publishing Co, London 2024.

⁹ Cf. Catherine Tabb Powell, “Rap Music: An Education with a Beat from the Street”. *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 60, No. 3, (Socialization Forces Affecting the Education of African American Youth in the 1990s Summer), 1991, 253–254; Rachel E. Sullivan, “Rap and Race: It’s Got a Nice Beat, but What about the Message?”. *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 5, May 2003, 606.

¹⁰ Sullivan (2003) in her survey made this conclusion.

Empirically, political themes have always existed in rap music. Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message” (1982) can be regarded as the first single to address social injustices and political issues in the ghettos of New York City.¹¹ By the end of the 80s, political hip hop had become a separate subgenre of rap music. Entire albums were devoted to political activism and promoting self-awareness among African-American communities. Albums recorded by Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, X Clan, and Paris represent the earliest examples of the genre. More recently, political rap is represented in the songs of artists like Nas, Dead Prez, and Kendrick Lamar, to name a few. In scholarship, besides Afrocentrism, some political hip hop has been seen as expressions of Black nationalism.¹² Not all hip hop is politically charged; mainstream rap or commercial hip hop often focuses on more neutral topics such as partying, love, sex, and boasting.¹³ However, it must be remembered that sometimes songs dealing with non-political topics may contain references to issues related to race and life in the ghettos and thus can also be considered political commentary.

In this study, I pay attention to lyrics referring to the Classical past with allusions to Afrocentric views. This does not mean that the Classical past or its figures have not been referred to in other contexts besides those of Afrocentrism. For example, African-American rappers might refer to the allegedly “white-skinned” Alexander the Great as a metaphor for their invincibility or as a symbol of empire-building skills.¹⁴ However, it would be an exaggeration to say that the Classical tradition has a huge significance in most rap music. For rappers, it offers one rhetorical database for rhymes, metaphors, and allusions, similar to modern-day phenomena and celebrities. It could be argued that the Bible is cited much more frequently in rap lyrics than the Classical tradition. Yet, it must be noted that the Bible, and possibly the Quran, is sometimes approached from an Afrocentric perspective.¹⁵ My main aim is not

¹¹ James B. Stewart, “Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop”. *The History of Hip Hop. Special issue of Journal of African American History* 90, No. 3, 2005, 218–219.

¹² For considering the music of Public Enemy and Paris as a black nationalism, which draw its inspiration on Nation of Islam and Black Panther Party, see Jeffrey Louis Decker, “The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism”. *Social Text*, No. 34, 1993, 60–67; Errol A. Henderson, “Black Nationalism and Rap Music”. *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, Jan. 1996, 324–328.

¹³ In her research on lyrical content of rap music between 1979 and 1995, Lena (2006) recognizes more than 10 tropes. Cf. Jennifer C. Lena, “Social Context and Musical Content of Rap Music, 1979–1995”. *Social Forces*, Vol. 85, No. 1, Sep. 2006, 482–483.

¹⁴ Cf. Tyler the Creator’s “Rest stop flow”, or Craig Mack’s “The Wooden Horse”, similar reference to Alexander’s Empire is made in IAM’s song “L’École du micro d’argent”.

¹⁵ Besides Africa, Asian influences can also be recognized in rap music, for example in the works of Wu-Tang Clan and Jeru the Damaja. For a general overview on the Asian influence in hip hop, see Ellie Hisama, “We’re All Asian Really’: Hip Hop’s Afro-Asian Crossings”. *Critical minded: new approaches to hip hop studies*. Edited by Ellie M. Hisama. Rapport, Evan B. Institute for Studies in American Music, New York 2005, 1–23.

to explore the historical accuracy of the views expressed in the lyrics but rather to focus on the argumentation and the meanings attributed to the Classical past, and what this reveals about its reception. In previous research, philosophy in rap music has been recognized, but the reception of the Classical past or Greek philosophy has not been thoroughly explored. This present article attempts to fill this scholarly gap.¹⁶ The methodological approach I apply in this study derives from intertextuality, as I explore how rappers draw on and reinterpret existing cultural materials to create new meanings. Additionally, my study can be regarded as a sociolinguistic analysis because I pay attention to the ways rap artists express their social positions and challenge dominant narratives concerning the Classical past.¹⁷ To gather source material, I utilized the websites lyrics.com and genius.com as primary databases.

“Yo Aristotle, Plato, Socrates... Step off!”

X Clan is a rap group from Brooklyn, New York, whose music is strongly affiliated with Afrocentrism and activism. The group originally consisted of rappers Brother J and Professor X, as well as Paradise the Architect and DJ Sugar Shaft. Many songs from X Clan’s debut album, *To the East, Blackwards* (1990), contain references to ancient Egypt and its culture as the beginning of Black history, as well as to Africa as the birthplace of humanity. On the album cover, the artists wear Egyptian symbols such as the Ankh.¹⁸ In the song “Heed the Word of the Brother,” the forgotten grand past of Black people is revealed. Additionally, the conflicting state of mind in the consciousness among Blacks is recognized: “The descendants of kings and queens act like jesters.” At the end of the song, Professor X exclaims: “Yo Aristotle, Plato, Socrates... Step off!” This argument is not explained but suggests that Classical tradition is secondary and inferior to the older “Black” Egyptian culture in Africa. In the song’s music video, images of these two Greek philosophers are quickly shown in clear contrast to many Black leaders such as Malcolm X. In the same album, the song “In the Ways of the Scales” makes the inferiority of Classical tradition clear to the listener: “Must I be reminded of a legendary thief who tried to make Greece in comparison to Egypt.” Most likely, the “legendary thief” refers to White Europeans who have allegedly presented the history of ancient Greece as superior

¹⁶ For example, Julius Bailey’s *Philosophy and Hip-Hop: Ruminations on Postmodern Cultural Form* (2014) does not discuss the reception of ancient Greek philosophy in rap music.

¹⁷ For other studies on rap lyrics which apply similar approach, see Valentin Werner, “Assessing hip-hop discourse: Linguistic realness and styling”. *Text & Talk - An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language Discourse Communication Studies* 39, 5, 671–698; David Diallo, “Intertextuality in Rap Lyrics”. *Revue française d’études américaines* 2015/1, No. 142, 40–54.

¹⁸ For using the image of Egyptian goddess Isis in X Clan’s Afrocentric ideas, see Decker 1993, 71–73. For the group’s thoughts on the recording of the album, see Brian Coleman, *Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies*. Villard/Random House, New York 2007, 468–487.

to its precursor, Egypt. X Clan represents early consciousness in hip hop and most likely had a great influence on later conscious hip hop groups.¹⁹

KRS-One, whose real name Lawrence Parker, from the Bronx, New York, is one of the most influential rap artists in the sub-genre of political rap. He started his career as part of the group Boogie Down Productions, also known as BDP, from 1986 to 1992, during which time the band recorded five studio albums. After the group broke up, KRS-One started his solo career and continues to make music to this day. The massive amount of lyrics he has written cover multiple topics such as the essence of real hip hop, life management, drug problems, violence, police brutality, racism, and religion, often delivered from a didactic point of view. Some of his songs offer an Afrocentric view that the human race originates from Africa and that the earliest civilizations, including religion, philosophy, and all sciences, were created on the continent of Africa.²⁰ In the song “Blackman in Effect” (1990) by BDP, these points are made clear. After strongly criticizing the American school system for falsifying the truth and asserting that the first civilization on Earth, the Egyptians, were Black, the valuation of Greek philosophy receives critical treatment:

*So people that believe in Greek philosophy
Know your facts, Egypt was the monopoly;
Greeks had learned from Egyptian masters
You might say “Prove it”, well here is the answers:
640 to 322 B.C. originates Greek philosophy
But in that era Greece was at war
With themselves and Persia once more.
Any philosopher at that time was a criminal;
He would be killed very simple
This indicates that Greece had no respect
For science or intellect
So how the hell you created philosophy
When you killed philosophers constantly?!
The point is that we descend from kings
Science, art and beautiful things
African history is the world’s history
This is the missing link and mystery*

¹⁹ Decker 1993, 76–77.

²⁰ Research on his lyrics highlights the appreciation of his work among scholars and his acclaimed status in the genre of hip hop. For studies on KRS-One lyrics, see Heather Aldridge and Diana B. Carlin, “The rap on violence: A rhetorical analysis of rapper KRS-One”. *Communication Studies* 44, 1993, 102–116; Parmar Priya, *Knowledge Reigns Supreme: The Critical Pedagogy of Hip-hop Artist KRS-One*. Brill, Leiden 2009.

KRS-One argues that it is impossible for Greek philosophy to have originated as a separate strand of science in Greece due to the wars Greek city-states fought during that era. He possibly refers to incidents where philosophers such as Protagoras were banished from Athens in 5th century BCE. Most likely, KRS-One follows the arguments that James made in the aforementioned *Stolen Legacy*. In this book, the period of 640–322 BCE is presented as a time of internal and external wars. According to James' argument, due to the wars that Greeks fought among themselves and against the Persians, there were no conditions for creating philosophy, as peace and tranquility are required to produce philosophy. Thus, it is impossible that the Greeks during this period would have created philosophy and invented other sciences. Instead, they borrowed their main concepts from Egypt.²¹

In the song "You Must Learn" (1989/1990) by Boogie Down Productions, the main arguments above are repeated. The song develops the idea that Greece, Rome, and Persia did not allow the power of the ancient Egyptians, who had previously developed all sciences of the mind, to last but successfully defeated them. According to the argument, these three kingdoms deliberately tried to destroy Egyptian wisdom and thus promoting the spread of Christianity. KRS-One also refers to the reigns of emperors Theodosius, who ruled from 379–395 CE, and Justinian, who ruled from 527–565 CE, as a deliberate policy aimed at supporting ignorance and false teachings:

*A Greek ruler not known to most of us
He, in the fourth century A.D.,
Closed the Egyptian schools you see
Two years later, Justinian rules
Six A.D., was it for schools
As a result, ignorance had swirled
Over Christian Europe and Greco-Roman worlds
This went on for a thousand years
Of ignorance, stupidity, and tears*

These details also appear in James' book, where he writes that because of the edicts of Theodosius in the 4th century A.D. and Justinian in the 6th century A.D., the Egyptian Mysteries and the philosophical schools of Greece were closed. This led to an intellectual darkness spreading over Christian Europe and the Graeco-Roman world for ten centuries, during which time knowledge had disappeared.²² In the song, Egypt represents goodness and progress, while the European powers are presented as the antithesis and enemies of true wisdom. The view of history that KRS-One

²¹ James 1954, 18–22.

²² James 1954, 29–30, 108.

supports in the song is “black and white”; history is depicted as an epic battle between good and evil, which has not ended in the world he lives in. According to the lyrics, Europeans have deliberately tried to destroy the ancient wisdom of Egypt to achieve and maintain world power. Implicitly, the deliberate decisions of the ancient emperors were directed at falsifying the truth and maintaining certain power structures, which is compared to the European/American consciousness and ignorance of Africa’s great past. In the music video for the song, KRS-One raps/sings in a classroom while White teachers and officials vainly try to prevent his lyrics from reaching the Black kids in the classroom.

Another song by KRS-One that references the Classical tradition comes from the soundtrack of *Ma 6-T va crack-er*. The song, titled “The French Connection” (1997), is a strong ideological manifesto dealing with both African-American history as 400 years of oppression and the social problems that Black people face in the USA, including the difficulties of being accepted as equal members of the state. The tone of the song is very accusatory towards White Americans for deliberately oppressing Black people. KRS-One mentions the way Classical tradition is taught in schools:

*You can kill a man by taking him out of his land
And putting him in a land he really doesn’t understand
Then teach him to respect Greek mythology
like Pythagoras, Ptolemies, Socrates
These people are thieves
They stole us astronomy, mathematics, all tactics of biology
Even the concept of democracy stolen from the king Akhenaton*

KRS-One here repeats the Afrocentric views of the Classical past that he had promoted in the songs mentioned above. Here, “us” refers to Black people who lived in Africa but were taken to the USA by slave ships in the 18th and 19th centuries. The three famous Classical intellectuals—Pythagoras, Ptolemy, and Socrates—are called thieves who stole scientific inventions from Black people, and whose valuation belongs to the category of unhistorical myths. The lyrical content may have been inspired by both Parker’s study and Bernal’s conclusions.

When Bernal analyzes Plutarch’s essay *On Isis and Osiris* and the way it deals with the similarities between Egyptian religion and philosophy and the ideas of Plato and the Pythagoreans, he states: “They were simply the result of the fact that—as everyone knew—Plato, Pythagoras, and Orpheus had taken their ideas from Egypt.”²³ KRS-One refers to the view that the democratic system was not first invented in Classical Athens but during the reign of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton, who reigned from 1353–1336 or 1351–1334 BCE. This ruler was famous for his religious

²³ Bernal 1996, 118; Cf. Bernal 1996, 106–108.

reforms, which are often regarded as proto-monotheism. However, the invention of democracy during his reign does not have support among modern scholars. In recent years, research has been conducted on the types of democratic systems that existed before the emergence of Athenian democracy in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. It has been argued that several forms of government, where ideas of democracy were applied, might have existed prior to the rise of Athens.²⁴ Even though the detail of Akhenaton as the inventor of democracy is unhistorical, the high prestige of Athens as the cradle of democracy and liberty is exaggerated. Many scholars have noted in recent decades that Athenian democracy was not true democracy since all women, non-citizen males, and slaves were not allowed to be involved in political decision-making.

In KRS-One's rhetoric, the high valuation of the Classical past/tradition is not only unwarranted but also linked with the oppression of Black people. The Afrocentric approach in KRS-One's songs is not restricted to the Classical past but also extends to Biblical texts and Christian concepts. In the song "Why Is That," it is argued that Shem, Abraham, and Moses were all Black men, even though they are often imagined as white-skinned. In the music video for "You Must Learn," Moses is depicted as an elderly Black man holding the two tablets that reveal portions of the Ten Commandments.

In his songs, KRS-One wants to demonstrate how American society and White people have deliberately neglected the culture and history of Black people. According to him, White schools and teachers teach lies regarding the past and do not give, or acknowledge, the credit that Africa and ancient Egypt justly deserve. His songs not only reflect but also construct a strong feeling of distrust and suspicion towards the neutrality of the American school system. These sentiments are often echoed in political rap. For example, Public Enemy in the song "Party for Your Right to Fight" (1988) states: "To those that disagree, it causes static / For the original Black Asiatic man. Cream of the earth and was here first and some devils prevent this from being known." Similarly, Dead Prez in their song "They Schools" (2000) focus on the biased and racial teaching in public schools, stating: "I tried to pay attention but they classes wasn't interesting / They seemed to only glorify the Europeans / Claiming Africans was only three-fifths of human beings." In their political commentary, rappers are not isolated. There has also been a lot of academic research on the importance of

²⁴ Benjamin Isakhan, "What is so 'Primitive' about 'Primitive Democracy'? Comparing the Ancient Middle East and Classical Athens". *The Secret History of Democracy*. Edited by Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2011, 19–35; Stephen Stockwell, "Before Athens: Early Popular Government in Phoenicia and Greek City-States". *The Secret History of Democracy*. Edited by Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2011, 35–49.

incorporating Afrocentric teaching in public schools and colleges, highlighting the struggles that African American forebears had to cope with.²⁵

After KRS-One, a more recent American rapper who has taken an Afrocentric approach to the Classical past is Nas, whose real name Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones. This rapper from Brooklyn, New York, became very popular in the mid-1990s. In his song "I Can" (2003), Nas combines Alexander the Great's visit to Egypt with an Afrocentric view of the superiority of African culture, which Western conquerors and representatives of the white race have tried to hide. As in the aforementioned lyrics of KRS-One, Nas also intends to construct a sense of belonging among African-Americans by raising awareness of the African past and by offering a different version of history than that allegedly taught in American schools:

*Before we came to this country / We were kings and queens, never porch monkeys
There was empires in Africa called Kush /Timbuktu, where every race came to get books
To learn from black teachers, who taught Greeks and Romans
Asian Arabs and gave them gold, when Gold was converted to money it all changed
Money then became empowerment for Europeans
The Persian military invaded /They heard about the gold, the teachings, and everything sacred
Africa was almost robbed naked
Slavery was money, so they began making slave ships
Egypt was the place that Alexander the Great went
He was so shocked at the mountains with black faces
Shot up they nose to impose what basically
Still goes on today, you see?
If the truth is told, the youth can grow
They learn to survive until they gain control
Nobody says you have to be gangstas, hoes
Read more, learn more, change the globe*

Nas refers to the libraries of Timbuktu, a city in northern Mali, and argues that European Greeks and Romans went to Africa to learn from African teachers. The books in Timbuktu refer to West African manuscripts, which consist of more than 100,000 documents, with the earliest dated to 900 CE. However, based on the

²⁵ Cf. Molefi Kete Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea in Education". *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Spring 1991, 170–180. For the importance of Afrocentric approach in the teaching of history in the United States, see Asante 1991, 175–177.

existence of these manuscripts, it is an exaggeration to say that they show ancient Greeks and Romans, who lived some 1000 years earlier, went as far as West Africa to be taught.

Additionally, Nas argues that the invention of money was related to the campaigns of Achaemenid Persia in Africa. He gives the impression that the Persian campaigns, presumably carried out during the reign of Cambyses, were directed at the entire continent of Africa, even though they were specifically against Pharaonic Egypt. Regarding Alexander the Great's visit to Egypt in 332 BCE, Nas says the king was shocked to see that the local people were Black. Ancient sources do not mention that Alexander paid any attention to the Egyptians' skin color. Additionally, ancient Greeks and Romans did not use skin color as their basis of racial categorization.²⁶ Thus, this anecdote was most likely invented by the rapper to address the issue of race and the oppression of the African American population, which has plagued the United States for hundreds of years. Nas seems to portray Alexander as acting and thinking in the way Europeans have tended to think since the 19th century, when race and skin color started to become the basis of segregation and oppression.²⁷ After narrating the history of Africa from an Afrocentric perspective, Nas connects the way history is taught to young Black youth with their self-view. Instead of trusting false stories about Africa, he encourages Black youth to read and learn the facts, and to recognize that their lives are full of options beyond just supporting themselves through prostitution or drug dealing.

Ras Kass, whose real name is John R. Austin II, from Los Angeles, California, has a reputation for being a very talented and skilled rapper, although he did not achieve great commercial success.²⁸ His debut album *Soul on Ice* (1996) contains a seven-minute-long song titled "Nature of the Threat," which deals with the history of man from ancient India, Greece, and Rome to the Crusades and European colonialism. This ambitious song debates the origins of racism, which, according to Ras Kass, derived from the Aryan system of the ancient Indians, and Christmas, which originates from Roman Saturnalia.

In the song, Ras Kass explicitly makes clear his view that the Classical past symbolizes the European/American subjugation of other races. He rhymes: "The Greek culture begins Western civilization / But 'Western civilization' means 'White domination.'" The song also shares the view that Greek philosophy was stolen from Egypt. Interestingly, when compared to the songs analyzed above, Ras Kass addresses the question of the sexuality of the Greeks and Romans, particularly their homosexuality. He states:

²⁶ Cf. Howe 1998, 153; McCoskey 2012, 8–10.

²⁷ Bernal 1987, 115–116 argues that Alexander leaned on Egyptian (i.e., African) culture and that Eurocentric scholars have deliberately ignored this connection.

²⁸ Cf. *The Anthology of Rap*. Edited by Adam Bradley and Andrew Dubois. Yale University Press, New Haven 2010, 483.

*The word philosophy means "love of knowledge"
 Stole from first man, Greek power expands
 The first Greek fraternities band
 The word gymnasium is Greek for "naked"
 This was the place where adolescent boys were educated, and molested
 This was accepted because Greek culture was homosexual
 For example, Sappho trained girls on the island of Lesbos;
 Hence, the word Lesbian (ey, let these dumb motherfuckers know!)*

In these verses, Ras Kass points out that same-sex relations dominated ancient Greek society. He refers to pederast relations that flourished in the Classical world. The rapper intends to reveal the real nature of ancient Greek culture, which he claims was homosexual and supported relationships between older men and younger boys. Additionally, lesbian love also flourished. The sexual orientation of the ancient Greeks is presented implicitly as an indication of their inferior status. Ras Kass also seems to highlight the conflict in White American Christians venerating ancient Greeks and their allegedly great scientific achievements, despite their sexual morality differing from what is openly accepted in America. Some might consider these rhymes extremely homophobic.²⁹ The song shares the same didactic approach, where the rapper allegedly reveals hidden truths that have been neglected by mainstream thinking and white dominion.

In the following verses, the rapper comments on Roman history with a negative tone. The expansion of republican Rome is presented as a grim part of world history. Carthaginians and Hannibal are depicted as "Blacks," while Romans represent White dominion. The sack of Carthage is called "the first genocide".³⁰ He unmasks the much-venerated Roman Julius Caesar as gay. One's sexuality and sexual morals also matter in the verses related to the Roman origin of Christmas. The rapper reminds his audience that December 25th was the birthday of Saturn, who is characterized as a "homosexual god." Additionally, during Saturnalia, men slept with each other and afterwards beat their wives. Ras Kass seems to distinguish a certain pattern in history that is repeated. For him, the past is a mixture of oppression and lies told to people, the effects of which can be seen in the contemporary world he lives in.

²⁹ For a homophobia in rap music, see Julius Bailey, *Philosophy and Hip-Hop: Ruminations on Postmodern Cultural Form*. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2014, 12; Farai Chideya, "Homophobia: Hip Hop's Black Eye". *Step into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature*. Edited by Kevin Powell. John Wiley, New York 2000, 95–101.

³⁰ In academic research, the term 'genocide' has been used to describe the destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE at the hands of Rome (Cf. Ben Kiernan, "The First Genocide: Carthage, 146 BC". *Diogenes* 203, 2004, 27–39).

Conclusions

In the rap lyrics examined here, the Classical past and its valuation are presented as the history of White Europeans. It represents a falsified and biased past. The veneration of the Classical past and its “whitewashing” both support a White man’s power structures and racist systems, which obstruct the correct view of world history. The rappers discussed in this article believe Black people should be aware that they have their own great past; they lived as kings and queens in Africa before European colonization, oppression, and slavery. In contrast to the past of ancient Greece and Rome, ancient Egypt receives much more favorable treatment in rap lyrics composed in the 90s. The reason for the different valuation is based on the question of race. In the studied songs, the culture and religion of ancient Egypt demonstrates the greatness of the Black culture that preceded the “White” ancient Greek culture.

The lyrics are not only intended to reveal defects in public education and the general consciousness but also to change how Black people think and see themselves. In their study on Afrocentricity in rap music, Cummings and Roy write: “While an important facet of Afrocentricity is to challenge the racist system and look for ways to ameliorate the conditions of African Americans, the ultimate goal of an African American communicator is ‘transformation.’”³¹

In the songs, rappers/MCs use their personal prestige to influence how Black youth should see their past and present, and to generate a collective consciousness among Blacks in an environment portrayed as menacing. Their interpretation of history is allegedly serving the truth and what is good for the Black community. In the rap songs, MCs present themselves as providers of truthful information for the Black community and promote distrust in the government’s power structures and the school system. In the lyrics analyzed, the Classical past represents the white man’s history and his attempt to govern and subjugate Black people in America. Teaching the history of ancient Greeks from the European perspective is one way to maintain “white supremacy” and downgrade the accomplishments and potential of Black people. The critical approach to the Classical past does not arise from nowhere; besides Afrocentric theories, it is a genuine reaction to the way Europeans have placed classical culture above everything else, as well as the tendency to give less attention to the history of the African continent.

³¹ Cummings and Roy 2002, 73.