The urge to «clean up» the rap: rhythm and plasticity in rap music

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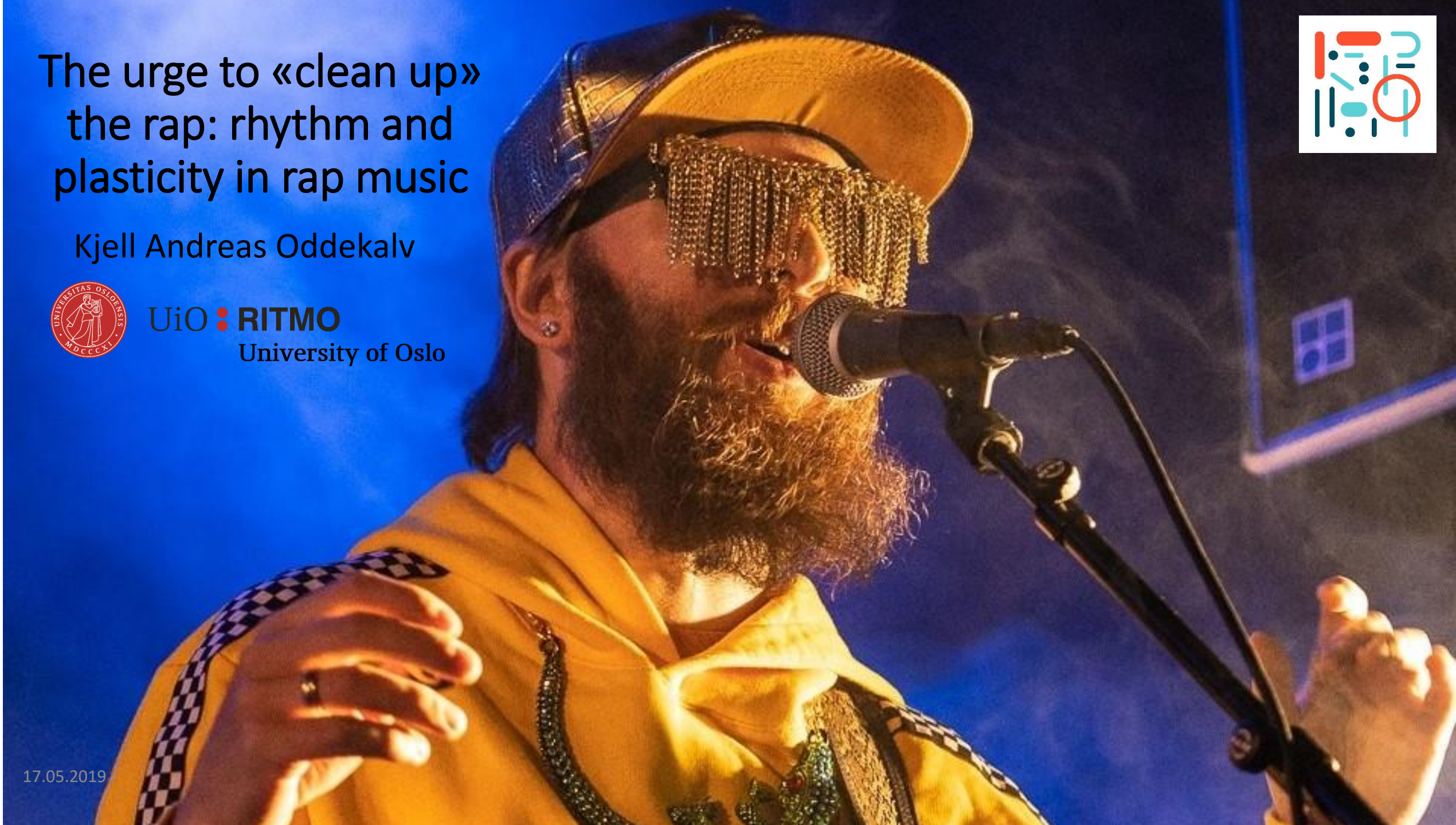

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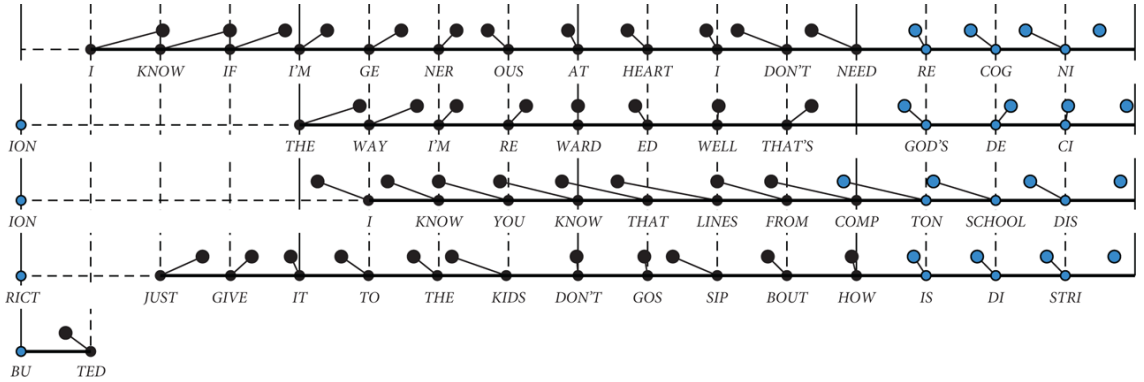
Structure of the talk:

- Microtiming in rap vocals
  - Existing research – theories and methods of representation
  - Systematic versus unsystematic deviation
    - Unsystematic deviation – «Expressive timing», «speech-rhythmic rap»
    - Systematic deviation – old-school laidback, new-school eager
    - How do we look at this?
  - Aesthetic goals – old-school laidback, new-school eager
  - Performance and production
    - How do we create this?
    - Roles, communication and choices
    - Dogmatism and pragmatism – a little bit of both?

Microtiming in rap vocals

- Microtiming – often (but not always) observed as deviations from canonical time-value classes (i.e. quantisation)
  - «Expressive timing» (for example Clarke, Todd, Ohriner)
  - «Systematic Variation» (Bengtsson & Gabrielsson)

- And in rap?
  - «Rap music occurs in a metric environment (…) in which the durations in some parts of the music are mechanically regulated» (Ohriner, 2018)
  - Studied looking at alignment with «quantised» categories.



  - Informal discourse – inaccurate
    - «off-beat»

Systematic versus unsystematic deviation:

- Two different «styles» of microtiming deviation
- Systematic deviation: trending towards «equal» deviation, with the misalignment of syllable-p centres either «behind» or «ahead»

- Unsystematic deviation: Misalignment of syllable-p centres are unsystematic.

- The two can (and do) combine, and there are also edge-cases of «systematic unsystematic deviation» such as phrase-final lengthening (ritardando vocal rhythmic delivery over non-ritardando musical background), or other repeated patterns of «speeding up» and «slowing down».

Unsystematic deviation in microtiming

- «Expressive timing» - thoroughly explored in the context of performances of notated classical music.
- In rap: Not comparison between different performances, rather analysis of trends within «performance» (recorded music).
- Example – Big Boi in OutKast (2000) «So Fresh, So Clean»

- «Speech-rhythmic rap» (Ohriner 2018, 2019): «Nonalinment unexplained by tempo- and phase-adjustment» (opposed to «music-rhythmic rap»)
- Example – Chance the Rapper (2016): «Blessings»(2)

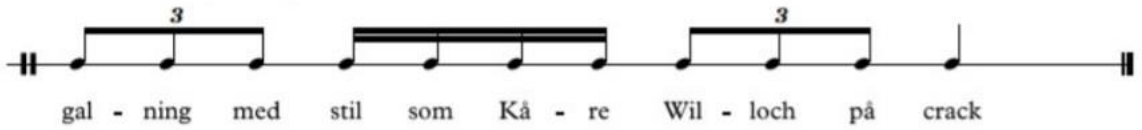
Systematic deviation in microtiming

- The deviations from canonical time-value classes trend in one direction – either ahead or behind the «experienced beat»-
  - Systematic =/= constant! Not (necessarily) a «quantised» performance offset in either direction, but also «organic performance» that trends in a certain direction
- Example of «behind»: Snoop Dogg (1993) «Gin And Juice»
- Example of «ahead»: Lil B (2014) «No Black Person Is Ugly»

- What about when the beat is deviating systematically?
  - Example: Common (August Greene 2018) «Black Kennedy»

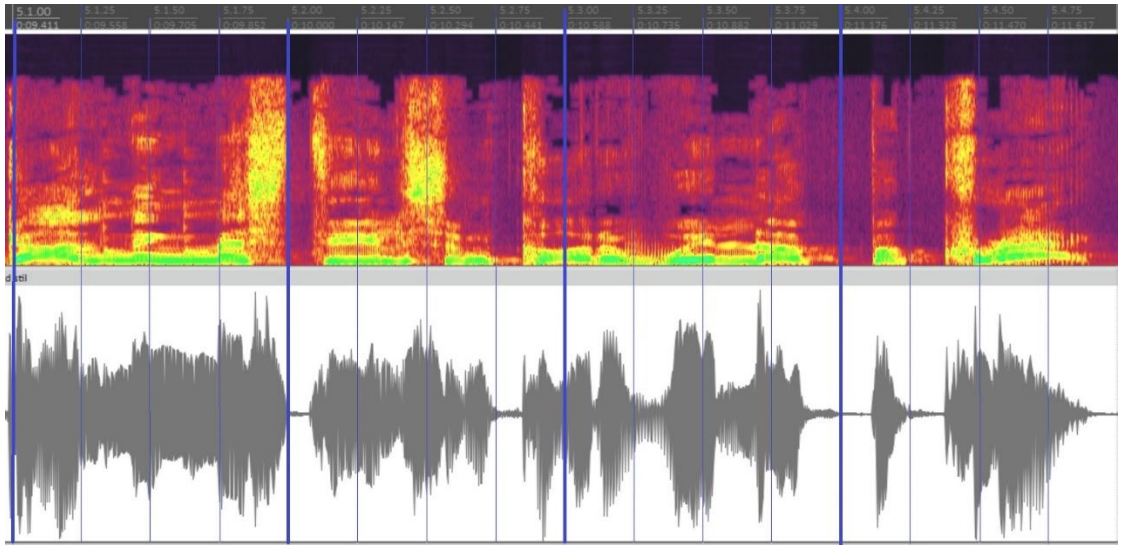
Interesting cases and/or implications

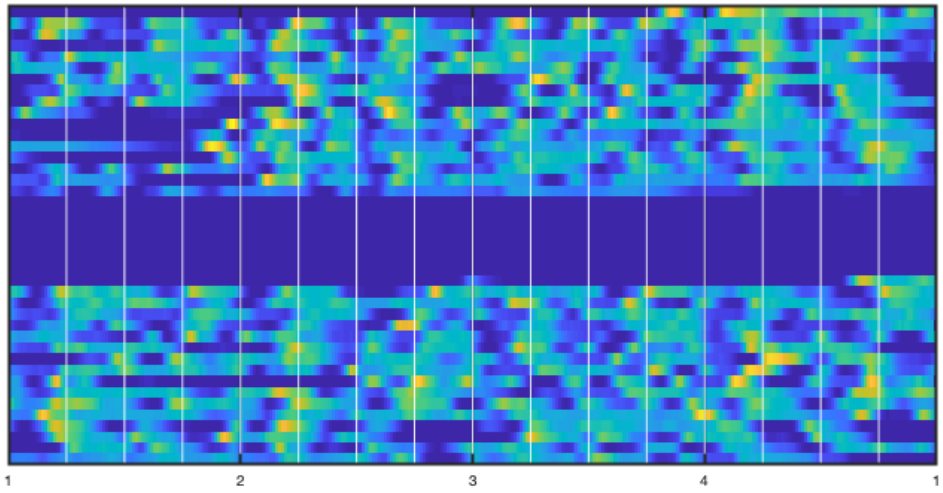
- Ambiguity in rhythmic position:
  - Does the syllable belong to a late (or early) «on»-category, or the next (or previous) subdivisional category (depending on the metrical framework).
  - Example 1: Ugstad (Sinsenfist 2018) «Muselunden
  - Example 2: Linni (Neste Planet 2018) «Eple»
    - Verbal accent wants to correlate with metrically heavy position, or create displacement
    - Displacement that is not on a clear subdivision creates ambiguity
- Clear metrical grouping, but clearly uneven length of «beats»:
  - Example: Sjef R (Side Brok 2004) «Si eiga rås»
  - Definitely NOT this rhythm, but definitely grouped like this:

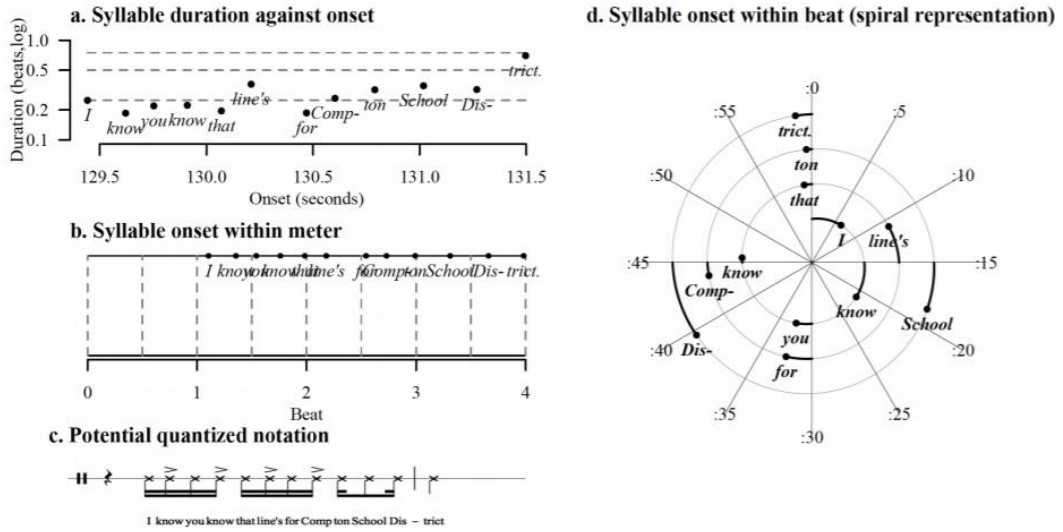


How do we look at this?

- Many representational tools
- The best/easiest material to use:
  - Stems/multitracks
  - A capellas/instrumentals







Ohriner (2019)

Why do we have this? Aesthetic goals

(The following slides have several questions and speculations based on as-of-yet unpublished interview material)

- *Whether or not a rapper's microtiming signature is an integral part of the performance is very much an open question(!)*
- Dogmatic ideals – That's one type of edit we don't do! (or do we?)
- Aesthetic ideals:
  - Old-school «laidback», a la the earlier Snoop Dogg example
  - New-school «eager»

  - Example of modern «eager» style: Blueface (2018) «Respect My Cryppin'»

Performance and production – Talk about it!

- How do we create this? Or rather, when do we choose to leave it?
  - What are the roles of the people involved? Rapper and mixer (and beatmaker)
  - What is the communication like – how many callbacks, how detailed pointers?
  - Is microtiming and the potential editing of it a part of the discourse?
  - How about physical/mechanical issues? Studio time, latency etc.
  - This varies wildly(!)
- We (or the rapper supplying the tracks) typically already do this to a certain degree.
  - Backtracks/dubs – what makes the original track «sacred»?
  - Some typical strategies:
    - Only «cleaning up» some places considered «too off» (creative input!)
    - Keeping the unsystematic deviation (or the microtiming signature) and manipulating a systematic deviation (moving entire tracks forward or backwards)

How do we create this – an example

- Several people involved: Rapper (me) – «internal» engineer – mixing engineer
- Initial recording of the three bars consisted of three tracks (Main, BT1, BT2)
- Backtracks were «tightened up» to line up perfectly with Main.
- Timing was changed – this was the communication received (translated):

  «I put your [bars] quite a lot more behind. Played with putting it a tiiiiny bit ahead, because then it became sick Lil Yachty, but nudged back instead. Scream out if it was a conscious gimmick, and I'll move back»

  - Original premix mixdown: Master mix: «Lil Yachty»:

- What are the impacts of this type of manipulation? Why did we do it?

Dogmatism or pragmatism – or both?

(this is probably more of a «lesson» or a philosophical «mixer's microtiming manifesto™», but perhaps a good starting point for a q&a)

- Microtiming – what is it, and what does it do?
- This might be a source of potential miscommunication if artist and mixing engineer/producer is not the same person!
- Can microtiming adjustments be a creative/artistic tool?
- Can one hear subtle microtiming adjustments in a recording?

Literature:

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The musical examples can be found in this Spotify playlist:

https://open.spotify.com/user/kjellen/playlist/6pff7fKAtKAaVrVZ6HhWsv?si=1yN1-QmIRd2kbICZe0wdCQ

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