

Rap, Islam and Jihadi Cool:

The subcultural attractions of the Western jihadi subculture

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has explored the potential of subcultural theory for understanding the convergence of Western street and jihadi subcultures. The role of jihadi rap in this radical hybrid culture, however, is yet uncharted. We argue that subcultural analysis allows an understanding of the aesthetic fascination of jihadism, sometimes referred to as jihadi cool, and that jihadi rap should be seen as an integrated part of this cultural amalgam. To better understand the role of hip-hop in the hybrid street-jihadi culture, this paper offers a historical analysis of the relationship between hip-hop and Islam and detailed insight into the more contemporary, and marginal, phenomena of jihadi rap. We track the continuities and discontinuities from the presence of Black Islam in early hip hop to recent convergences between hip hop and jihadism. Our analysis draws on Lévi-Strauss concepts of *bricolage* and *floating signifiers*. Subcultures and hip-hop music are seen as bricolages that draw on a multitude of cultural references with their own particular history. In these cultural bricolages, Islam often acts as a floating signifier, with different and often ambiguous meanings. We argue and demonstrate that Islam has a long history of being part of hip-hop rebellion and

attraction and that this, channelled through jihadi rap, can contribute to jihadi cool and the contemporary pull of Western jihadi subcultures.

Keywords: jihadi cool, Western jihadi subculture, jihadi culture, jihadi rap, Islam, hip-hop

The Ronald Reagan was a dirty kuffar/The minister Tony Blair, them a dirty kuffar/

The one Mr. Bush, them a dirty kuffar/Throw them in the fire.

The jihadi rap song ‘Dirty Kuffar’ⁱ was made publicly available in 2004 by the British rappers Sheik Terra and the Soul Salah Crew. The song is one of the first examples of a broader musical genre that mixes US urban hip-hop with jihadi messages and symbols and was later followed by a number of songs with similar content (see Aidi, 2014: 205-208). Commentators have often emphasized the novelty of jihadi rap and the strategic use of hip-hop style in jihadi propaganda. Picart (2015), for example, studied how al-Qaeda used hip-hop slang in their magazine ‘Inspire’ to target young people in the West (2015: 362 ff.; see also Andersen and Sandberg, 2020). There is a long historical link connecting hip hop, Islam and radicalism, and arguably, it is Western minority male street culture that incorporates symbols from jihadism, as much as the other way around. Regardless, the result is a cultural convergence (Basra, Neumann & Brunner, 2016: 3) that contributes to what Sageman termed *jihadi cool* (2008, see also Cottee, 2015; Herding, 2014; Picart, 2015), a more specific element of what Cottee (2020) describes as *Western jihadi subculture*.

A recent body of literature has explored the analytical purchase of viewing recent formations of jihadism in the West from a subcultural perspective (Cottee, 2011, 2020; Ahmed

and PISOIU, 2017; PISOIU, 2015; Hemmingsen, 2015; Conti, 2017; Andersen and Sandberg, 2020; Larsen and Jensen, 2019; Jensen and Larsen, 2019; Sunde et al., 2020). This perspective has many advantages. It opens up for understanding Western jihadism as a subcultural response to the dual ethno-class experience of racial and Islamophobic othering and renders jihadism intelligible as opposed to a mere irrational manifestation of evil grounded in religious fanaticism. Subcultural analysis also allows a grasp of the aesthetic fascination and cultural pull-factor of jihadism and can be helpful for understanding the styles and symbolic repertoires of Western jihadi subcultures.

This article conducts a subcultural analysis by borrowing Hegghammer and colleagues' (2017) methodology of analysing closely – and, in this case, historically – specific elements of jihadi (sub)culture. We understand this Western jihadi subculture as composed of loosely organized groups supportive of jihadism and are interested in the stylistic repertoire of these groups rather than individual perpetrators of violent jihadism. Our object of analysis in this study is jihadi rap, which we define as rap that incorporates jihadi symbolism and messages. We argue that jihadi rap builds upon and incorporates a long-lasting tradition of Islamic symbolism in hip hop. This close historical relationship between hip hop and Islam is part of a subcultural history that contributes to making Western jihadi subculture attractive for youths. We believe that understanding the historical relationship between hip hop and Islam can contribute to a better understanding of the new crime-terror nexus (Basra, Neumann and Brunner, 2016) or the convergence between jihadism and street culture that has been noted in previous research (Ilan and Sandberg, 2019; Basra and Neumann, 2017; Ibáñez, 2013; Hutchinson and O'Malley, 2007).

Hip hop has traditionally articulated explicit, sometimes quite radical, dissent and challenged social injustice, at least in some of its complex and multifaceted history. Expressing this opposition, hip-hop culture has sometimes drawn on symbolic repertoires from different

versions of Islam. Arguably, Islam has been a *floating signifier* (Lévi-Strauss, 1950), taking on different meanings in different articulations of critique in hip-hop history, most recently also involving jihadi (sub)culture. We trace the relationship between social criticism, hip-hop coolness and Islam and explore how religion has been articulated in hip-hop at different times and in different contexts, with particular attention to contemporary jihadi rap. Our analysis draws subcultural theory and Lévi-Strauss' (1950, 1966) concepts of cultural bricolage and floating signifiers to study the symbolism, stylistic repertoires and aesthetic coolness of the cultural amalgams that comprise the cultural elements of Western jihadi subculture.

Subcultural theory and jihadi (sub)culture

The conception of subculture that informs our analysis is indebted to theories and studies developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), Birmingham University, in the late 1970s (Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1978). The CCCS theoretical tradition understood youth subcultures as collective stylistic and symbolic responses to a shared situation, often one of alienation, repression or marginalization. CCCS scholars rethought classical criminological subcultural theory (Plummer, 1997) by adding analyses of the politics of subcultural styles. Most importantly, they understood subcultures not only as criminal responses or answers to structural problems but also as creative manifestations of opposition to social injustice, with their own complex symbolism and appeal to youths. In particular, the CCCS studied how young people in subcultures created new styles that were seen as 'cool' and 'authentic' by the participants (Hebdige, 1979). One of the central inventions of the CCCS was thus a unique grasp of the collective agency involved in subcultural stylistic creativity. This theoretical grasp of creativity and dissent should however not be taken to imply a naïve celebration of subcultural

styles. On the contrary, CCCS were keen to emphasize that ‘cool’ always comes with a price. Subcultural answers in a capitalist society may add to the reproduction of class structure (Willis, 1978), and subcultural actors may end up contributing to their own marginalization.

The subcultural studies of CCCS were an amalgam of different theoretical traditions. They included earlier subcultural theory (Plummer, 1997) and mixed the themes of dominance, conflict and antagonism from Marxist thinking with Barthes’ (1972) semiological analysis and Lévi-Strauss’s (1966) concept of *bricolage*. The bricolage describes how existing signs and symbols can be altered by subcultures, inventing new styles through collective and creative exercises of appropriation and re-combination of cultural signs and symbols. Bricolage is ‘the re-ordering and re-contextualization of objects to communicate fresh meanings’ (Clarke, 1978: 149). In a somewhat similar fashion, Willis (1978: 59) wrote about the ‘pool of styles, meanings and possibilities’ that were available to young people in subcultural practices of creating style. In CCCS studies, young people were thus viewed as reacting to, or answering, collectively shared problems through the creative formation of symbolism, and style was seen as something aesthetic and symbolic that attracted young people to subcultures, but did not necessarily solve the underlying problems that the young people were responding to.

Displays of *coolness* are central to subcultural style, especially in street-oriented subcultures (Ilan, 2015). This can best be understood as the ability to carefully balance dangerousness (or the potential of violence) against a form of restricted emotionality. Coolness thus pertains to a street cultural stylistic repertoire of displaying the potential for violence while being able to keep calm under pressure. Coolness has furthermore traditionally been described as carrying connotations of anti-establishment, anti-authority and as associated with criminality (Pountain and Robins, 2000) and as connected to (black) masculinity (Majors and Billson, 1992).

Recently, this street cultural coolness and street cultural style and symbolism more generally seem to have merged with jihadi symbolism and created the jihadi cool (Sageman, 2008). This hybrid street-jihadi culture is often studied through the lenses of subcultural theory.

Early on, Cottee (2011) applied Cohen's (1955) theory of delinquent subcultures and argued that jihadist groups can be interpreted as a subcultural response to structural strain. Later, he argued that the core values of the Western jihadi subculture have parallels to the dominant cultures' 'shadow values' (Matza and Syke, 1961; Cottee, 2020). Hemmingsen (2015) understood jihadist groups by employing Roszak's (1995) theory of counterculture. PISOIU (2015) found support for the explanatory value of subcultural concepts such as bricolage, homology and resistance, and Andersen and Sandberg (2020) examined the now defunct ISIS magazine, *Dabiq*, from both a subcultural and social movement perspective (see also Larsen and Jensen, 2019; Jensen and Larsen, 2019; Sunde et al., 2020). Finally, and of particular interest for the argument in this paper, Conti (2017) used perspectives drawn from the CCCS and studied the jihadi rapper Deso-Dogg and online subcultural visual elements using the concepts of bricolage and homology.

We follow this contemporary tradition of studying hybrid street-jihadi culture using subcultural theory. However, we aim broader than Conti (2017) and explore hip hop and jihadi rap more generally and historically and have a particular emphasis on religion and religious symbols that are rarely seen in subcultural studies. Our theoretical perspective also diverts from the CCCS tradition on two important points: Following what has become known as post-subcultural theory (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003, Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004), we assume that subcultures are not characterized by sharp boundaries. In contrast, their boundaries are blurry, and it is possible to move between different subcultures or participate in more than one subculture at the same time. Consequently, we see the boundaries between street culture, Western jihadi subculture and actual

jihadism as indistinct and full of grey areas. Moreover, following critiques of the overemphasis on class, and lack of focus on gender (McRobbie, 1980, 1990) and racism and ethnic absolutism (Gilroy, 1993), in the CCCS theory, we include a focus on how different articulations of Islam in hip-hop are connected to different notions of gender, race and ethnicity. Our analysis thus includes a focus on how masculinities, in particular, ethnic minority masculinities, are articulated in the subcultural styles we analyse.

Inspired by the concept of bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) – appropriation and (sub)cultural creativity – our study explores how certain types of American Black Islam have historically been part of the assemblage that comprises hip-hop subculture. We further discuss how Western jihadi subculture can be viewed as another more contemporary bricolage that builds upon and incorporates the historical relationship between hip hop and Islam. In the analysis, Islam is seen as a floating signifier (Lévi-Strauss, 1950) that has been ascribed different meanings in hip-hop in different contexts and has been integrated into different subcultural responses and styles. The first part of the analysis traces the role of Islam in hip hop. This part is informed by existing research literature on the history of hip hop (such as Rose, 1994) as well as literature that specifically addresses the relationship between hip hop and Islam (such as Aidi, 2014; Khabeer, 2016). The second part of the analysis studies the emergence of jihadi rap. It is based on online virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), where we have searched the Internet for contemporary expressions of this new music genre.

Finally, and before we turn to the analysis, a short note on positionality: In these times of increasing emphasis on colonialization and representation in academia, some may ask why three white Scandinavian, non-Muslim, researchers are studying a music genre created by groups of which they do not share religion, racialised identity or ethnic minority status. In short, we come

from an ethnographic and qualitative tradition and have experience from studying people involved in crime, drug use, violence and politico-religious extremism. Being long-time hip-hop fans and students of global street culture and forms of extremism that are also present in Scandinavia, a study of jihadi rap is a natural culmination of research interests we have had for many years. The claim sometimes made in contemporary academia that one should share the experiences, or background, of those studied, is of course especially problematic in this line of research. It risks shutting down research fields in sociology and criminology that has humanized stigmatized people and counter widespread stereotypes for a century. While some may argue that researchers should focus on that which is “close to home”, we believe instead that it is particularly important to study those experiences and cultural expressions that differ from one’s own. Such research requires researchers to reflect continuously on positionality and the power dimension of research (Larsen 2020) and is arguably ideally, but not necessarily, done in close research collaborations with the communities studied (Sandberg and Rojas 2021). Trying to get a grasp of cultural and social diversity and variance however, is the only way we can increase cross-cultural understandings and cumulatively contribute to knowledge of complex and increasingly global social phenomena.

Hip hop, Black Islam and dissent

Since its emergence in the Bronx in the 1970s, hip hop has portrayed the marginal urban life of racialized minorities. Although far from reducible to political commentary, hip hop can be viewed as a subcultural response involving critique and opposition towards social injustices. Rose, for example, described rap as a ‘cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America’ (1994: 2), and Quinn noted that the genre ‘is based on urban black culture and made for economically and politically marginalized groups’ (1996: 70). McLaren referred to rap

as ‘an oppositional political practice’ (1999: 23), and Kahf viewed the genre as a ‘vernacular of resistance’ (2007: 375).

In the 1980s and 1990s – an era to which many insiders refer as the golden age of hip-hop – this social critique was articulated through a number of vastly different stylistic repertoires. Versions of Black Islam originating in the US provided an important oppositional symbolism, but there were also others. One was the hypermasculine and controversial symbolism of gangsta rap. This subgenre has often been criticized for its masculinism and misogyny (for instance, Armstrong, 2001; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009), but it also articulated critical descriptions of the harsh realities of life in marginalized urban areas and explicitly criticized institutional racism and police brutality (McLaren, 1999). There were also Black nationalist hip-hop groups that did not celebrate crime. They had a masculinity position that can be argued to be militant and hard but not (explicitly) misogynist. Groups and artists such as Intelligent Hoodlum (later Tragedy Khadafi), Paris and The Coup articulated a secularist perspective and claimed the legacy of radical Black revolutionary movements in the USA such as the Black Panther Party.

Nevertheless, one of the most important symbolic repertoires of hip-hop has been various versions of Black Islam, and Islam is arguably ‘the official religion of hip-hop’ (Alim, 2006: 46). Rappers have been affiliated with different strands of Islam: Everlast and Q-Tip and Ali Shaheed Muhammed from A Tribe Called Quest are affiliated with Sunni Islam, while Public Enemy and Ice Cube have incorporated references to the Nation of Islam (NOI). In addition, several hip-hop groups and individual artists, including Rakim Allah, Brand Nubian, Grand Puba Maxwell, Wu Tang Clan, Big Daddy Kane, Nas, Busta Rhymes, Pete Rock and CL Smooth, Pure Righteous Teachers, Leaders of the New School, The Guru of the group Gangstarr, Mobb Deep, and Diggable Planets, are or have been affiliated with the organization often referred to as ‘the 5 Percenters’ or,

alternatively, the ‘Nation of Gods and Earths’ (Aidi, 2004: 110; Khabeer, 2007: 126; Swedenburg, 1997). Through these artists, and more, Black Islam has historically been an integral part of the way that hip-hop artists have articulated both coolness and social dissent.

The NOI was founded by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad in 1930. The NOI, and in particular the 5 Percenters, teaches a highly unorthodox version of Islam. NOI teachings include the claim that the Black man of Asia (and not Africa, which is considered the white man’s false terminology for the Black man’s homeland) is the original man of the earth, whereas the white man (sometimes referred to as the coloured man) was created by the evil scientist Yacub. Whites are often referred to as devils. The 5 Percenters is a splinter group from the NOI founded by Clarence 13X, also known as Allah or the Father, in the 1960s. Due to its reliance on oral tradition, it is difficult to provide a precise account of the 5 Percenters’ teachings. However, the group teaches that Black men have God potential, although only the 5 Percenters have realized this. Black women are referred to as Earths. The group’s syncretic teachings further include what is referred to as ‘the divine alphabet’ and influences from numerology inspired by Moorish Science. The 5 Percenters sometimes deny being Muslim, as it sees spiritual religious belief as functional to the reproduction of racism and inequality. Nevertheless, the group incorporates Islamic symbolism and terminology, and its teachings would fall under most definitions of religion (Knight, 2016; Swedenburg, 1997).

While some of the NOI’s and especially the 5 Percenters’ teachings may appear obscure, it is worth remembering that they were forged in the face of racial oppression and, as such, can be interpreted as a variant of resistance theology (Knight, 2016: 31). Black Islam teachings have thus been adapted to the experience of Black people in the US. In this context, Islam can be understood as an alternative to and critique of both Christian whiteness and Christian blackness, as the latter

in this understanding is seen as an instrument of legitimizing black subordination (sometimes referred to as “tricknology”). Islam thus becomes closely connected to Black Nationalism and Black Consciousness (Khabeer, 2016: 52). Khabeer (2016: 57) describes ‘knowledge of self’ as ‘Black Islam’s most significant contribution to hip-hop’. In Black Islam-inspired hip hop, knowledge about social and societal systemic injustices and the critique of and resistance against oppression of Black people has thus been central, as has the ‘Islamic’ self-empowering answer to these social conditions (Khabeer, 2016, 2007; Alim, 2006; Aidi, 2004). The ‘central motivation’ of Black Islam has thus been reshaping how Black people think of themselves (Khabeer, 2016: 51). The teachings have, however, been criticized for being primarily geared towards restoring Black *manhood*, thus rendering the gender politics of Black Islam (and rap) somewhat problematic (Cheney, 1999: 4).

References to 5 Percenter or NOI content in rap range from the use of metaphors or specific terms (such as Rakim Allah saying, ‘But now I learned to earn cause I’m *righteous*’, 1987: ‘Paid in Full’) to communicating 5 Percenter affiliation through visual symbolism on record covers and in music videos. Some phrases in 5 Percenters’ verbal style have become a staple of hip-hop slang, such as the use of ‘peace’ for greeting or sayings such as ‘word is bond’ and ‘show and prove’. Another common saying is ‘wassup, G?’. Currently, the ‘G’ is most often understood as ‘Gangsta’, but the origin of the phrase is in 5 Percenter numerology, where G is the seventh letter in the alphabet. Seven is the number of perfection; consequently, the ‘G’ stands for ‘God’, referring to the God potential of Black men (Swedenburg, 1997).

The rap group to most explicitly claim 5 Percenter affiliation is perhaps Poor Righteous Teachers (PRT), whose name is a direct reference to 5 Percenter teachings. In terms of reaching a broader audience, however, PRT is rivalled by Brand Nubian. On the song ‘Wake up’ from the

1990 debut album 'One for All', with a musical style based primarily on jazz/funk samples and typical for the period, the group directly paraphrased the central 5 Percenter text known as the 'Supreme Wisdom Lessons'. The video for the song was shot outside 5 Percenters' Allah School in Mecca on 127th Street in New York and depicts 5 Percenters 'dropping knowledge' on young Black people on the street.

The group's next album – entitled 'In God We Trust', which has a special meaning when one remembers that in 5 Percenter teaching, the Black man has God potential – starts with the song 'Allah U Akbar', which contains a lengthy sample of 'the adhan' (Islamic call to prayer) fading into a hip-hop drum beat. This artistic choice is an example of creative subcultural stylistic bricolage, illustrating that Islam has been part of the 'pool of styles, meanings and possibilities' (Willis, 1978: 59) from which hip-hop artists have drawn to create a cool style of dissent. The album also contains Brand Nubian's hip-hop/R&B version of the 5 Percenter's national anthem 'The Enlightener' in the song 'Allah and Justice'.

Many other rap groups have incorporated references to the NOI. One example is Public Enemy (PE), who referred to NOI leader Louis Farrakhan ('Farrakhan is a prophet and I think you ought to listen to/What he can say to you/What you ought to do', Public Enemy, 1988: 'Bring The Noise'). Public Enemy thus included the critical symbolism of Black Islam in their unique mix of styles and symbols, thereby creating a distinct form of cool stylistic dissent. The group's albums generally contain radical critiques of racism and social injustice backed up by a dissonant and noisy musical style composed of mostly reworked funk samples. Although portraying a militant Black type of masculinity, the group also drew attention to historical injustices towards Black women in the US, for instance, on the song 'Revolutionary Generation' (included on the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, 1990).

Another rapper affiliated with the Nation of Islam was Ice Cube, who mixed NOI symbolism with a ‘gangsta’ style that is quite distant from the lifestyle endorsed by the NOI (or any other interpretation of Islam). This subcultural bricolage is illustrated by the flipside of the album ‘Death Certificate’. The left half of the cover, termed the Death side, is populated by young Black men posing in a style clearly related to street culture. The right half, the Life side, shows 9 Black men with sunglasses, dark brown suits, white shirts and bow ties standing erect parade style. This image is clearly a reference to the NOI style. The two sides of the cover thus show two different versions of cool Black masculinity. Ice Cube is positioned in the middle wearing street apparel but reading the NOI newspaper ‘The Final Call’. The front-page headline is ‘Unite or perish’. Without exaggerating the importance of a single record cover, this symbolism illustrates a central point for our argument: that it is perfectly possible to combine gangsta hip-hop street cultural coolness and Black Islam – or, better yet, that this combination has been made possible by a specific stylistic bricolage created by US hip-hop artists in the 1980s and 1990s. As Aidi (2014: 205) hinted at, this link between Islam and hip hop – and therefore the link between street culture and Islam – is an important historical background for the more recent articulation of jihadi cool.

In the aftermath of the ‘golden era’ of the 1980s and 1990s, hip-hop as a subculture, including but not limited to its musical form, branched out into numerous subgenres and styles. Thus, even though hip hop has largely become part of mainstream popular music, there are still more hard-core subgenres, such as the UK subgenre ‘grime’, that critically depict urban life (Barron, 2013). In parallel, various subgenres and styles have spread to a wide range of national contexts outside the USA. Hip hop was thus also taken up in Islamic contexts and by artists self-identifying as Muslims in Western contexts (Aidi, 2014; Khabeer, 2016). Examples include Algeria and Tunisia (Shannah and Hussain, 2011), Turkey (Solomon, 2006), Sweden (Ackfeldt,

2012), Palestinian youths living in Israel (Kahf, 2007) and a wide range of other places (see also Mitchell, 2001). This dissemination of a subcultural style included countries where hip hop was re-inscribed in a primarily Sunni version of Islam, which led to discussions regarding whether this style of music, or music in general, is prohibited in Islam (Kahf, 2007; Shannahan and Hussain, 2011; see also Khabeer, 2007).

The dispersal, adoption and adaption of Islam in different hip-hop styles illustrates how Islam works as a floating signifier (Levi-Strauss, 1950) that can be ascribed different meanings in different contexts; ‘a sign that can be deployed in different ways to various cultural and political ends’ (cf. Solomon, 2006: 60). For instance, in Tunis, Sunni Islam is an integrated part of the hip hop scene. Here, rap has been used as a critical voice against the regime, but it also includes quite traditional gender conservatism (Shannahan and Hussain, 2011). In Europe, where Muslim youths constitute an ethno-religious minority, the articulation of Islam in hip hop is different. Muslim youths in Europe construct their identity up against negative representations of Islam and are often ‘reminded’ that they are (perceived as) Muslim, whether or not they actually practice the religion or identify as Muslims (Solomon, 2006: 66-67). Here, hip hop has become part of a subcultural response to the collective experience of othering.

In the words of Aidi, ‘hip-hop and the African American experience’ provide minority youths in Europe with a ‘cultural vocabulary and historical experience with which to bond and from which to draw elements for local repertoires of experience’ (Aidi, 2004: 119). One such response, articulated by German rap groups such as Islamic Force and Sert Müslümanlar (Hardcore Muslims), has been to revalorize the Muslim identity as something positive, in other words, to make Muslim identity cool. This response parallels the way hip-hop culture has revalorized blackness in the US context through the symbolic repertoire of Black Islam. In this sense, there is

a striking parallel between the situation for Blacks in the USA and Muslims in Europe. However, this style of dissent has not been limited only to revalorizing minority status in European countries but has also been directed at the geopolitical role of the West and used in jihadi propaganda in the post-9/11 era.

Gangsta rap goes jihadi

After the 1980s and 1990s, hip hop branched into numerous subgenres, including what we refer to here as jihadi rap. This genre has a very different status than the 1980s and 1990s NOI and 5 Percenter rap. While the Black Islam rap groups of the golden era constituted the core of the hip-hop subculture – and, in some cases, sold millions of records – jihadi rap is a marginal phenomenon in terms of listeners and popularity. Nonetheless, jihadi rap has been described as ‘the unofficial soundtrack to militant extremist Islam’ (Smirke, 2004), rendering it relevant if researchers are to understand the complex history of ‘jihadi cool’ (Sageman, 2006) as well as the crime terror nexus (Basra and Neumann, 2016) and recent convergence of jihadism and street culture.

Some artists can be described as intermediaries illustrating the stylistic and aesthetic continuity between Black radicalism in hip-hop and jihadi rap: In the US, the rapper Paris released the album ‘Sonic Jihad’ in 2003 with a cover showing an airplane flying towards the White House, and groups such as Da Lench Mob have been accused of having terrorist sympathies (Aidi, 2004: 120). In Britain, the group Fun[^]Da[^]Mental released the album ‘All Is War: The Benefits of G-Had’ in 2006. The album was labelled ‘jihad rap’ that promoted the ‘benefits of holy war’ by British media (Swedenburg, 2009: 123). However, the group should instead be seen as placed somewhere between Black Muslim hip-hop and jihadi rap. Fun[^]Da[^]Mental was founded in the early 1990s and, from the beginning, drew on the symbolism of the NOI and 5 Percenters. The

group combined this symbolism with references to Islam from South Asia, which was their region of origin. Later, the group became known for their political radicalism. They advocated ‘militant anti-racism’, promoted pride in Islam and criticized Western military aggression in Muslim countries. The group stated that this political stance was their form of ‘jihad’. The group thus articulated a distinct and provoking style by appropriating and rearranging symbolism from highly distinct strands of Islam (Swedenburg, 2001, 2009, 2010).

Hip hop has traditionally articulated explicit radical dissent from social injustices. What we refer to as jihadi rap continues this tradition, albeit in a different manner. Whereas the traditional articulation of dissent from social injustices in hip-hop was directed at what was perceived as discrimination and racism against Black people in the US – and, later, in other contexts as well, e.g., as a response against experiences of othering – jihadi rap, to a larger extent, articulates dissent from injustices as a critique of geopolitical structures. A central theme in jihadi rap is thus a critique of Western leaders and their aggressions in Muslim countries. The song cited in the beginning of the article, called ‘Dirty Kuffar’, released by the British radical Islamist rap group Sheik Terra and the Soul Salah Crew in 2004 is an example of this radical critique, as it explicitly calls for the violent death of named Western leaders (because they oppress and kill Muslims in Muslim countries).

Jihadi rap often pictures a world with two oppositional and clashing worldviews or civilizations. The West is understood as engaging in a war against Islam and Muslims. In 2005, Puerto Rican Muslim rappers from Boston and Brooklyn called the Mujahideen Team released an album called the ‘Clash of Civilizations’. The title is a reference to Samuel P. Huntington’s book of the same title from 1996, which predicts a scenario where the West is at war with Islam. The Mujahideen Team’s album consists of songs that follow this analysis – a world where true Muslims

and disbelievers and Western society in general are at war. Jihadi rap is thus characterized by the explicit promotion of jihadism in the sense of holy war against the ‘kuffar’. Whereas jihadi rap continues the tradition within hip-hop of articulating radical critique of social and political injustices, it adds to this tradition something that has not been part of the earlier history of Islam within hip-hop culture and rap music, namely, the call for violent action against disbelievers, be they Western ‘(dirty) kuffar’ or Muslims who are perceived as practising diluted forms of Islam.

There are both continuities and discontinuities between the tradition of Islam within hip-hop culture and the more recent subgenre of jihadi rap. Jihadi rap, for example, continues the tradition within hip-hop of articulating radical dissent in a stylistically ‘cool’ way. In the song ‘Gun Fire Sound’, for example, the Mujahideen Team describes the kuffar as hunting Muslims and calls for Muslims to be ready to fight back: *come hear me one time/we on the front line/these kaffirs want mine/these kaffirs hunt mine* (Mujahideen Team, 2005: ‘Gun Fire Sound’). This message of jihad is delivered in the musical style of a gangsta rap. In another song called ‘Day of Retribution’, the Mujahideen Team calls Muslims to be ready as *today is the day of jihad/today is the day of victory or martyrdom* (Mujahideen Team, 2005: ‘Day of Retribution’) in a ‘nu metal’-style song with lyrics that are rapped over heavy rock-style distorted guitars. Sheik Terra and the Soul Salah Crew’s song ‘Dirty Kuffar’ delivers its message of jihad in the style of rap and dance hall music. Moreover, in another song from 2006, used as an introductory piece to a documentary entitled ‘Malcolm X: The Prince of Islam’, they incorporate Malcolm X, one of Black Islam’s most prominent figures, who has been cited numerous times in politically conscious hip-hop, into their jihadist message.

Articulating jihadism in these styles, jihadi rap, we argue, contributes to bridging Western street culture and jihadi culture and making jihadism or jihadist articulations of dissent attractive

or fascinating for (some) Western youths. Jihadi rap is a paradoxical example of cultural creativity and bricolage, as it mixes and combines hip-hop musical style, the symbolism of US Black Islam, and jihadism. Jihadi rap combines a stark critique of Western societies and values with a cultural style that is thoroughly embedded in Western popular culture. Moreover, while music is not allowed within strict Salafi interpretations of Islam, such as those followed by terrorist groups such as ISIS, there is music in jihadi rap. The only ‘music’ allowed in strict Salafism is *anashid*, which is a form of Islamic chant (Lahoud, 2017). There are examples of jihadi rap songs that have used these chants (often about jihad and martyrdom) in their songs. An example of this is the song ‘Pepsi, Basmati und Kuffr’, where a *nashid* performed by the former German gangsta rapper and street criminal Deso Dogg, who joined ISIS, is mixed with a hip-hop backing track originally performed by million-selling artist Jay-Z (@tha_swagonaut, 2015: ‘Pepsi, Basmati und Kuffr’). The song was released on an album called ‘Straight Outta Syria’ by Traphouse/Trapspot Syria. The album can be traced to Germany, but its title is a reference to N.W.A’s West Coast gangsta rap album ‘Straight Outta Compton’ from 1988. A *nashid*, which is an Islamic orthodox, traditional genre, and often sustains solidarity and reaffirms specific values and is sometimes also used as propaganda and a way to articulate dissent by terrorist organizations, is here transformed into the hip-hop street cultural universe. In this way, there is continuity between the otherwise different and in some sense conflicting cultural styles, *anashid* and jihadi rap, as jihadi rap also helps build and sustain solidarity and a reaffirmation of dissident values.

Jihadi rap can be seen as part of the cultural draw of the Western jihadi subculture. This attraction, however, is more than merely the style of the music. Jihadi rap draws on symbols that can also comprise an aesthetic attraction to the Western jihadi subculture. A central symbolic element in jihadi rap music videos is guns and other weapons. Jihadi rappers often pose with guns

in their videos, and they often show clips from jihadists posing with and shooting guns. In the video for the song 'Dirty Kuffar', Sheik Terra and the Soul Salah Crew, wearing camouflage jackets, pose with a gun in one hand and the Quran in the other. The explicit visual emphasis on guns in jihadi rap videos resembles how hypermasculine gun culture has traditionally been a central part of gangsta rap. Gun culture in rap music has been a way to symbolize resistance and, not least, a form of thug masculinity. Gun culture has thus been part of the aesthetic attraction of street culture, and jihadi rap sometimes lends cultural elements of this gun culture from gangsta rap. However, whereas US gangsta rap uses gun culture to express masculinity through resistance against, e.g., (white) police and as a way to mark gang affiliation, the symbol of the gun takes a different meaning in jihadi rap. Here, guns and other weapons symbolize a more militaristic masculinity. The jihadist message is directed at the defence of the Umma against Western military aggressions (Sunde et al., 2020). Posing with guns and the Quran while wearing camouflage jackets thus symbolizes a militaristic masculinity, which some young Muslim men in the West might find aesthetically attractive.

We have demonstrated a cultural and historical continuity between Black Islam in hip-hop and jihadi rap. This continuity, however, and importantly, exists mainly on the stylistic and aesthetic level. In regard to the content of religious teachings, discontinuity rather than continuity is the main picture. NOI and the 5 Percenters believe in versions of Islam that are very different from militant interpretations of Sunni Islam. Therefore, neither the NOI nor the 5 Percenters can be blamed for recruitment to jihadism. Despite their radical rhetoric, Black versions of Islam in the USA have rarely been violent: US Black Islam generally relies on eschatology rather than actual violence and should be read more as allegory and as a deconstruction of historical and social racial hierarchies than a literal hatred of whites or religiously motivated calls for violence.

Cultural bricolages and subcultural continuities

For Levi-Strauss (1966), bricolage is a heterogeneous repertoire representing a multitude of widely dispersed and heterogeneous cultural references. The multitude of voices allows for a certain ambiguity in interpretation and much flexibility and creativity in use. In this sense, it has a lot in common with Bakhtin's (1982) concepts of intertextuality and polyvocality. There are still important limitations: 'The elements which the 'bricoleur' collects and uses are 'pre-constrained' (...) restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuvre' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 19). Studying subcultures and hip hop genres as bricolages implies identifying the different elements of the culture and trying to obtain a sense of the historical connotations they come with. The cultural bricolages of Western jihadi subcultures and jihadi rap, for example, draw on a multitude of cultural references with their own particular history, most importantly, the role of Islam in hip hop.

The creativity and agency in subcultures comes clearly to the forth in jihadi rap, especially in the way that Islam acts as a floating signifier in these subcultural and hip-hop bricolages. Islam seems to represent 'an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning' (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 63–64). Islam as the floating signifier is a result of the 'unfixity introduced by a plurality of discourses' (Laclau et al., 2000: 305). Such a view of Islam as a floating signifier in cultural bricolages, a sign or symbol that constitutes a historical continuity but also cultural agency and dramatic changes in meaning, makes it easier to recognize the role of Islam in subcultural and hip hop history: from the revalorization of (male) blackness in urban areas of the USA to the revalorization and defence of Muslim minority youths in Europe

and finally to the current hypermasculine jihadi rap and its critique of US/Western geopolitical and military aggression in the Middle East.

The CCCS tradition emphasized the importance of studying the politics of subcultural styles (Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1978), and post-subcultural theory (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003; Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004) serves as a reminder that the boundaries between subcultures can be blurry and that individual commitment to them might vary. These are both important insights for understanding contemporary jihadi rap. There are, for example, no direct links between hip-hop or ethnic minority street culture and jihadi rap, and listening to jihadi rap music cannot be equated with future involvement in violent jihadism. As demonstrated by studies of drill music (Ilan, 2020; Lynes et al., 2020), one of hip hop's most controversial subgenres, these are complex artistic performances expressing deep concerns of social injustices and come with highly ambiguous relationships to actual violence. Nevertheless, there is still a certain (sub)cultural continuity in, and blurriness between, these subcultures and hip hop genres. That Islam was already 'cool' in hip hop, for example (Aidi, 2014), made it easier to combine jihadism with Western street cultures, and the historical link between hip hop and Islam forms part of the (sub)cultural background of what can be seen as 'jihadi cool' (Sageman, 2006).

Illustratively, while there are no direct links between jihadi and street subcultures or between mainstream hip-hop and jihadi rap, there are examples of people whose life trajectories link Black Islam in US hip-hop and affiliation with jihadism or at least radical Islamism. John Walker Lindh, a US convert who was captured by US forces in Afghanistan in 2001, was drawn to Islam first through 5 Percenter hip-hop and then mainstream Sunni teachings, after which he joined militant Islamism (Knight, 2016: 234). Another example is the former radical Islamist Maajid Nawaz. In his autobiography about his journey in and out of radical Islamism, he reported

that he was initially inspired by the US hip-hop version of Islam. He had no knowledge about the teachings of the NOI or the 5 Percenters, but he found that the music re-branded his religion ‘as a form of resistance, as a self-affirming defiant identity [...] All of a sudden, it was *cool* to be a Muslim’ (Nawaz, 2016: 22, emphasis added).

These trajectories illustrate concrete biographical continuities. The subcultural continuity, however, remains mainly on the level of style, subcultural creativity, dissent and coolness. If we regard Islam as a floating signifier, it is possible to understand the continuity between these very different – even antithetical – versions of Islam in rap music. The religious symbolism was already there to be mimicked, used and appropriated by excluded Muslim youths in Europe critical of their marginal situation, general Islamophobia in the region and US/Western military aggression in the Muslim world. As opposed to the CCCS subcultural tradition’s emphasis on class, the collective stylistic and symbolic responses to marginalization found in hip-hop and jihadi rap are as much related to oppression based on race, ethnicity and religion (see also Gilroy, 1993). The continuities in these subcultures and musical genres are also explicitly expressions of ethnic minority masculinities, demonstrating the importance of gender for subcultural studies (see also McRobbie, 1980, 1990).

Conclusion

Our study has demonstrated the analytical purchase of subcultural analysis for understanding the aesthetic attraction of Western jihadi subculture. Inspired by Hegghammer et al.’s (2017) methodology of analysing closely and, in this case, historically, specific elements of jihadi (sub)culture, we have shown how Islam has historically been a part of hip-hop’s street cultural coolness. Jihadi rap’s stylistic bricolage of Islamist and jihadist symbolism, US Black Islam, and

Western street culture is a vibrant example of how subcultures appropriate and (re-)combine existing aesthetics, styles and symbols. Our study has further shown the importance of including gender, race and ethnicity in subcultural analysis and for including a concept of subculture that opens up for understanding historical continuities, symbolic ambiguity and blurry boundaries between cultures and music genres.

We argue that the convergence of Western street and jihadi subcultures that has variously been described as jihadi cool (Sageman, 2006), a Western jihadi subculture Cottee (2020), or as being part of a new crime-terror nexus (Basra et al., 2016) has found a powerful expression in jihadi rap. This music genre should be seen as an integrated part of the street-jihadi cultural bricolage, where Islam acts as a floating signifier, with different and often ambiguous meanings. This heterogeneous and ambiguous cultural repertoire, drawing on references as different as traditional Middle-Eastern religion and hip hop and street culture, is part of what makes Western jihadi subculture attractive (to some people). At the same time, and importantly, street-jihadi bricolages also repel people. For example, Muslims with a strict Salafi understanding of the role of music or contempt for Western popculture culture – or youths in hip-hop or street culture without extreme religious beliefs or aspirations. This probably explains why jihad rap, after all, is a marginal musical genre.

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ⁱ Kuffar is Arabic for infidel.