

#Russianrapisracist vs #RussianNaziPurgeParty: On Geopolitics, Trolling and the Mistranslation of Race in a Twitter Controversy

Dinara Yangeldina

Introduction

I am currently being trolled by Russian rap fans in droves posting straight up Nazi propaganda. The Russian hip hop scene is extremely racist. It's being led by racists like @sdthaking and i1official (@Talib Kweli 2020)¹

The above tweet was posted at the end of February 2020 in the middle of a heated Twitter controversy between famous US rapper Talib Kweli and the Russian hip-hop community, in which he described the entire Russian rap scene as racist, Nazi and state sponsored.² The scandal quickly spread to other social media platforms and got extensive coverage online and even on the official Russian TV channels. But what exactly

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- 1 In the wake of a harassment-related scandal Talib Kweli was permanently banned from Twitter on 4 July 2020. It is for this reason that none of his original Tweets are available anymore. The retypes of tweets are based on screenshots circulated in secondary sources or collected by me during the initial stage of research for this chapter (the same applies to Twitter screenshots used here but not available in the original to reference).
 - 2 Talib Kweli is a rapper known for his outspoken activist stance against police brutality and racial oppression in the USA. His early recognition is linked to the critically acclaimed band Black Star, which he formed together with Mos Def in 1997 in Brooklyn, New York. This style of hip-hop, known as conscious hip-hop, is usually juxtaposed with gangsta rap.

pushed Talib Kweli to draw these conclusions and what could explain the extraordinary response this conflict received in the Russian media?

My analysis of this conflict is divided into five sections. I provide more details and investigate how it was reframed in geopolitical terms by Russian media. I show how Russian media transformed the conflict from a subcultural hip-hop conversation about race and privilege into an attack on Russians as a nation, animating Cold War discourses and anti-American sentiments and bringing the ethnically diverse Russian hip-hop community under the banner of patriotic (ethnic) Russianness. Secondly, I explore the geopolitical inflections of Talib Kweli's accusations of trolling and racism, as he mobilized the discourses of Russian intervention in the US elections and of Russian trolls to delegitimize his opponents. Thirdly, building upon a subset of trolling literature, which argues for the need to distinguish between different types of trolling, overcome moral evaluations of trolling and recognize *potentially* subversive aspects of trolling, I examine the trolling flash mob launched by Dvach (2ch.hk) imageboard users who aimed to provoke both sides. Finally, I focus on how the scandal was taken up by the Russian rap community with an emphasis on the travel of US racial politics to Russia through the medium of hip-hop. While being overdetermined by geopolitics and mistranslation, the conflict nevertheless allows insight into the Russian hip-hop scene as an arena of intense negotiation of discourses about race and racism. This Twitter controversy presents a unique case for examining what the accusations of trolling and racism do to the dynamics of a conflict, how both the accusations and reactions to them are embedded in larger geopolitical tensions, and how they bounce back against localized Internet ecologies and subcultures such as hip-hop.

More about the conflict

On 24 February 2020 avid Twitter user Talib Kweli tweeted: "Only a racist white person would deny that they have white privileges" (@TalibKweli 2020) in response to another Twitter post. One of his followers, a rapper from Russia, I1, replied to Talib Kweli's tweet with: "For a person from Russia where most ppl are white & slavery existed until 1861 and police terrorizes the poor & dissidents it's so hard to always read only about white privilege. While financial, talent & personal qualities privileges are

often way more powerful.”³ This comment was dismissed as an example of white privilege by Talib Kweli. Subsequent heated discussion involved Talib Kweli’s fans and Russian rap artists, who joined the Twitter thread (namely PLC, Dime, SD, Maestro A-Sid and Roma Jigan) and tried to explain the Russian cultural context. Unconvinced, Talib Kweli accused the interlocutors of racism and doubted their ability to grasp black marginalization. Gradually the conversation shifted into a barrage of mutual insults. Anonymous users from the Russian-language imageboard Dvach (Двач), known for its antagonistic, disruptive, and politically incorrect communication style, flooded Twitter to fight a memetic war against both sides.



Images and their circulation in social media played a striking role in the conflict. It was photography’s presumed indexical relations to “truth” that were used to shore up the claims made. The same indexical relations were contested through the memetic flash mob. Thus, an old photocollage (*photozhaba* in Russian Internet slang), featuring Russian rapper Oxxxymiron, Mikhail Boiarskii and rapper SD doing a Nazi salute, was dug up and pitched to Talib Kweli as “proof” of his suspicions about the racism of the Russian rap scene.⁴ It is important to contextualize that

3 twitter.com/I1Official/status/1231923350504603649.

4 *Photozhaba* translates literally as “phototoad.” It appropriates the word Photoshop, where original photomontages were created. *Photozhaba* is an iconic, humorous, memetic genre for early Russian Internet culture. Mikhail Boiarskii was photo-

ethnically Jewish Viktor SD from the Antihype hip-hop association approaches this symbolism in a profoundly ironic way. SD has been on the hip-hop scene from 2002 as a battle rapper and founder of multiple labels. Known as an enfant terrible of underground Russian rap, he espouses anti-establishment values, trolls commercial hip-hop artists, and makes ironic use of politically incorrect slurs and profanities to refer to himself, his colleagues from Antihype, and the world around him (Nilov 2017). Taking this photo as proof that SD is a convinced Nazi, Talib Kweli launched a twitter hashtag #russianrapisracist to expose the Russian rap scene. In turn, motivated by the desire to troll both sides, Dvach users launched a hashtag #RussianNaziPurgeParty, outing “famous Russian Nazi rappers” through photo memes.



The conflict took another turn when Talib Kweli learned that Russian rapper Timati’s first album and his musical label are called Black Star, just like his own band with Mos Def (talibkweli Instagram 2020). Timati was accused of stealing and cultural appropriation. Talib Kweli posted several pictures of Timati, including a screenshot from the 2008 Russian

shopped to the picture later, while the original picture features Oxxxymiron, SD and his brother. I found that both the original and the *photozhaba* had already been published in 2013 on the hip-hop.ru forum (hip-hop.ru 2013). This is confirmed by SD’s now deleted Tweet: “I am jewish, not a nazi, this salute is sarcasm, the man in the middle is photoshop, u moron, fact.”

comedy *Hitler Kaput!* where Timati's character (DJ 50 Bundes Schilling aka Super-agent Timati) is seen sitting under a Nazi flag. This picture served as proof of Timati's alleged Nazi leanings. Another picture posted showed Timati and Vladimir Putin shaking hands.⁵ Talib Kweli took the Timati-Putin handshake, a collection of *photozhabas* and deliberately provocative tweets as convincing evidence that the entire Russian rap scene is racist, Nazi and sponsored by the state. He started presenting his opponents as Russian trolls, paid by Trump to target Talib Kweli for his activist beliefs. In a short interview he interpreted this trolling flash mob as a broader case of global far-right mobilization and said that fighting racists empowers him.⁶

Russian media framing of the conflict

This Twitter controversy received extraordinary attention in the Russian media, spanning from state-sponsored outlets to specialized media about rap. Thus, conservative TV channel Tsargrad, which defines itself as “the voice of the Russian Orthodox majority,” posted the news about the conflict under the headline: Тимати ультраправый, Егор Крид—лютый неонаци: Американского рэпера, оскорбившего русских, наказали (Tsargrad 25.02.2020).⁷ This antagonistic framing emphasizes the idea that Talib Kweli's statements should be regarded as an insult not only to the Russian rap community, but the entire nation. The usage of slightly informal vocabulary with elements of slang reinforces the message that “punishment” is justified. Gazeta.ru newspaper covered the conflict with the headline Спорить мы не бросим: легенда рэпа из США против русских and the subheading Американский рэпер Талиб Квели назвал Тимати «нацистом» (Gazeta.ru 25.02.2020).⁸ The click-bait style of the heading gets more nuanced in the body of the article where *russkie* are replaced with *rossiiskie khop-khop ispolniteli* (hip-hop artists from

5 [instagram.com/p/B8_qom1g9XO/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B8_qom1g9XO/). Timati indeed supports the Russian government and does not shy away from pro-government videos.

6 [tmz.com/2020/03/08/talib-kweli-fighting-nazis-racists-russian-trolls-online-empowering](https://www.t TMZ.com/2020/03/08/talib-kweli-fighting-nazis-racists-russian-trolls-online-empowering).

7 “Timati is far-right, Egor Kreed—a hardcore neo-Nazi: American rapper who insulted [ethnic] Russians has been punished.” Tsargrad is a young conservative channel founded in 2015, supporting Orthodox Christianity, ‘traditional values’ and ethnic Russian nationalism. (All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.)

8 “We will not stop arguing: rap legend from the USA against (ethnic) Russians. American rapper Talib Kweli called Timati ‘Nazi.’”

Russia) and ethnonationalist framing is muted (Gazeta.ru 25.02.2020). In both sources the confrontation is presented as a quasi-civilizational conflict targeting the country as a whole.⁹ The Tsargrad and Gazeta.ru headlines achieve this effect through strategically replacing “Russian rappers” with “Russians.” This omission precludes the reading of the controversy as a subcultural conversation about rap and presents ethnically diverse rappers performing in Russian as ethnically Russian.

The examples above show that Russian media consistently conflated *rossiiskii* and *ruskii* when translating the conflict back from English to Russian for Russian-speaking audiences. The first term denotes citizenship of the Russian Federation, while the second could be translated into English as ethnically Russian or referring to Russian language. The slippage from *rossiiskii* to *ruskii* can therefore have exclusionary undertones, marginalizing minorities and Russia’s status as a multi-ethnic federation. The slippage also ignores distinctions between language, ethnicity and citizenship, which do not map neatly on each other in the post-Soviet space. Musicians performing in Russian might not necessarily be ethnically Russian or Russian citizens themselves. The case of the rapper Scriptonite, who is incredibly popular in Russia, is useful here. A Kazakhstan citizen and ethnic Kazakh, Scriptonite raps in Russian, but explicitly objects when the term *ruskii* rap is applied to him (colta.ru 2016). The slippages in translation between *ruskii* and *rossiiskii* were instrumental in the geopolitical framing of the conflict in the Russian media, which presented it as a quasi-war between Russians and Americans. Relying on the imaginaries of Cold War confrontation, a homogenous image of Russia as a community of ethnic Russians was reinforced. Strategic translation choices might have also helped to present Russian rap as a patriotic music genre in the Russian authorities’ ongoing efforts to harness the power of rap to influence youth.

The conflict was also covered by the pro-government channel Россия 24 (Russia 24) which put up a video: Рэперов Тимати и Крида Обвинили в Расизме (Rossiya 24 26.02.2020).¹⁰ After covering the basics, the presenter introduced short clips of rapper Roma Jigan, who accused Talib Kweli of “black racism,” and marketer Nataliia Bek, who said

9 Similar rhetoric was used by other Russian media, but I focus here on select representative examples.

10 “Rappers Timati and Kreed are accused of racism.”

that Russian Internet users have a good sense of humor, which is often not understood by US users. The presenter then tried to explain the intensity of the conflict to the audience:

Впрочем, может быть действительно сложно распознать иронию, либо надо очень сильно *верить в расистскую повестку*, которую у нас вряд ли можно назвать актуальной, по сравнению со *Штатами*, где все нередко скатывается в истерию.¹¹

Another participant in the conflict, rapper Obei Kenobe, explained in a clip that Talib Kweli как больной человек ругается с детьми.¹² He added that this conflict had come as a shock to Russian rappers because of Talib Kweli's iconic status: Лично я его считал очень интеллигентным человеком.¹³ The presenter concluded:

Вот и получается—одни откровенно шутят, и это порой правда смешно, когда другой в грудь себя бьет и заявляет о пресловутом белом доминировании и угнетении по расовому признаку. Black Star, судя по логике, даже в названии ущемляет тех, кто black.¹⁴

The video dismisses accusations of racism as far-fetched. Racial conflict is discursively displaced as an issue completely irrelevant to Russia, and problems of racism are exterritorialized to the USA. As anthropologist Alaina Lemon argues, race “became a key term in Cold War ideological struggles” between the USA and USSR where both states “competed to depict racial equality at home and to ascribe racism to the enemy” (Lemon 2019, 60). Elements of this discourse framed the coverage of the Twitter conflict as well. By contrasting Russia with the USA, an image of peaceful multicultural coexistence within Russia is reproduced, where people

11 “Maybe it is indeed difficult to discern irony or maybe one has to firmly believe in the racist agenda, which can hardly be called relevant to us in comparison to the USA, where things often lead to hysteria.”

12 “Like a sick man he is fighting with kids.”

13 “I personally thought of him as a highly cultured man.”

14 “So this is how it goes: some are openly joking and to be honest this is funny sometimes, and the other thumps his chest and claims so-called white domination and oppression based on race. Black Star, according to this logic, already in its name oppresses those who are black.”

do not get offended by racist jokes. Talib Kweli's accusations of racism are described as nonsensical and extravagant, and dismissed as "chest-thumping" and the result of a lack of a sense of humor. Russia is thereby reclaimed as a place that managed to preserve healthy irony in opposition to the USA, which is presented as obsessed with political correctness. Thus, in this example, we can see how anti-Americanism espoused by the official media in Russia uses the USA's racial tensions and culture of political correctness to advance a portrait of Russia's civilizational difference. It is worth noting that while this Twitter scandal received extraordinary attention in the Russian media, it was barely noticed in the US media or specialized English-language sources on rap. The next section looks more closely at how the geopolitical imaginary was employed by Talib Kweli in his framing of the events.

Geopolitics of Russian trolling

As well as accusing the Russian rap scene of being state-sponsored, racist and Nazi, Talib Kweli called his opponents "Russian trolls" and linked the conflict to global far-right mobilization, assuming connections between Trump and Putin: "These state sponsored racist Russian rappers are here trolling me on behalf of @realdonaldtrump pay attention people. This was never about rap. This is a targeted election interference from Russia" (@TalibKweli 27.02.2020). Talib Kweli's reaction to the conflict hints at his reliance on the moral panic about Russia's intervention in the US elections. Using the frames available for the interpretation in the US context, such as "Russian trolls paid by Putin" to characterize his opponents, Talib Kweli aims to undermine their legitimacy and dismiss their arguments. In so doing he builds upon the "Russia scare" discourses that have dominated the US mediascape over the last couple of years (Tsygankov 2019).

I approach the "Russia scare" discourse as a moral panic associated with Russia's digital warfare (Simons 2019). This moral panic is proliferated through a set of Western intelligence and think-tank reports on "countering" Russia's "propaganda machine." Such reports and studies are usually dedicated to the analysis of the famous "troll factory" in St. Petersburg (Chen 2015), Russia-related fake accounts on Twitter, and Russia's alleged meddling in US affairs, such as the election of Donald

Trump (amongst other things).¹⁵ There is a number of problematic assumptions associated with the discourse of election interference, such as the disavowal of agency of local voters and overemphasizing the effects even if the alleged intervention has taken place. But it is through these reports and accompanying journalistic pieces that the discourse of the “Russia scare” gets spread and acquires a life of its own, transforming into a number of ready-made clichés for interpreting reality. Such discourse frames Russia through a highly alarmist vocabulary, rendering it a “mega folk devil” (Simons 2019, 202). It is imagined as a threat to Western democracy and everything opposite to what “the West” is. Vitaly Kazakov and Stephen Hutchings frame this trend as the “information war paradigm” (2019, 137), which has been the dominant interpretation lens for recent Russia-West relations. As Alexei Yurchak aptly puts it, such a lens

reduces ‘Russia’ to a space that supposedly exists outside of the geopolitical context, a zone that is subjected exclusively to its own internal logic of authoritarianism and corruption and that is populated by an army of computer hackers, internet trolls and KGB/GRU/FSB agents. (Yurchak 2018, 95).

Contemporary commentators argue that the Ukraine crisis facilitated the reappearance of mirror image discourse in relations between Russia and “the West” (Smith 2018). Urie Bronfenbrenner’s 1961 mirror image hypothesis dates back to Cold War times and was proposed to explain mutually distorted images in US–USSR relations (Bronfenbrenner 1961). As Arutunyan suggests in a recent piece on the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, both the US and Russia mirror each other in making claims of foreign interference as an explanation of domestic unrest (2020). Through this conspiratorial logic, denying agency to local protesters and presenting them as “merely the puppets of powerful foreign forces” absolves governments of responsibility and the need to tackle protesters’ demands, placing the responsibility instead on the figure of the foreign enemy that needs to be fought (Arutunyan 2020). This discourse forms another layer in the historical ways of framing Russia: from the orientalization of Russia and Eastern Europe through Western travelogues (Wolff

¹⁵ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to determine how finely the claims of these reports assess the impact of Russia’s “hybrid warfare” on Western societies.

1994), through Cold War narratives of Sovietology and US understandings of the Soviet subject (Krylova 2000), to the contemporary situation heightened by Russia's annexation of Crimea and alleged meddling in the US elections (Tsygankov 2019). One of the paradoxical effects of "Russia scare" discourse is that the Russian government effectively deflects such narratives by mirroring them with the discourse of Russophobia, i.e. any Western criticisms of Russia are presented to citizens as manifestations of Russophobia.

When discourses of trolling converge with the "Russia scare" frame in the context of the "new Cold War" paradigm, the image of the "Russian troll" gets peculiar traction. This figure, which has acquired a life of its own, needs to be put in a wider context of research on trolling. Within Internet studies there is a rich literature that tries to understand the phenomenon of Internet trolling. Trolling is often framed in highly loaded terms, associated with hate speech, bullying, misogyny, antisocial behavior, deception, immaturity, damage, inauthenticity, pathology, sadism and threat (De Seta 2013; Bishop 2014; Sanfilippo, Fichman, and Yang 2018). The tenacity of the "Russian troll" figure can be explained by the fact that it merges two highly negative signifiers. The "Russian troll" is imagined as non-human through association with the "troll factory." If Internet trolls are constructed as simply malignant and hateful bullies, Russian trolls are particularly evil—they are fakes threatening democracy, and instruments of propaganda undermining the very foundations of Western civilization. It is possible to see here a reconfiguration of Cold War "practices of competitive contrast" (Lemon 2019, 60) where another important axis apart from race was "freedom of speech and thought." The panic around Russia's "information warfare" resuscitates the Cold War tropes of information censorship threatening freedom of speech and democracy. Democracy in turn becomes positioned as uniquely Western and free from any contamination/influence.

It has been noted by scholars of trolling that calling one's opponent a troll can be used as a strategy to delegitimize opponents and their opinions (Knustad 2020). By evoking Russian trolls imagery, Talib Kweli homogenized the rather fractured community of Russian rappers and their fans, paradoxically contributing to its temporary cohesion. Moreover, the deployment of "Russian troll" imagery allowed him to disregard the central reason for the conflict—cultural mistranslation in the discussion on

race and oppression across contexts. My attempt to understand trolling in the context of the Twitter controversy builds upon the growing current in trolling literature, which calls for distinctions between different types of trolling (Sanfilippo, Fichman & Yang 2018). This current analyzes more neglected dimensions of trolling and its carnivalesque side, such as “mockery, hilarity, deception and absurdity for confronting powerful ideologies” (Mylonas & Kompatsiaris 2019, 2), interprets some forms of online trolling as “creative insurgency” (Tovares 2019) and *potentially* transgressive cultural production for counter-hegemonic means, and argues for “localized understanding of Internet cultures” in non-Western contexts (De Seta 2013). However, I also agree with Kerr and Lee who “argue against categorizing trolls by their assumed intentions” (2019) as an important caveat against projecting our moral assumptions on the analysis of trolling. De Seta’s genealogical approach (2017) to trolling literature is useful in that it maps an “endorsement-critique” axis as one of the guiding controversies in the academic approaches to trolling. Depending on the ethical orientation of the researcher, trolling can be celebrated as a disruptive and subversive practice promoting democratic deliberation, or conversely as anti-social and malicious activity (De Seta 2017, 399–400). It seems to me that there is an implicit danger in some academic works examining trolling in authoritarian contexts and focusing on anti-government memes and protest humor. They can sometimes result in what de Seta calls “exaltation of disruptive figures” (De Seta 2017, 400) which also connects to how contemporary Russian culture is often interpreted through either a totalizing oppression or disruptive resistance lens. But how can we deal, for example, with anti-government memes using dehumanizing vocabulary against opponents? Or with Putin-as-gay-clown memes designed to counter the homophobia of the Russian state but implicitly building on transphobic rhetoric (Wiedlack 2020)? Or, in terms of the Twitter controversy, what to make of trolling both used as a geopolitically inflected accusation and as actual practices embedded in localized Internet subcultures based on memetic humor such as Dvach?

Trolling for lulz and elusive politics of truth in photographic memes

The trolling flash mob launched against Talib Kweli should be placed within the tradition of Russian Internet humor. This tradition is rooted in satirical memes and parodic websites such as Lurkmore.ru where eve-

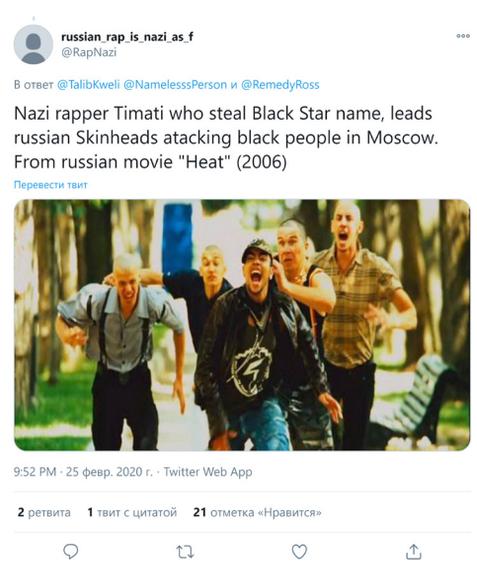
ryone is mocked, including those in power, by using explicitly offensive, provocative and politically incorrect language. Dvach is an anonymous Russian-language imageboard, popular among young people, known for antagonistic, ironic, anti-establishment and politically incorrect material and deliberate defiance of social norms. “The logic of lulz” favoring “distanced irony and critique” informs cultures of anonymous imageboards such as 4chan (Milner 2013). As Milner contends, Internet memes serve as an aesthetic manifestation of the logic of lulz (Milner 2013). This logic and other “irony laden communicative practices” ultimately have the potential both to “reinforce essentialisms and disrupt them” (Milner 2013). Having been banned multiple times by Roskomnadzor, the Dvach imageboard gained its iconic notoriety through “online raids” of its users, defending multiple causes: from de-anonymizing people who torture animals, faking the death of its owner Nariman Namazov in Kemerovo fires to the witch-hunt style exposure of women who starred in a pornographic video with Rammstein front man Till Lindemann. It was “the logic of lulz” that was explicitly motivating Dvach users on /b/ board¹⁶ to launch a memetic campaign on Twitter. But importantly while the first goal was to troll Talib Kweli and other “social justice warriors” for lulz’s sake, the second was to: *Выставить русский рэп в глазах иностранной общественности как расистскую музыку для нациков* (2ch.hk/b/ 26.02.2020).¹⁷ To achieve these goals, Dvach users employed a strategy of hyperbolic over-identification with Talib Kweli’s claim that Russian rap is racist and Nazi. Thus, in response to Talib Kweli’s hashtag #Russianrapisracist, Dvach users launched the hashtag #RussianNaziPurgeParty. The photos, some of which were deliberately taken out of context and others photoshopped, were accompanied by tweets outing “Nazi Russian rappers.” The ironic effect of this memetic bacchanalia, designed to both compromise Russian rap and troll Talib Kweli and his followers, was achieved through the incongruity between the tweet and the photo, requiring cultural knowledge of the Russian context to be detected. Competing in producing alleged exposures of the “racism of the Russian rap scene,” some of the memes relied on the use of profanities and racist tropes.¹⁸

16 A “random” or “bullshit” section on imageboards where anything, however shocking, can be posted.

17 “Present Russian rap in the eyes of the Western public as racist music for Nazis.”

18 They were later scorned by a significant number of Russian rap fans.

However, others, while being deliberately incongruous, provocative and deceptive, managed to make a socio-political commentary on Russian society. As Shifman argues, photography-based memes and the spread of the digital capability to manipulate the images have questioned “photography’s assumed indexical relation to the world” and photography’s “rhetoric of truthfulness” (Shifman 2014). The deliberate incongruity between the text and the photo performs a double role of both contesting the indexical relations of images to the world and making political comments on pertinent social issues (Shifman 2014). To explore this further, I focus on several memetic photos from the Twitter controversy.



One image where such relations are contested is a non-manipulated photo posted by Twitter user @RapNazi. The photo is taken from the same parodic comedy *Hitler Kaput!* where young Timati plays the role of a DJ. Screaming, he tries to escape from a gang of skinheads following him through the park. The tweet addressed to Talib Kweli says: “Nazi rapper Timati who steal Black Star name, leads Russian Skinheads attacking black people in Moscow. From Russian movie ‘Heat’ (2006).”¹⁹ The text here reverses the meaning of the image, where being chased is deliber-

19 twitter.com/RapNazi/status/1232408151451938818

ately replaced by leading, which achieves an ironic effect, transforming the potential target of the skinheads into their leader. Although the image comes from a movie and is, therefore, by definition staged, it contains a reference to the late 90s in Russia when hip-hop fans were persecuted by skinheads.²⁰



The next manipulated photo from the same user, @RapNazi, depicts a military parade on Red Square in Moscow with Timati’s smiling face superimposed. It is accompanied by the tweet: “God bless you, Talib, finally someone is telling the truth about Timati. We are tired of living in fear. You are a real warrior of light! He should not come to power and built the Fourth Reich in Russia.”²¹ This memetic photo works on several levels. Its sarcasm is expressed by the emphatic usage of “truth” and “warrior of light” to refer to Talib Kweli. Meta-level references here hint at Timati’s recent fashion collaboration with the Russian Army and thus problema-

20 Statistics collected by the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, sova-center.ru.

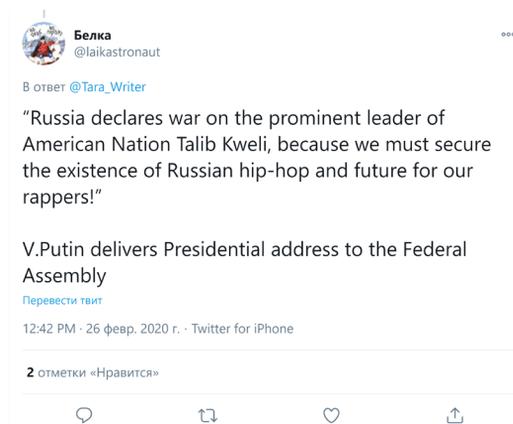
21 twitter.com/RapNazi/status/1232411022251765760

tize his support for the government and Russian authorities' attempts to harness youth approval through popular culture.



Another *photozhaba* designed in menacing dark red tones, posted by @DanilaSokolovsk, portrays the biggest opposition political figure in Russia, Aleksei Navalnyi, against a backdrop of what looks like a Nazi march. Navalnyi is wearing a swastika armband on his shirt, while the accompanying tweet describes him as a “famous Russian Nazi,” “leader of the far-right organization Navalnyi team” and YouTube blogger and rapper.”²² The memetic politics of “truth telling” here hints at Navalnyi’s early career participation in Russian nationalist marches and his success on YouTube, but at the same time lures the reader into seeing him as a rapper, his current political orientation as “far-right” and the 2019 protests against fraud in the Moscow municipal elections as “far-right demonstrations.”

²² twitter.com/DanilaSokolovsk



The memetic flash mob presented multiple figures as “Russian Nazi rappers,” starting from Ramzan Kadyrov to Dvach owner Nariman Namazov, including a tweet “on behalf” of the president of Russia who is delivering an address to the Federal Assembly stating: “Russia declares war on the prominent leader of American Nation Talib Kweli, because we must secure the existence of Russian hip-hop and future of our rappers!”²³ This ironic tweet in response to Talib Kweli’s accusations that the Russian rap scene is pro-Putin frames the conflict in geopolitical terms as a grotesque war between the USA and Russia. The second part of the sentence parodies the notorious far-right slogan “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children,” but “our people” is replaced with “Russian hip-hop” and the children’s future becomes the rappers’ future. In the context of the Russian state’s investment in WWII commemorations of the victory over fascism, the tweet’s use of mockery and absurdity confronts the “new Cold War narrative,” the anti-American sentiments of the Russian government as well as the “Russia scare” discourse of Talib Kweli.

To understand the effect on the Russian hip-hop community, it might be useful to apply the dynamic groupness concept, where groupness is understood as an event (Kazakov & Hutchings 2019). Through the confrontation with Talib Kweli and geopolitical framing of the conflict employed by both sides dynamic groupness was temporarily achieved, uniting Russian rappers and their fans who were otherwise heterogene-

23 twitter.com/laikastronaut/status/1232632074995224582

ous both stylistically and politically. The Russian rap scene is fractured along different lines, not only in terms of an opposition or pro-government stance, a pairing through which Russian rap is often understood (Ewell 2017; Liebig 2020). For example, some artists are considered more pop, copycats and sell-outs (such as Timati), some more indie and “true” (Oxxymiron), some anti-establishment outsiders (such as SD) etc. There are splits between generations, perceived stylistic mastery in music and lyrics, subgenres of rap etc. This heterogeneity was also reflected in how the conflict was taken up within the Russian hip-hop community.

On double mistranslation of race: “we are not white, we are Russian”



One of the implicit questions that animated the Twitter conflict was the meaning of race across contexts. What happens when the activist politics informing Talib Kweli’s hip-hop travels from one place to another? Can racial ontologies travel through hip-hop? What does it do for the discussion of racial politics in Russian hip-hop? Are white people guests in hip-hop, as famous rapper Eminem recently acknowledged?²⁴ Are Russians white, as one of the participants in the conflict, Maestro A-Sid, doubted (@TalibKweli 2020)? What does whiteness mean in Russia? Who can be considered “black” in Russia? Does race matter for Russia, as Lemon puts it? (2019) And how is all this negotiated in a genre heavily influenced by US black politics in the context of increased geopolitical confrontations between Russia and the USA? Variations of these questions engaged the Russian hip-hop community in the wake of the controversy, which was taken very seriously. A specialized Russian-language website dedicated to hip-hop culture, the-flow.ru, published three opinion pieces on the issue in February–March 2020 with over 1,000 user comments in total. Numerous videos explaining the conflict appeared on Russian YouTube

24 [youtube.com/watch?v=3PUYyD-W6sg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PUYyD-W6sg)

hip-hop channels. It should be noted that most Russian rappers who took part in the Twitter conflict are skilled translocal interpreters of both contexts, having lived in the US or Europe; they speak fluent English and are able to debate the tensions fragmenting the English-language hip-hop scene, including the place of race in it. One reason why the controversy had such a resonance was the iconic status of Talib Kweli's rap for many Russian rappers. His conscious hip-hop with explicit anti-oppression and social justice-oriented texts was an important source of inspiration. Thus, the rapper PLC expressed his bitter disappointment in Talib Kweli, saying that he had grown up on his music and was shocked by his unwillingness to "listen." One of the recurrent themes in comment threads was a sense of sadness at the cultural mistranslation which sparked the trolling flash mob. Thus, one user bitterly remarked (the-flow.ru2020):²⁵

 **JoJo** → Andrey Nikitin · 10 месяцев назад
в этом большая проблема всех тех кто запрыгнул в этот хайпотрейн, они не думают что для Талиба и в целом американской тусовки, это не дискуссия где умные русские поясняют за многообразность расизма, а массивированный расистский троллинг и для Талиба и его фанов Россия теперь расистский анклав.
3 ^ | v · Поделиться >



Михаил Идов ✓
@moscowidov

В ответ @jetvillains

Вот да, все поржут и разойдутся, а "Russian rap is racist" останется (при том что проблема эта тоже как бы не совсем несуществующая, просто не в той форме, которую себе нафантазировал дед)

1:41 PM · 27 февр. 2020 г. · Twitter for iPhone

10 отметок «Нравится»



@moscowidov lamented: "Everyone will laugh and it will be over but 'Russian rap is racist' will stick around (not to say that there isn't a problem, just not in the form it was imagined by the old man)."²⁶ There is

25 "This is a big problem for all who took part in this hype, they don't think that for Talib and the US scene this is not a discussion where smart Russians (*russkie*) explain the multiplicity of racism, but instead massive racist trolling. Now to Talib and his fans Russia is a racist enclave."

26 twitter.com/moscowidov

a shared fear among users that the conflict will have a profound effect on the Russian rap scene, permanently branding Russia as racist and preventing US hip-hop artists from touring in Russia. The trouble with translating Russia back and the failure to translate it properly become particularly pertinent in a context informed by global hip-hop's inspiration by US hip-hop, US world hegemony in the production of popular culture, and the heightened geopolitical tensions between Russia and the "West," which influence the stories about Russia that "stick" and those that don't.

Related questions animated a round table *Real Talk #1* hosted by I1 on his YouTube channel in the wake of the conflict.²⁷ This round table demonstrated that first tier participants in the conflict are well versed in the context of US hip-hop debates and wider US politics. Among the questions discussed were discourses emanating from US hip-hop stars, positioning hip-hop as an African American cultural form appropriated by white artists, and the implications such discussions might have for hip-hop scenes in Japan, South Korea and Russia. As Pennycook argues, the tension between authenticity in hip-hop (hip-hop as an African American cultural form coming from the experience of black marginalization) and the global spread of hip-hop premised on hip-hop localization is a structuring one for the genre (Pennycook 2007). Authenticity thus becomes a barrier to the global spread of hip-hop. Helbig and Miszczyński (2017, 1) highlight how Eastern European hip-hop has been stigmatized as inauthentic for the "lack of historical connections to black identity." Rooting hip-hop authenticity in engagement with the local community and providing "local definitions of what matters" and "local horizons of significance" become a strategy of hip-hop's localization (Pennycook 2007, 102–106). Various local experiences of marginalization (including racialization) can be used as localized discourses of authenticity. What localized discourses of authenticity does Russian hip-hop build upon and what place do ethnic and racial difference play within it?

The conservative writer Zakhar Prilepin who made multiple commentaries on Russian rap once observed on his LiveJournal page: Russian rap artists upon closer examination are extremely ethnically diverse.²⁸ Making a connection between US black culture and post-Soviet hip-hop

27 [youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=Or199ZW7E6I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=Or199ZW7E6I)

28 prilepin.livejournal.com/861464.html

“International” through the discourse of “hot blood,” he lists the nationalities (ethnicities) of well-known Russian rappers. He concludes that Russian rap of the 2010s is in fact a product of Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Kazakhs, Ossetians, Jews and Russians from the southern borderlands of Russia.

Этническое.

Подумал вдруг.

Рэп, равно как регги, блюз или джаз — порождены в той или иной мере стараниями темнокожего населения: горячая кровь для этого нужна.

Присмотревшись к русским рэперам, обнаружил, что этнически они представляют натуральный интернационал.

Берём самых топовых артистов.

Наполовину армянин, отчасти, кажется, бурят - Хаски. Казах Скриптонит (Адил Оралбекович Жалелов). Азербайджанцы из «Каспийского груза» (Тимур Одилбеков (он же Брутто) и Анар Зейналов (он же Везь)). Евреи Оксимирон и Гуф. Армяно-азербайджанец Птаха (Давид Нуриев). Кто именно Слим не знаю, но на-русского похож он очень мало. Кто по национальности Смоки Мо тоже не знаю, но фамилия у него Цихов.

Осетины MiyaGi (Азамат Кудзаев) и Endshpil (Сослан Бурнацев), Баста, он же, Ноггано, он же Вася Вакуленко — скорей, русский, но Птаха в недавнем интервью определил его как «XXLла» (украинца, малороса — как вам угодно), и, кажется, в этом что-то есть.

В первой десятке (максимум - двадцатке) топовых артистов обнаружатся следующие, судя по всему, русские: Типси Тип (Алексей Антипов) — но и он родом с Украины, конкретнее - с Кривого Рога, Рэм Дигга (Роман Воронин) - но и он с юга России, с ростовской области. Оттуда же, из Ростова, и «Каста».

Тимати, как все нормальные ребята понимают, в такой компании не может быть упомянут, ибо попсарь, но справедливости ради скажем и про него. Зовут его Тимур Ильдарович Юнусов, и он татарин.

Остался Андрей «Бледный» из 25/17, сибирский парень, но и у него просматривается, по его собственному признанию, бабушка горячих кровей, как минимум из Польши; в общем, для Андрея совершенно очевидно, что она не сибирячка ни в одном глазу.

Южная музыка рэп, я ж говорю. Много солнца требует. Горячая кровь рэпу нужна.

Собрались армяне, азербайджанцы, казахи, осетины, евреи, десяток ребят из ростовских кварталов и малороссийских степей и придумали этот самый русский рэп "десятых" годов XXI века.

Метки: [рэп](#)

Posted on 31 авг, 2017 at 19:40 | [Ссылка](#) | [Оставить комментарий](#) | [7 комментариев](#) | [Поделиться](#) | [Пожаловаться](#)



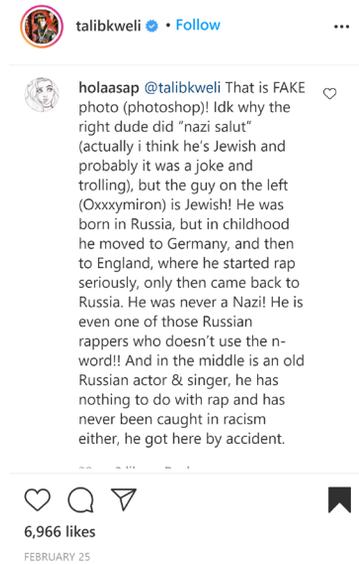
This remark points to the accepted thesis in hip-hop scholarship that this genre finds global resonance with minority groups and can serve as a platform for expressing grievances and experiences of marginalization. As Helbig and Miszczyński (2017, 2) argue, hip-hop reverberated so well in post-socialist spaces because its arrival coincided with the capitalist transition which was marred by extreme impoverishment, violence, corruption, and instability. However, the issue of ethnic difference on the Russian hip-hop scene has received almost no attention so far in the academic literature.²⁹

29 For exceptions see, for example, Mills 2018, Denisova & Herasimenka 2019.

While some hip-hop artists in Russia do not emphasize their ethnic origin, others actively embed it in their art. Jewish Oxxxymiron for example called one of his albums “The Eternal Jew,” while Tatar-Jewish Timati actively plays with his non-Russianness and ethno-racial ambiguity both in his music and the productions of the Black Star label.



For example, he deliberately selects distinctly non-Slavic artists for his label, such as Georgian-Russian Levan Goroziya, Armenian Christina C, Kazakh Nazima, and Uzbek Mc Doni, or invents the fictional persona Teimuraz, a racialized migrant from Central Asia and the Caucasus, and uses him in his videos from 2014 to 2016. By appropriating the blackness of US hip-hop aesthetics Timati infuses it with the meanings blackness acquires in the post-Soviet space, which in this respect makes him one of the most intriguing rap artists in Russia. “Blackness” in Russia is a slippery category, as Lemon (1995, 37) argues, being attached to bodies and thus immutable but at the same time highly malleable, pointing towards different ethnic groups and conflating “moral, market and national identities” (1995, 37). Who can be racialized as “black” in Russia thus considerably differs from US ontologies of race and US understandings of blackness. I argue however, that this difference in meanings remains unreadable for Talib Kweli who associates race and processes of racialization writ large through anti-black racism in the US and thus implicitly reproduces US-centric optics in interpreting “race” in other locales. His opponents pointing to the alternative histories of racialization are too quickly read as racism deniers and dismissed as Nazi “white boys,” while he constructs Russia as a “white country.” However, such framing disavows the diversity within Russia and paradoxically coincides with the discourse of ethnic Russian nationalists promoting slogans like “Russia for ethnic Russians.”



This paradox of not seeing difference where it exists was emphasized by some commentators versed in the understandings of both contexts, who tried to conduct a cultural translation of both “race” and Russian Internet humor and trolling to the us audience. Thus, defending the Russian rap scene from accusations of being Nazi, some, such as user @holaasap (Talibkweli Instagram 2020), pointed out that both Oxxxymiron and SD portrayed on the *photozhaba* with Mikhail Boiarskii are Jewish and hence cannot be accused of Nazism and are allowed to employ the Nazi salute however they want, including as parody. Others stressed that Timati is half-Jew, half-Tatar and therefore cannot be considered fully “white” in contemporary Russia, hence Talib Kweli’s accusations of racism do not hold.

The initial comment of I1 about the 1861 abolition of serfdom in the Russian Empire “where most people are white” was an attempt to draw similarities and differences between the two countries and respective legacies of American chattel slavery and Russian peasant serfdom. Rather unfortunately, through such framing I1 has implicitly left out the understanding of Russia as a colonial empire and the importance of race in the Russian and Soviet context. The fact that both in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union race was never a legal category and hence no legally

enforced racial regime was in place (Rainbow 2019, 4) should not lead us to the conclusion that “race did not matter” (Lemon 2019). Far from being an outlier, Vera Tolz argues, the Russian Empire picked up discourses on race circulating in nineteenth-century Europe, where “race, ethnicity and nationhood were constructed as a single, integrated conceptual domain” (Tolz 2020, 49). This contradictory legacy of conceptual confusion and terminological disarray was inherited by the Soviet state (Tolz 2020, 49). The USSR used categories of nationality and ethnicity instead of race and its anti-racist politics was important for the Cold War rivalry, constructing “communism’s superiority over its race-obsessed rivals in the fascist and capitalist West” (Rainbow 2019, 3). All these things make it difficult both for scholars of Russia and the ordinary population alike to “see race” and can partly account for the disavowal of racism, especially when looking for it in the past. Additionally, the accusations of racism in a genre so obviously indebted to and affectionately attached to the US hip-hop scene hit particularly hard. The trouble of “seeing race” in Russia produced paradoxes in the Twitter conflict, when the problem of xenophobia as discrimination on the basis of nationality/ethnicity was acknowledged by the same rappers who denied the relevance of racism in the Russian context. Here too racism was perceived exclusively through the US white-black dichotomy.

Accusations of the alleged Nazism of the Russian rap scene provoked vivid reactions among the Russian hip-hop community. However, they should not be linked only to Russia’s role in WWII, but also to the lived memories of being attacked by neo-Nazi skinheads in the 1990s and early 2000s for publicly wearing hip-hop style clothing.



It is these events that were brought up by the older generation of Russian rappers such as @maestroasid who mentioned in a tweet: “[...] We (Russian rappers) idolized and praise your music and the music of other rappers, we were beaten and maimed for listening rap, but we defended our right to listen what we like and you call us racists? You’re nonsense, mister”³⁰ or @PustomRuka: “[...] Real nazis been jumping on me for wearing baggy pants in 2000s here.”³¹ It should be noted that there is already a generation of Russian rappers who stood at hip-hop’s early beginnings in the 90s and a generation of people who grew up listening to hip-hop in Russian. That makes Russian hip-hop a highly localized genre. While hip-hop in post-socialist spaces in its beginnings was highly imitative of US hip-hop aesthetics, later it developed its own trajectories (Miszczyński & Helbig 2017). Having this in mind, the Twitter conflict can also be seen through the lens of the struggle for Russian hip-hop’s autonomy from the perceived hegemony of US hip-hop.



Loading... · 10 месяцев назад

Как забавно слышать упреки чёрного американца о том какие русские-нацисты. Когда у нас 1/3 праздников по стране и тем на гос.каналах о победе над фашистскими оккупантами.

^ | v · Поделиться >



theknifesong · Loading... · 10 месяцев назад

И квартиры мы сдаём только славянам!

10 ^ | v · Поделиться >

I would like to pause on two more quotes from the-flow.ru, which epitomize the array of positions on the conflict. In this quote one user comments: “It is funny to hear the reproaches of the black American that (ethnic) Russians are Nazi, while 1/3 of our state holidays and topics on state TV channels concern the victory over the fascist occupiers” (the-flow.ru 2020). In a reply to that comment, another user says: “And we rent out flats only to Slavs!” If the first comment aims to challenge the accusation of Nazism through bringing up memories of WWII and its centrality in state politics, the reply trolls this position through mentioning a distinctly post-Soviet example of xenophobia in the rental market, thereby juxtaposing official narratives of victory over fascism (hence the presumed absence of racism) and the experiences of everyday discrimination in big cities.

30 twitter.com/maestroasid

31 twitter.com/PustomRuka

261 Комментариев The Flow Политика конфиденциальности Disqus Войти

Рекомендовать 7 Твитнуть Поделиться

Новое в начале

F **Ei Magnifico** · 9 месяцев назад

Вообще я очень надеюсь, что это очередной матч в Сарказмобол, в котором обе стороны показывают чудеса постирони. С одной стороны — диды ваивале и "русские на положении негров до 1861". С другой — "все белые расисты по дефолту" и фото тимати со съемок в качестве пруфа.

Ну нельзя такую чушь пороть без желания потроллить

Думаю, когда в твиттер-войну вмешивается Паша, то все стороны должны сразу уяснить для себя, что выглядит ситуация крайне нелепо

1 ^ | v - Поделиться

I really hope that this is just another sarcasm competition, where both sides exhibit wonders of post-irony. On one side ‘our grandfathers fought’ and ‘Russians were treated as negroes until 1861’. On the other— ‘all whites are racists by default’ and Timati’s photo as proof. Who would not resist trolling such bullshit? [...] (the-flow.ru).³²

The last comment articulates the double mistranslation of race happening in the conflict. Here both Russian and US exceptionalisms are questioned. It mocks the tropes and memes used to disavow racism from the Russian side such as WWII and comparisons between serfdom and slavery. It also criticizes the position of Talib Kweli for ignoring the transnational mutability of race. The trolling flash mob, which was initially launched to compromise both the Russian rap scene and Talib Kweli, is paradoxically framed as the only possible and legitimate response to the conflict where both sides occupy indefensible positions.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the Russian rap scene is animated by intense negotiations of discourses coming from the US through the vehicle of hip-hop, including US racial politics and activism. Race, racialization, and its meanings mediated through hip-hop surfaced as crucial in the understanding of the controversy. They have gone through the process of double mistranslation. Legacies of Cold War confrontation and contemporary tensions between Russia and the US affected the framing of the conflict by both sides. In the Twitter conflict accusations of trolling to delegitimize the opponents were inflected through Talib Kweli’s panic at Russian information warfare. He tied the figure of the “Russian troll,” indexing fake, unfree, politically influenced speech, to Russian hip-hop. The latter got reframed as inauthentic, decoupled from “true” politics

³² This is a well-known meme mocking the attitude when problems of the present (i.e. racism) are solved by referencing victory over fascism in the past (Great Patriotic War).

(state-sponsored), and white racist appropriation of a black cultural form. Geopolitically inflected accusations of trolling obscured the role of the disruptive “trolling for lulz” flash mob conducted by anonymous users from the Dvach imageboard to compromise both sides. Bouncing back through cycles of interpretation across platforms, languages, contexts and subcultures, race and trolling got lost in translation.

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