

Going Native/Viral in Russian Popular Music: Aesthetic Populism, Patriotic Anti-racism, and the Quest for Hip-Hop Authenticity in Timati's Teymuraz Music Video Trilogy

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes the 2010s' viral music video trilogy featuring Teymuraz, a stage and video persona of the Russian/Tatar/Jewish hip-hop artist Timati. Using hyperbolized stereotypes of a racialized taxi driver from the Caucasus/Central Asia, the hybrid aesthetics of Teymuraz fuses the elements of New East style, post-Soviet cultural recycling, social critique, and appropriates the voices of the subaltern. Contextualizing Teymuraz as a strategy of racial translation of US hip-hop and as a part of the Russian cultural trend of aesthetic populism, I analyze the work of racial signification in the trilogy that relies on multimodal racial metonymy. I read the trilogy as a peculiar Russian patriotic anti-racist project with contradictory implications. Having been haunted by the accusations of 'copying' US rappers throughout his career, Timati negotiates the stigma of imitation, transgressing it in Teymuraz, exploiting his own ethnoracial ambiguity, chronic hip-hop inauthenticity, and the aesthetic populism trend.

KEYWORDS: Post-Soviet Popular Music, Russian Hip-hop, Racial Metonymy, Aesthetic Populism, Anti-racism, Virality

Introduction

Hip-hop artist Timati is a highly controversial figure in contemporary Russian popular music and hip-hop scenes. As one of the first celebrities who, in the early 2000s, fused commercial US hip-hop aesthetics with Russian glamour, Timati gained nationwide fame through a nascent reality TV genre, participating in the *Fabrika Zvyozd* (*Star Factory*) reality talent show. Despite his transnational success and numerous videos with top US hip-hop celebrities such as Snoop Dogg and Busta Rhymes, by the early 2010s, Timati's celebrity persona had a highly controversial status among the broader Russian publics, not to mention the outright disdain of Russian hip-hop fans. His ostentatious display of wealth and the perceived overzealous emulation of US black hip-hop frequently made him a target of outright ridicule (see the detailed analysis of Timati's persona in Yangeldina 2023). In the 2010s, Timati's attempts to negotiate the stigma of foreignness and imitation manifested in what I call the 'memetic turn' in his cultural productions, using the potential of social media platforms and meme aesthetics. The ludic figure of Teymuraz, first born as an internet meme on Instagram, inaugurated a shift in Timati's hip-hop: a string of songs and music videos that went viral, generated hashtags, and flooded social media. Teymuraz appeared in three videos, released in the mid-2010s: *Понты* (*Swag*) (2014), *Баклажан* (*Eggplant*) (2015), and *Мага* (*Maga*) (2016), all shot by the same director, Pavel Houdiakov. The trilogy develops the elements of racial translation strategies used by Timati throughout the 2010s, such as vicarious realness, virality, hip-hop homophobia, racial/sexual metonymy, and regional originals (for a detailed analysis, see Yangeldina 2023). The Teymuraz trilogy both combines these strategies and exceeds them through one viral figure, that of non-Russian racialized *gopnik*.

I read the Teymuraz trilogy as a memetic strategy of racial translation and analyze it at the intersection of US and Russian debates on hip-hop authenticity and broader popular culture trends such as valorization of imperfection, late Soviet and post-Soviet cultural recycling, and Russia's hybrid cultural phenomenon of aesthetic populism typical of the 2010s. In what follows, I first contextualize Timati within the literature on hip-hop authenticity and situate him within Russian discourses of hip-hop authenticity that position him as chronically inauthentic. I then read Teymuraz's figure against the context of aesthetic populism, the Russian cultural trend of the mid-2010s. After this contextualization, I introduce a close reading of the video trilogy, relying on multimodal discourse analysis, with special attention paid to each video's narrative structure and racial signification. I argue that the trilogy, as a culmination of Timati's project of post-Soviet racial translation of US hip-hop, responds to his attempts to negotiate his chronic hip-hop inauthenticity and the stigma of 'copying' US hip-hop within Russia by tapping into the aesthetic populism trend. I also suggest that the Teymuraz trilogy represents a paradoxical patriotic anti-racist project with contradictory implications that, on the one hand, may destabilize existing ethnoracial hierarchies within Russia, yet on the other, may reproduce too familiar imperialist attitudes towards its diverse populations.

Troubling Hip-hop Authenticity

Authenticity has been a contested concept in musical research, yet it remains symbolically central in how people talk about and judge popular music. In everyday usage, musical authenticity is associated with the individual performer's creativity, originality, seriousness, sincerity, and uniqueness (Shuker 2017). Existing scholarship has analyzed musical authenticity not as an essential property that inheres in musical performances but rather as an act of interpretation ascribed to music, shifting the focus from authenticity to authentication (Moore 2002). Scholars have studied how discourses of authenticity help create and solidify the boundaries between and across musical genres, emphasizing musical authenticity's gendered and racial dimensions (Hutcherson and Haenfler 2010; Bannister 2017; Hansen 2022; Schaap et al. 2022). Within the gendered hierarchies of musical authenticity, popular music has been historically stigmatized as the feminized Other, associated with commerce, inauthenticity, and artifice, against which other genres have staged their identity (Coulter 2017; Hansen 2022). This is also evident in hip-hop, where claims of 'being true' and 'keeping it real' occupy a special place in the genre's discursive constructions of authenticity (Forman and Neal 2004). McLeod's influential typology has identified thematic domains crucial for hip-hop authenticity discourse: gender-sexual (hard vs. soft), racial (black vs. white), political-economic (underground vs. commercial), socio-psychological (staying true to oneself vs. following mass trends), social-locational (the streets vs. the suburbs), cultural (the old school vs. the mainstream) (McLeod 1999: 139). In gender/sexuality terms, hip-hop authenticity has been associated with hypermasculinity and sexism (Perry 2004), although more recent male (Lafrance, Burns, and Woods 2017; Forman 2021), female (Djupvik 2017), and queer (Hansen 2022) performances of hip-hop masculinities have challenged the discursive conventions that tie the genre to misogyny and homophobia. In the US context that shapes the racial politics of the genre, its affiliation with African American cultures and Black masculinities remains one of the most important aspects of hip-hop authenticity, where whiteness and white identities are associated with illegitimacy, appropriation and fakeness (Harrison 2008; Armstrong 2004; Hess 2005; Fraley 2009; Oware 2016).

Regarding social and political aspects of hip-hop authenticity, the genre's rise to the mainstream, its commercialization, and subsequent globalization have presented threats to its discourses of authenticity. Scholarly analyses of global adaptations of hip-hop have attempted to salvage non-US variations from the frequent accusations of inauthenticity, appropriation, and imitation (Mitchell 2001). As part of this effort, the genre's spread to different national contexts has been theorized in terms of its localization, seen as being adapted to various contexts through local definitions of what counts as real or authentic (Pennycook 2007). This multifaceted process of localizing hip-hop authenticity across the globe has been approached through the focus on language and translingual experimentation

(Pennycook 2007; Terkourafi 2010), post-colonial politics of connective marginalities (Osumare 2007) or via the combination of multiple and multi-scalar processes of local and translocal authentication developing across various national hip-hop scenes (Elafros 2013; Westinen 2014). Across different hip-hop scenes around the globe, hip-hop artists participate in transnational politics of exchange, including ideas about race (Condry 2007, Darling-Wolff 2015), which complicates constructions of hierarchies of authenticities with the primacy of US hip-hop and neatly sealed borders between what counts as local/national and what as global.

In my exploration of the politics of authenticity in Russian hip-hop, I have examined how the genre's arrival in post-Soviet contexts, such as Russia, has been met with anxious concerns about borrowings from the West and ensuing preoccupations with authenticity and imitation (Yangeldina 2023). I have argued that some of the stories of the genre's arrival in Russia have constructed a following trajectory of Russian hip-hop that starts with a faithful imitation of the West, moves to the search for its own voice, and finishes with the blossoming of the authentic hip-hop expression (Tsarev 2019) that corresponds to the genre's rise to the mainstream in the 2010s Russia (Yangeldina 2023). Two central premises structure these stories of arrival. The first is the idea that the ethnoracial dimension of US hip-hop has been entirely untranslatable to post-Soviet Russia because of the presumed absence of ethnoracial conflict in the country (Pilkington, 2002; Osumare 2007; Ivanov 2013). This presumed untranslatability of race in Russia is seen within these stories as requiring alternative, unrelated to race, pathways of hip-hop localization (Tsarev 2019), such as the elusive search for the 'Russian ghetto' in the post-Soviet bloc houses and the violence of capitalist transition. The second broader assumption, also characterizing global discourses on hip-hop authenticity, is tied to the discursive tethering of hip-hop to the politics of protest and resistance.

In my PhD dissertation, I have argued that Timati, who translated US black aesthetics into 2000s Russia through commercialized hip-hop and RnB tethered to glamour, nightclubs, elite youth, and later reality TV, uniquely epitomizes the vagaries and paradoxes of hip-hop's cultural transfer into post-Soviet contexts (Yangeldina 2023). The fact that Timati and his urban label Black Star are glaringly absent from the sparse academic stories of hip-hop's arrival in Russia betrays not only the hegemonic politics of ethnoracial exclusion within Russian discourses of hip-hop authenticity (Yangeldina 2023) and the transnational complexity of racialization lost in translation between post-Soviet and US contexts (Yangeldina 2020), but also reveals the dominant construction of hip-hop's global circulation privileging conscious hip-hop, with a fetishization of resistance, over more commercial varieties that also travel (Moreno Almeida 2017). Recent attempts to explore European hip-hop through a post-colonial lens provocatively challenge some of the binaries structuring the hip-hop authenticity debates (commercial vs. underground), looking at the genre, instead, as 'commercialized resistance music' that works within and against the dominant structures of oppression (Rollefson 2017). The figure of Timati, therefore, helps illuminate some of the paradoxes of US-American, global, and Russian debates on hip-hop authenticity.

Considering these debates, Timati's longer trajectory and overall project of post-Soviet racial translation of hip-hop into Russia, detailed in my thesis (Yangeldina 2023), can be characterized by a peculiar reputation that I call chronic inauthenticity. Stemming from both the vagaries of cultural transfer of hip-hop into post-Soviet contexts, including symbolic tethering to pop music and TV, which solidified Timati's image of hip-hop inauthenticity; the rapper's privileged economic background; enthusiasm for commercial rather than conscious hip-hop and perceived overzealous copying of African American hip-hop - Timati's reputation of hip-hop inauthenticity in Russia was so strong that even multiple releases with top US hip-hop celebrities in the 2010s have paradoxically hardly helped to alleviate this image. Having successfully adapted commercial US hip-hop aesthetics through his play with malleable post-Soviet blackness that made space for non-Russian racialized musicians on his Black Star music label (Yangeldina 2023), Timati's visible non-Russianness did not translate into a valuable commodity in post-Soviet Russia. Instead, Timati's ethnoracial ambiguity often made him a target of racist vitriol, constituting the rapper as a liminal figure for the genre of Russian hip-hop, which, as I argue, betrays the racialized ethnonationalist foundations of Russian discourses of hip-hop authenticity (Yangeldina 2023). Attempts to repair the stigma of imitation and chronic inauthenticity characterized much of Timati's career in the 2010s, relying on various strategies of racial translation such as memetics, vicarious realness, and hip-hop homophobia (Yangeldina 2023). The viral figure of Teymuraz, participating in the Russian cultural trend of aesthetic populism, yet simultaneously speaking to Timati's more extended project of translating US hip-hop, represents a distinct response to the stigma of inauthenticity surrounding Timati's career. In what follows, I expand on the Russian popular culture trend of aesthetic populism, which helps contextualize the Teymuraz trilogy.

Locating the Figure of Teymuraz: Aesthetic Populism in Russian Popular Culture of the 2010s

In the 2010s, a significant shift took place in Russian culture, reflected in the global popularity of *gopnik* aesthetics: the so-called New East style, fetishizing "neglectedness and ruin", has superseded the Russian glamour of the 2000s (Engström 2021: 98–99), Marking "the end of the post-socialist imitation of the West", this process was "directly linked to the rise of identity politics in Eastern Europe and Russia" (Engström 2021: 98–99). According to Engström, the adjacent phenomenon of Russian neo-camp in popular culture and music (exemplified by the band Little Big), which amplified the features of the New East/*gopnik* style, finds resonance within broader global dynamics, such as revalorization of the aesthetics of imperfection, post-irony, and metamodernism and within "subversive affirmation of Russia's outlaw status after the annexation of the Crimea" (Engström 2021: 99). The emergence of aesthetic populism as a critical artistic phenomenon in the 2010s Russian culture has coincided with Putin's third term that has seen the rise

and refinement of this aesthetics. Aesthetic populism can be seen as a “strategy of appropriation of ‘the voice of the people,’ the aesthetics of everyday, and the representation of life of the subaltern groups” (Engström 2021: 105–6). In Engström’s analysis, Russia’s so-called ‘conservative turn’ is inherently postmodern and hybrid, combining normative elements such as patriotism and nation-building, local search for a non-Western identity, and global trends such as valorization of post-irony, voices of marginalized, and cultural recycling. The figure of Teymuraz is part and parcel of this hybrid Russian popular culture aesthetics of the 2010s.

Through the figure of Teymuraz, Timati, continuing his project of racial translation, translated US black hip-hop masculinity, central to the authenticity ethos of hip-hop, into a localized idiom of ethnoracial difference that relies on post-Soviet Russian tropes of racialized masculinities and popular humor traditions. At the same time, through Teymuraz, Timati literally enacts racial translation, performing kitschy impersonation infused with deliberate self-irony, virality, and grotesqueness, responding to the Russian popular culture trend of aesthetic populism and anti-elitism. By enacting Teymuraz, Timati turns the chronic stigma of imitating US rappers on its head: embracing the accusations of inauthenticity and channeling them into ludic self-critique. This self-critique mixes both elements of anti-elitism and aesthetic populism, fusing them with hip-hop modernity and capitalist fantasy of economic uplift for the non-Russian racialized subalterns. Timati fuses the features from the New East aesthetics emblemized by Adidas-tracksuit-wearing ‘squatting slavs’ and *gopnik* memes with cultural recycling of the artifacts of late Soviet and post-Soviet visual cultures representing non-Russian racialized men, such as comedies *Nasha Rasha*, and sketches *Gortsy ot uma* to produce the highly viral character of Teymuraz, a type of a non-Russian racialized *gopnik*.

In contrast to the dazzling memetic success of Sergey Shnurov and the Leningrad band’s 2010s videos, which, in Engström’s words, celebrate ‘the Russian abject,’ in the case of Teymuraz, the celebrated abject is decidedly non-Russian, pointing to racialized men from the Caucasus and Central Asia. However, the modality of the figure of Teymuraz is not that of representation of racialized men as has been claimed by Teymuraz’s critics (Gadzhiahmedov 2016). Rather, the work performed by the viral character rests on the exploitation and hyperbolization of Russian clichés about men from the Caucasus and Central Asia. It is deliberately opaque who is ridiculed through this figure: Timati himself and his constant troubles with authenticity in Russian hip-hop circles and beyond, racialized men from the Caucasus and Central Asia, or Russian ethnonational xenophobic prejudice that reduces them to grotesque caricatures. I argue that the Teymuraz trilogy cannot be simply boiled down to the reproduction of xenophobic stereotypes about racialized men, as some public commentary on the figure of Teymuraz maintained. Instead, through my analysis, I aim to show how the figure of Teymuraz mobilizes, exposes, appropriates, and ultimately reworks Russian xenophobic clichés about men from the Caucasus and Central Asia, revalorizing these subalterns through hip-hop modernity and elevating them from post-Soviet abject through the promise of migrant economic uplift in Moscow. Similarly to Shnurov, through viral

impersonations of Teymuraz, Timati deploys the strategy of aesthetic populism, harnessing ‘the voices of the people’ and quotidian aesthetics. Timati signals his proximity to ‘the people’ and the racialized men by embracing and instrumentalizing his ethnoracial ambiguity and non-Russianness, exploiting his chronic inauthenticity both in Russian public discourse and in local hip-hop scenes.

Swag (2014): Slavic ‘Damsel in Distress’ Saved by a ‘Noble Savage’

The first video featuring Teymuraz is 2014th *Понты* (*Swag*). Its narrative is structured around a ludic damsel in distress story: the female protagonist, played by celebrity singer Vera Brezhneva, is robbed by a biker on the streets of Moscow and saved by a ‘noble savage’, Teymuraz. The unlikely interracial romance unfolds between the two characters, who represent two distinct worlds of post-colonial Moscow: the glamorous world of Brezhneva and a world of racialized underclass of Teymuraz-like migrants. This romance results in the couple cruising Moscow’s streets in Teymuraz’s white Lada car, smoking shisha and eating shashlik in front of the glitzy Moscow city, and visiting expensive clothing stores.

In *Swag* and subsequent videos, racial meanings are encoded through colors, cars, and women, and the relationships between signs matter for racial signification. The white Lada Priora in *Swag* translates into the Slavic Ukrainian ‘whiteness’ of Vera Brezhneva’s character, with her light blond, bleached hair, blue eyes, and whitish dress, which stand in sharp visual contrast to the racialized figure of the taxi driver Teymuraz with his pitch-black beard and golden teeth. The figure of Teymuraz enacts hyperbolized racialized migrant masculinity through the work of multimodal racial metonymy. As in other trilogy videos, race is not explicitly named but instead pointed to, illustrating how racial translation operates in the music video across multiple modes. The work of racial metonymy indexing racialized masculinities enacted through the figure of Teymuraz includes sartorial codes (white socks worn with black sandals, fake Adidas tracksuit); physical appearance (golden teeth and beard); behaviors (exaggerated gestures, picking nose, grimacing, dancing a traditional dance from the Caucasus, *lezginka*); food and drinks (samsa pastry and tea); vehicles and objects coded as ‘oriental’ and associated in Russia with racialized migrant masculinities (modified white Lada Priora car and its interiors: fluffy steering wheel cover, plush cubes, a dog with a shaking head, pocket Putin’s portrait, emphasizing Teymuraz’s patriotism). The latter also manifests in explicit lyrical homophobia, thanking the president for banning gay pride parades. These physical features, objects, sartorial items, behaviors, and predispositions are indexes of Teymuraz’s fuzzy racialized and gendered non-Russianness, marking him as a subaltern. The work of racial metonymy in *Swag* is deliberately opaque: Teymuraz can be read as embodying clichés of racialized migrant men both from the North Caucasus and Central Asia. Teymuraz both

dances *lezginka* and eats *samsa*; it is, therefore, unclear where exactly he is from, yet his racialized masculinity is immediately recognizable for the Russian Muscovite gaze.

The exaggerated hyperbolic portrayal of racialized men enacted in the figure of Teymuraz may lead to conclusions that the image is offensive. Indeed, some have argued that the character of Teymuraz perpetuates harmful stereotypes about men from the Caucasus in Russia that harm their reputations (Gadziahmedov 2016). However, this claim is based on the premise that the logic of the figure is that of (mis)representation rather than, as I argue, the strategic use of generic, stereotypical imagery to negotiate multiple discourses of (in)authenticity across several scales. Thus, in the scene in *Lada Priora* with Brezhneva's character by his side, Teymuraz raps while driving and grinning: "I am like at the end of the 90s, / A new Russian from rap, / But I am not really Russian; / Ok let's change the topic". Calling himself a "new Russian from rap", Timati evokes his reputation of chronic inauthenticity in Russia as well as his ethnoracial ambiguity. The idiom "new Russian" was used in the early post-Soviet contexts to refer to people who benefited from capitalist transition and represent economic but not cultural elites. Timati uses this expression to allude to both his financial success, celebrity status, and yet firm reputation for chronic hip-hop inauthenticity and excessive commercialism within Russian hip-hop scenes and beyond. He deconstructs the pun inherent in the term "new Russian" by highlighting its oxymoronic nature and referencing his ethnoracial hybridity and ambiguous positions vis-à-vis Russianness.

Another example that complicates the representational reading of the figure is Timati's interview, where he says that his Teymuraz character embodies a "generic oriental imagery (*vostochnii sobiratel'nii obraz patsana*) of a lad who came to Moscow for a better life". The Teymuraz figure then metonymically refers to a broader group of people, migrants, or people coded as migrants, yet its logic is not that of standing for the migrants but rather a strategic hyperbole. In other words, the figure of Teymuraz does not aim to represent Russia's subalterns; it represents Russian xenophobic clichés about them. Moreover, in other interviews explaining the genesis of the viral persona, Timati signals his affection towards people like Teymuraz: "I respect the Caucasus and Caucasian men. They have their moments, which are misunderstood in Moscow. But there are also cool moments and phrases. I took them, and the Teymuraz character appeared" (Timati 2017). On his Facebook page, Timati performs a double voice, as someone who can relate to the 'native' Muscovite population because of his Soviet Jewish composer family roots on the mother's side, yet can relate to racialized newcomers because of his ethnoracial hybridity and associations with the Orient and Islam due to his Tatarsness:

I am a muscovite in the fifth generation. For me, it is not bad that 50% of Moscow is made up of people like Teymuraz. They sell cigarettes and flowers, drive your taxis, and work at construction sites, which is normal. You have Algerians in Paris and Mexicans in America. Exactly such a mixed population inspired Teymuraz's character. He is close to me – I am half Jewish, half Muslim. My oriental side finds all this appealing – carpets, hairy car seat covers, tuned cars, and shisha aesthetics (Timati 2015).

Explicitly framing Russia as a post-colonial country, Timati compares it to the USA and France, where Teymuraz-like migrants from former colonies come to the metropole for the prospects of a better life, aligning with recent analyses of late Soviet and contemporary migrations to Moscow within a global post-colonial framework (Sahadeo 2019; Kuznetsova and Round 2019). In doing so, Timati compensates for his lack of street credibility within Russian hip-hop due to his privileged Muscovite upbringing by evoking his non-Russianness and proximity to racialized men. He leverages his mixed heritage to align with Moscow's multicultural, post-colonial character (Rubin 2018), whose diverse population is said to have inspired the Teymuraz persona. At the same time, Timati emphasizes that the figure of Teymuraz is not intended to ridicule racialized migrants but should be interpreted as an affectionate and even personal portrayal. He signals his proximity to these migrants, highlighting his own 'Oriental side,' which is said to be 'naturally' drawn to carpets and shishas. In this narrative, naturalized proclivities are perceived as lurking in the blood (Lemon 2002), in the rapper's very nature, revealing the vernacular racial frames of thought. However, Timati's proximity to Teymuraz-like figures has certain limits, for, in his daily life, Timati prefers Mercedes cars and Gucci outfits over fake Adidas tracksuits and Russian-produced Lada cars. Introducing Teymuraz to Russian and post-Soviet audiences, Timati capitalizes heavily on the persona's social media virality and transmedia potential. Memes featuring Teymuraz proliferated on social media platforms, encouraging audience engagement with the character's viral appeal. Teymuraz even appeared in a premium toothpaste commercial and performed on a popular late-night TV talk show led by a TV host Ivan Urgant, further solidifying his status as a cultural phenomenon speaking to diverse publics. Teymuraz's success and social media virality were the reasons the figure returned later.

Eggplant (2015): The Awakening of the Dzhigit (1)

In *Баклажан* (*Eggplant*) (2015), the second video featuring Teymuraz, Timati's rendition infused rap verses into the chorus of the song *Lada Sedan* by the Russian blues band *Record Orchestra*. However, it was the viral music video showcasing Teymuraz's escapades in Moscow that propelled the song to become the biggest hit of 2015. Unlike *Swag*, set in the heart of Moscow, *Eggplant* primarily unfolds in gritty urban outskirts and ethnically coded spaces, such as teahouses and migrant dormitories. The plot of *Eggplant* revolves around a forbidden love story, including the 'kidnapping' of a love interest and a tale of the ongoing migrant hustle in Moscow. This romantic narrative diverges from that of *Swag*. In contrast to the Slavic character of Vera Brezhneva, the female lead in *Eggplant*, portrayed by the Uzbek/Kazakh model Shaira Kulbajaeva, is depicted as non-Slavic and non-European. Introduced in a teahouse scene alongside her honor-obsessed brothers, excessively protective of their sister, she embodies the stereotype of a seductive

‘woman of the East’. Enchanted by Teymuraz’s charisma, she is expected to follow more reserved gender norms and ask her brothers’ permission to go out with Teymuraz. Like Teymuraz’s persona, whose hybridity is crafted to evade the representational logic by blending Central Asian and Caucasian signifiers in one figure, the ethnic provenance of the ‘family’ is similarly blurred. The brothers, portrayed by the North Caucasian Dagestani comedians Khalil Musaev, Yousoup Omarov, Eldar Iraziev, and Omar Alibutaev, gained renown in Russia through the sketch show *Highlanders from Wit*, which humorously parodied tropes about the Caucasus and its inhabitants.

Similarly to *Swag*, racial metonymy in *Eggplant* links racialized bodies to specific objects and sites where these bodies enact presumably ‘inherent’ behaviors. One such locale is a teahouse, where Teymuraz runs his office, consumes tea, and smokes shisha, passionately exhaling clouds of steam while wooing his romantic interest. These inherent behaviors associated with particular types of bodies draw on gendered and racialized discourses from the Russian romanticist tradition of depicting Caucasian masculinities (Tlostanova 2010). Teymuraz is portrayed in the verses as a proud and free *dzhigit*, locked into the urban cage of Moscow. Amidst the cityscape, his masculinity finds expression in reckless car driving, escaping the police, and catcalling women. Teymuraz’s exaggerated gestures and kitschy fierceness toy with the tropes of hot-headed hypermasculinity associated in Russian popular culture with men from the Caucasus. The color of the Lada car celebrated in *Eggplant* also performs a metonymic work, referencing the aesthetic preferences of racialized migrants and a subculture of car modifications. The sartorial codes of racialized migrant masculinity are evident – this time, Teymuraz sports a fake Armani hat and a purple turtleneck, displaying golden teeth when grinning. The ode to racialized migrant masculinities permeates the verses of *Eggplant*:

Normal guys eat kebab, not sushi / From the heart, brother, heart to heart /
 Normal guys enjoy hitting a punching bag / From the heart, brother, punching
 in the heart / Business on the phone, I am on it / In the hood, office in the
 teahouse / Come to me alone, with money / It’s dope here, carpets on the wall
 / We are all the same here, don’t be shy / Teymuraz and brothers, those who
 made it.

Through these lyrics, racialized migrant attachments, behaviors, and aesthetic predispositions, coded by the Russian metropolitan norms as low and trash culture, are elevated from the post-Soviet abject into the realm of cool, reshaped as a legitimate aspirational narrative through the entrepreneurial hustle ethos of hip-hop and male homosocial camaraderie. Like a true *dzhigit* motivated, rather than discouraged by obstacles, Teymuraz secretly abducts his love interest, evoking North Caucasian customs and tropes of forbidden love and bride kidnapping. Roaming Moscow’s streets together in a purple Lada car, the couple escapes the police. Eventually, their journey brings them to the shabby migrant dormitory where Teymuraz lives. As the couple steps inside, their kiss is interrupted by the arrival of angry brothers trying to retrieve their abducted sister. Armed with baseball bats, they unleash their fury by vandalizing Teymuraz’s Lada Sedan, tapping into

racialized stereotypes of excess, vengeance, and the fiery temper associated with the warrior-like masculinities of the Caucasus.

The pivotal moment in *Eggplant* occurs during a nighttime scene where Teymuraz, reveling in his 'kidnapping' prowess, performs a *lezginka* dance atop a police car that had been tailing him for his reckless driving. As he dances, a figure clad in a traditional Caucasian dress and a *papakha* hat emerges from the fog, mirroring *Teymuraz's* dancing atop a police car earlier. The camera's whirling movements and choppy editing suggest that Teymuraz is a contemporary incarnation of the noble *dzhigit*. Teymuraz's true essence is thus awakened: proud *dzhigit*, trapped in every male migrant from the Caucasus suppressed by the urban landscapes of Moscow, is a powerful imagery to counter the abjection of everyday racialization (Round and Kuznetsova-Moreno 2017). *Lezginka* on top of a police car symbolizes a playful rebellion: an act of symbolic revenge against the powers subjecting migrants to everyday profiling and abuse. Furthermore, since it is the Dagestani comedians who play the roles of the police officers in the video, it further exacerbates the Russian ethnonationalist anxieties about perceived Caucasian criminality and ethnic 'mafia' infiltrating Russian police structures.

Eggplant achieved spectacular success, garnering over a million likes on YouTube, making it one of Timati's most-watched videos to date. In 2016, Timati won two Muz-TV channel musical awards for *Баклажан* in the categories of Best Song and Best Video among male artists. In interviews, Timati acknowledges that the viral appeal of the Teymuraz character played a significant role in transforming the video into a veritable 'people's song':

You can criticize as much as you want. I hear tons of criticism about *Eggplant*. Try to write a song like that. You make a music video that gets 83 million hits. You make it so that your song is sung by five-year-olds and known by eighty-year-olds. Go try to make a product that makes the whole country swing. And you'll find that it's not easy. Only a few make songs that tear up the entire country. Honestly, at the Muz-TV Awards, I didn't expect *Eggplant* to win. I was sure they would give it to the *Exhibit* by Leningrad (Timati 2016).

The Spectacle of Conviviality in Multi-cultural Moscow in *Maga* (2016): Muscovites 'Going Native' in a Caucasus-style Wedding.

The last video in the Teymuraz trilogy is the 8-minute-long *Maga*, brimming with comedy sketches, celebrity appearances, and product placements. The video's organizing trope is the hyperbolic excess of a Caucasus-style wedding gone wrong, organized for a wealthy Russian celebrity. Like *Swag*, *Maga* stages a clash of two worlds in multi-cultural post-colonial Moscow: the world of wealthy Muscovites represented by the pop star groom Igor Nikolaev and the world of entrepreneurial, shady, and 'wild' 'newcomers' from the Caucasus. The 'newcomers' are portrayed

by the same Dagestani comedians who starred in *Eggplant*, while the spotlight shifts to the character of Maga (Magomed), an entrepreneurial wedding planner, portrayed by comedian Yousoup Omarov. Maga is a wannabe businessman from the Caucasus, epitomizing the Russian archetype of a post-Soviet racialized hustler. The opening scene unfolds in an upscale restaurant, showcasing Maga's negotiations with Nikolaev to orchestrate his celebrity wedding. The video's humor stems from the exaggerated contrast between the celebrity groom's cultured naivety and Maga's racialized commercialism and amorality. In his attempts to persuade Nikolaev to hire him, Maga boasts of his business success, flaunts a golden Vertu phone, and boasts about Beyonce and J.Lo performing at his weddings while grappling with his creditors. Maga's character, with his ties to the ethnic mafia and connections in the corrupt Russian police, grotesquely exploits the post-Soviet gendered tropes of Caucasian criminality and excess, predisposition to trade and deception.

The video merges in-film and music soundscapes. The music in *Maga* is diegetic, starting with an introduction piece sung in a female voice reminiscent of the Russian romance genre of music, known in Imperial Russia for its Romani influences: "From birth, the path of dzhigit has been set. / From childhood, he was gifted with unbridled strength. / You cannot hold him captive; he is like a free eagle / Why, Maga, have I met you?" This musical introduction, coupled with the visual narrative, signals the arrival of Caucasian guests at the wedding. They descend one by one from the shabby bus serving the Derbent-Moscow route accompanied by a Romani folk band clad in brightly colored garments. The multimodal juxtaposition of Russian romance with the actors descending from the rundown bus connects the imagery of noble warrior-like Caucasian masculinity from Russian Romantic tradition to contemporary men from the Caucasus. This romanticized portrayal shatters to pieces when the camera lingers on the reaction of the pristine upper-class Muscovites to the arrival of the newcomers from Derbent. The wedding guests appear shocked and look at the newcomers with thinly veiled condescension. This scene, therefore, can be seen as a critical commentary on Russian xenophobia towards people from the Caucasus, depicted as 'invading' Moscow with 'uncivilized' habits and criminal behaviors, something that has been thoroughly explored in the literature on the dynamics of racism in Russia (Shnirelman 2011; Avrutin 2022; Tlostanova 2010; Zakharov 2015; Law 2012).

Like other videos in the trilogy, *Maga* works by performing racial translation via racial metonymy. *Maga* provides unique insights into articulations of vernacular racial imageries that build on indexicality and link the external signs to naturalized proclivities. In *Maga*, the sartorially amplified 'whiteness' of the bride, groom, and their upper-class guests serves as a proxy for ethnic Russianness. Conversely, the post-Soviet elastic 'blackness' (Yangeldina 2023) spanning the imaginaries associated with racialized Caucasians and Roma draws on multimodal racial metonymy: clothing and jewelry (black leather jackets, golden watches, patriotic Russia tracksuits; white socks with black shoes or black sandals; fur hats, *papakha* hats); appearance (golden teeth; beards); bodily styles ('uncultured' gestures and

mannerisms), behaviors, and predispositions (cheating and scheming; reckless car driving; stealing jewelry; fighting; shooting at the wedding), dances (*lezginka*), food (pilaf, shashlik), animals (sheep, horses), games (backgammon), objects (Vertu phone); vehicles, accents (speaking Russian with an accent); musical tunes and various textual realia in lyrics.

Teymuraz plays a peripheral role in the video, invited to the wedding to perform his rap for the guests. As the music transitions into a choppy rap-rock chorus, a female voice extols the toughness of Maga: “You are so tough, sharp as a bullet / Maga is tough, mighty, and has an animal appetite”. Sonic signifiers of Caucasus-style weddings (shooting) are also embedded in the chorus. Teymuraz’s verses celebrate Maga’s Caucasian masculine realness, hardness, and prowess. Maga’s masculinity is described through the Caucasian warrior tropes: tough, wild, feral, and menacing to the enemies: “People say I am bold, sharp as a bullet, / My car numbers, wild region (*region zversky*)”. While drawing on the mix of Russian Imperial, late Soviet, and post-Soviet tropes and humor (“Do you hear my accent? It is almost Muscovite”), they also perform a revalorization of Caucasian masculinities as cool and hard. The image of Caucasian hot-bloodedness is evoked through references to the “temperament of the mountaineer” (*temperament gorsky*) and comparison to exotic animals (Tiger as Maga’s nickname). Sexual prowess is implied by mentioning his popularity among women and his muscular physique hidden under the shirt. Caucasian masculine hardness is also juxtaposed to the weaker ethnic Russian masculinity of the celebrity groom Igor Nikolaev, depicted as docile towards women and easily exploited financially. Late-Soviet associations of Caucasian men with money and markets are translated into post-Soviet symbols of financial success, such as the golden Vertu phone, expensive Italian luxury garments, and a prestigious car to flaunt in the post-Soviet ‘hoods.’ If Teymuraz drives a Lada sedan, having climbed the ladder higher, Maga prefers a black Mercedes jeep. While the lyrics borrow from the late Soviet ethnic humor, portraying Caucasian men as uncultured and speaking Russian with a bad accent, the deliberate mixing and hyperbolization of these tropes, along with their translation into post-Soviet symbols of material success and the overall comedic genre, allow conceptualizing the video as a reshaping of stereotypes rather than their xenophobic reproduction.

As twilight descends, the video’s visuals transform into a whirlwind of scenes: horses and sheep mix with product endorsements, *papakha*-wearing bride dances with Maga. The festivities evolve into a spectacle of excess, showcasing kitschy, inebriated conviviality that erases the boundaries between the racialized newcomers from Dagestan and affluent Muscovite guests who end up ‘going native’ by dancing *lezginka*. With nightfall, the party gets wilder. The unexpected arrival of a police car creates a sense of suspense in the crowd. As the police join the festivities, the wedding morphs into a wild mess: fireworks, dances, and bonding of police with guests, culminating in one policeman’s daring leap into the empty pool. Amidst this frenzy, *lezginka*-dancing Teymuraz reaches an almost ecstatic state.

With a white rose between his golden teeth, he dances amidst an applauding crowd, firing shots into the air that evoke the tropes of a wild Caucasian wedding. This moment constitutes a climax of Timati's project of racial translation: enacting the figure of Teymuraz, Timati transcends the accusations of hip-hop mimicry and inauthenticity, which have haunted him his entire career. In the video frenzy, celebrating hybridity and eschewing purity, Timati enacts every facet of the racist vitriolic discourse he is often subject to: he 'becomes' a lezginka dancing Gypsy, a Jewish Tatar, a proud *dzhigit* from the Caucasus, personifying myriad incarnations of elastic post-Soviet blackness.

In the closure, the same Russian Romance-style song from the opening of the video echoes as an outro, recounting a tragic tale of falling in love with *Maga-dzhigit*, endowed with the untamed vigor and energy of a free eagle yet bound by a peculiar fate. As the outro unfolds, visuals of Maga executing daring driving tricks in his jeep on the empty night streets of Moscow fill the screen. These scenes blend with dreamlike imagery of *dzhigit* adorned in Caucasian warrior attire, performing equestrian acrobatics on a horse. Choppy editing, reminiscent of *Eggplant* when Teymuraz danced *lezginka* atop a police car, encourages viewers to identify Maga as an incarnation of the mysterious horse-riding *dzhigit*. Maga's reckless car driving mirrors the daring horse riding of a noble *dzhigit*. This reckless behavior seems to be in 'their nature,' enacting the connection between ingrained proclivities and racialized collectivities, inviting the ironic readings of transhistorical continuity: every Caucasian man is deep inside a noble warrior on a horse. Proud Caucasian warrior past is, therefore, alive on the night streets of multicultural post-colonial Moscow. The playful use of the noble horse-riding *dzhigit* tropes in *Eggplant* and *Maga* elevates Caucasian masculinities from the abject of post-Soviet racialization within the framework of hip-hop modernity and post-Soviet capitalist realism of Timati's and Black Star's entrepreneurial projects.

As the fire engulfs the wedding decorations, frightened guests scatter in panic. In the concluding scenes without music, Maga leans against a police car, meticulously counting his hard-earned cash, enacting the stereotype of corrupt Caucasian criminality linked to the police. Suddenly, his demeanor shifts as he receives a call from the president's administration, indicated subtly in the video through a change in Maga's expression, inquiring about his wedding planning services and extending a job offer, which Maga eagerly accepts. Maga has fulfilled the dream of migrant economic uplift in Moscow: climbing the ladder of success, making his way upward through ingenuity and skill. The video ends with the happy newlyweds, dressed in white, standing against the backdrop of the burning wedding decoration. The faint strains of Nikolaev's 90s melody, *Let's Drink to Love*, linger in the background as an abandoned sheep, the sole remaining wedding guest, awkwardly wanders nearby, underscoring the surreal atmosphere of the scene.

The *Maga* video stages a spectacle of conviviality in post-colonial Moscow by carefully threading a deliberately grotesque story of Muscovites going 'native' through the wedding-gone-wrong trope. By packaging the story in easily recognizable exaggerated tropes of Caucasian masculinities that draw from post-

Soviet comedies and popular humor, *Maga* continues the work of revalorization of non-Russian racialized masculinities pursued in Timati's hip-hop project of post-Soviet racial translation (Yangeldina 2023). Although the wedding ends with the scared crowd of guests running away in fear and the potential death of a Russian policeman, it is a happy ending. Teymuraz and Maga made it even higher in their journey of economic uplift and pursuit of financial success in Moscow. At the same time, the Russian celebrity groom and bride are happy: their boring and leisurely Muscovite life got reinvigorated through the unbridled energy brought by Dagestani guests. This time, the entire Muscovite society is presented as revitalized, benefiting from multi-cultural coexistence. If in the beginning, Russian wedding guests frowned at the 'uncivilized' newcomers from the Caucasus, barely concealing their xenophobic prejudice, in the end, the drunk crowd dances *lezginka* together, and everyone mixes in convivial 'unity in diversity'. In what follows, I will further discuss the broader implications of the Teymuraz trilogy as a culminating strategy of Timati's project of post-Soviet racial translation by placing it in the context of Timati's quest for hip-hop authenticity and peculiar patriotic anti-racism.

"We have our own 'blacks,' and it is the Caucasus." Performing Racial Translation and Patriotic Anti-racism

The viral figure of Teymuraz is deeply entwined with Timati's chronic troubles with authenticity within Russian hip-hop scenes, often manifesting in the accusations of copying and mimicking US hip-hop. While the figure of Teymuraz exploits both Timati's ethnoracial ambiguity and his persistent stigma of chronic hip-hop inauthenticity in Russia, Timati's embrace of Teymuraz is also motivated by the pursuit of originality and the attempt to reduce the accusations of imitation. Overcoming the stigma of mimicking US hip-hop involved the search for original aesthetics that would shield him from allegations of copying and stealing from 'the West'. This quest for authenticity is intricately entwined with Russia's ethnic diversity and imperial identity. In interviews, Timati's commentary sheds light on these dynamics and reveals the contradictory implications of his pursuit of originality, particularly in his discovery of *lezginka* and the Caucasus, framed as original and authentic Russian aesthetics. In one interview that helps understand the emergence of the Teymuraz persona, Timati demonstrates a keen awareness of his chronic hip-hop inauthenticity within Russia, which entails an imperative to repair the stigma of imitation:

People say: first, Timati was a *negr*, (2) afterward became a Caucasian. But everything is very simple. Before, I was orienting myself to the African American subculture from the USA. It ended up becoming mainstream. I go forward: I take classical canons of Caucasian music and integrate them into rap. Here, no one can confront me by saying I stole something. The Caucasus, this is ours. It is a very cool, original story. Russia's story but with a Caucasian

accent. Plus, I can tell that the Islamic group is the fastest-growing now. New members emerge with such speed that others cannot keep up with it. There are more and more people who can associate themselves with this story (Timati 2017).

In the interview, Timati presents the invention of Teymuraz as part of his artistic evolution: overcoming the reliance and orientation on US hip-hop as a model and going forward in his creative search by integrating sonic and visual metonymies of the Caucasus into his music. Notably, the discovery of the Caucasus, framed in the interview as a “very cool and original story” and as a “Russia’s story with a Caucasian accent,” is positioned as a remedy against the persistent charge of copying and stealing from the US rappers haunting his career. Since the Caucasus figures in Timati’s quote as “ours,” presented as authentically of Russia, it fulfills the rapper’s pursuit of original aesthetics, not borrowed from the West, and helps overcome the stigma of imitation. Because the Caucasus is designated as “ours” in the rapper’s framing, no one can longer accuse Timati of appropriating cultural elements that do not belong to him. The quote’s ending also suggests some of the more pragmatic business motives that could underlie Timati’s project of racial translation. The mention of a fast-growing “Islamic group,” indicates the potential ambition to tap into new audiences and markets, attracted by the Teymuraz persona. The revalorization of non-Russian racialized men through themes of migrant economic uplift in Moscow, evident in Timati’s and Black Star’s videos from the 2010s (Yangeldina 2023), may appeal to these new consumer groups. This strategy aligns with the expansion of Black Star-related businesses such as barbershops, burger chains, and clothing stores, catering to these emerging markets’ diverse tastes and preferences.

In another interview, commenting on *Eggplant* and the character of Teymuraz, Timati similarly weaves together his attempt to overcome the stigma of imitation through his pursuit of originality when performing racial translation of US hip-hop:

The song *Eggplant* is an absolute ‘entertainment,’ a slap in the face to everyone who said I was trying to bite from *negry*. We have our own aesthetic. As I said when I won the Muz-TV award for the best song, people used to say, ‘Timati is the Tatar who wants to be a *negry*, and now it’s the Jew who wants to be a Caucasian.’ We used to orient ourselves to the West and try to be like the blacks there. And there was a lot of criticism for that. And after I found my aesthetic, we have figuratively our own ‘blacks,’ and it’s the Caucasus, and when I took that aesthetic, there was still a huge amount of criticism. You can’t please everyone, but this story is absolutely original. Teymuraz is a distinctive character. It is not a bite; it’s just an original theme. It’s not even the pure Caucasus. It’s a collective image - both Central Asia and the Caucasus. It is a super successful alter ego (Timati 2016).

Timati presents *Eggplant* and the persona of Teymuraz as a dire response to the constant criticism of inauthentic mimicking and stealing from US rappers. In his efforts to mitigate the stigma of imitation, he turns to memetics, ushering in the emergence of Teymuraz, portrayed as inherently original and distinct from anything

borrowed from US hip-hop culture, not 'stolen' from the US rappers. In the quoted passage, Timati performs racial translation by identifying an equivalent to US black masculinities in the racialized men from the Caucasus and Central Asia in Russia. He also highlights Teymuraz's deliberate ambiguity and strategic imprecision, merging the imaginaries of Caucasian and Central Asian masculinities.

In a 2016 interview with GQ Magazine, Timati proudly describes his discovery of *lezginka* as "the beginning of his artistic rebirth" and explains how it helped him counter the accusations of unoriginality and imitation of US hip-hop: "I was often accused that I steal a lot from Americans and that I have nothing of my own. I responded to this with *lezginka*: I took hip-hop beats and added *our ethnic elements* to them. This is how, for example, the track *Eggplant* appeared, which is now known by the whole country" (GQ 2016). What is intriguing in the interview is that *lezginka*, a dance prevalent in the Caucasus region, figures as "our own ethnic elements," suggesting to view it as part of a shared legacy of the entire Russian Federation. That makes Timati's statement open to multiple readings, some of which can upset existing ethnoracial hierarchies within the country. Depending on how the term 'ours' is defined, Timati's statement could prompt inclusive readings that emphasize Russia's multinational, multi-confessional character and ethnic diversity. This perspective may challenge the exclusionary Russo-centric visions, upsetting Russian ethnonationalism and practices of the xenophobic othering of peoples from the Caucasus documented in research (Avrutin 2022; Shnirelman 2011). At the same time, claiming the Caucasus and its cultural artifacts as 'ours' could also lend itself to familiar imperialist readings, precluding the conversation about the imperial and colonial origins of Russia's ethnic diversity.

Interestingly, when Timati asserts *lezginka* as 'ours,' the GQ journalist appears shocked, indicating a divergence in their perceptions of the dance and showcasing a paradoxical prevalence of racism amongst liberally-minded Russians, linked to anti-communism and rejection of Soviet anti-racism by liberal intelligentsia (Djagalov 2021). Unlike the GQ journalist, Timati made such dancing a staple in his video and stage performances. If 'going native' for Russian imperial officers in the 19th century entailed adopting the Circassian dress (Mamedov 2008; Tlostanova 2010), in mid-2010s Russia, it manifests through *lezginka* dancing for Timati and other Black Star label artists. Timati's performances frequently feature him dancing *lezginka*, as seen abundantly in various videos. Teymuraz showcases *lezginka*, in *Swag* and *Eggplant*, atop a police car. *Maga's* kitschy spectacle of communal *lezginka*-dancing and *papakha* wearing by wealthy Muscovites and Dagestani guests symbolizes inebriated multi-ethnic conviviality. Media often circulate footage of Timati's *lezginka* performances in Grozny, the capital of the Chechnya Republic.

However, broader segments of the Russian population exhibit little enthusiasm for embracing *lezginka* by Black Star label artists. Sumina's research on the meanings of public *lezginka* dancing in Moscow streets and squares demonstrates how these performances by groups of men from the Caucasus evoke "the fear of

domination of Caucasianness over Russianness”, emphasizing “the fear of alien masculine penetration of the space of pure Russianness, of the very center of the metropole” (Sumina, 2014 :24). *Lezginka* is therefore marked as a racialized dance, associated with the Caucasus and the ‘dangerous’ bodies of its masculine performers (Sumina, 2014: 25). This perception makes *lezginka* a rather implausible candidate to be included in ‘our’ shared legacy, ‘our’ culture and heritage, as Timati puts it in the interview with GQ. Such inclusion holds a potentially counter-hegemonic yet inherently contradictory potential. Numerous polls and research tracking xenophobia among the ethnic Russian population reveal deep-seated prejudices against the Caucasus and its inhabitants (Alexeev 2013; Avrutin 2022; Shnirelman 2011; Zakharov 2015; Law 2012). For many ethnic Russians, the Caucasus and its inhabitants are still hardly considered as desired potential neighbors, revealing unmasked prejudice of the majority population (Bessudnov, 2016). People from the North Caucasus are often perceived as culturally foreign invaders or migrants in cities like Moscow. Mainstream media and politicians have perpetuated this narrative, especially during and after the Chechen wars (Shnirelman, 2011). The region is also never entirely Russian because all stability in the North Caucasus seems impermanent, haunted by the specters of resistance and rebellion.

In my analysis of the Teymuraz trilogy, I have argued that *lezginka* dancing, sartorial items, and other objects, such as the Lada sedan car, function as racial metonymies in Timati’s project of racial translation. The Lada sedan car and *lezginka* dance as racial metonymies link embodied proclivities, bodily movements, and vehicles to the Caucasus and Caucasian masculinities. Thus, when Timati, in his interviews and cultural productions, portrays *lezginka* and Caucasus as ‘ours’ and infuses his music with sonic and visual metonymies of Caucasian masculinities, this may be read as a performance of a patriotic multinational/imperial all-Russian nationalism. Although the origins of Russia’s ethnic diversity are constituted through colonial violence, wars, and forceful incorporation, Timati’s recontextualizing of *lezginka* as part of the cultural legacy of the entire Russia challenges Russian ethnonationalist xenophobic exclusion of the peoples of the Caucasus. This reading of Timati’s cultural productions prompts me to think of the Teymuraz trilogy as a peculiar conservative/patriotic anti-racist project with contradictory implications. Although this project is messy and non-innocent, it contrasts with the xenophobia among the Russian population, exclusionary Russian ethnonationalism, and the Islamophobic sentiments of Russian liberal opposition. Equally important, Timati’s reclaiming of *lezginka* is also performed as an ethn racially ambiguous subject who has personally experienced neo-Nazi skinhead violence in Moscow as a teenager (Yangeldina 2023). In his interviews, Timati acknowledges his gratefulness to Russia’s leadership for stifling down and suppressing racist violence of the 2000s (Kuvshinova 2013), later expressed in a patriotic turn in his cultural productions (Yangeldina 2023). In enacting Teymuraz persona in the 2010s, claiming to embrace his own ‘oriental side,’ Timati establishes ties of affinity with the Caucasus

and harder Caucasian masculinities, continuing his longer trajectory of racial translation (Yangeldina 2023).

Perhaps the most significant illustration of what is at stake in Timati's racial translation project was *Eggplant's* stage performance in November 2017 during Timati's fully booked 28,000 spectators' concert show in Moscow at Olympiyskiy Concert Hall. The stage, lit with bluish lights projecting rocking Lada Sedan cars, was suddenly peppered with *lezginka* dancing youth dressed in sleek black traditional Caucasian costumes. Sharp, energetic, and choreographed movements, performed by teenage dancers from Moscow-based Lezginka Dance collective Ansar, infused with acrobatic elements and synchronized with the song's beat and melody, merge with Timati's ecstatic *lezginka*-dancing in a red Adidas T-shirt (2018 FIFA Worldcup uniform) with "Russia" written on the back. Russian music journalist Alexander Gorbachev describes this performance as "patriotism meets cosmopolitanism," an odd cultural fusion of Timati's "Estrada rap" and "traditions of peoples of Caucasus" (Gorbachev 2017). Although rightly identifying this moment as a leading political element of the show, by constructing this element as an oddity and strange eclecticism rather than as a climax of Timati's long-term project of racial translation, such a reading downplays its broader political implications.

Gorbachev pits rappers Oxxxymiron and Timati against each other, portraying them as radically opposed figures in Russian hip-hop, capable of gathering Olympiyskiy-size audiences: the former representing the "good" complex poet rap, and the latter embodying the "bad" impure, Estrada rap, thereby perpetuating the narrative of Timati's perpetual hip-hop inauthenticity. However, comprehending the performance requires considering all semiotic elements to grasp its affective force and message. The performance includes children from the Ansar collective who dance *lezginka* on stage. The figure of a child is often associated in queer scholarship with the idea of futurity and sexual reproduction (Edelman 2004). Domestic specialists theorize Russian ethnofutures as bleak: experts lament the falling birth rates in European parts of the country, shortening life expectancies, and general depopulation resulting in highly politicized discourses of Russia as a 'dying nation' (Rivkin-Fish, 2003). At the same time, imaginaries of Russian ethnonationalists are obsessed with the Russian Muslim regions' fecundity, especially in the North Caucasus, imagined as swarming Slavic populations with excessive birth rates, remaking the ethnic composition of Russia. With this in mind, this energetic *lezginka*-dancing on stage hints that for Timati, Russian futures might have a Caucasian accent, further corroborating my argument that Timati's 2012-2018 project of racial translation with the Teymuraz trilogy as its climax can be read as a patriotic anti-racist project with contradictory implications.

Conclusion

Timati's messy journey toward the playful impersonation of Teymuraz defies a straightforward narrative of resistance, purity, and authenticity. Instead, it is a story that needs to be contextualized within Russia's transition to capitalism, US global hegemony, and Russia's geopolitical shift away from the West during the 2010s manifested in the aesthetic populism trend. It is a story ambivalently entangled in Timati's simultaneous post-Soviet experiences of ethnoracial marginalization and financial privilege, the stigma of chronic inauthenticity, and a successful business career constructed in the footsteps of US Black hip-hop moguls. This entanglement partly explains the lack of scholarly analyses of the ethnoracial politics of Timati's hip-hop compared to the performers who later captured public attention. For instance, Tajikistan-born singer Manizha, who represented Russia in Eurovision in 2020, figures in academic and public analyses as a harbinger of Russia's progressive, feminist, and anti-racist futures. In contrast, scholarly commentary on Teymuraz is scarce, with one notable dialogue between Mark Simon and Kirill Kobrin. This discussion, however, falls back on the popular tropes of Timati as imitating and stealing from US hip-hop artists. Simon reads Timati as part of the Russian mainstream who challenges the Western mainstream by putting: "people dancing lezginka in the spotlight, a kind of Russian 'negritude.' But it turns out that this is not a 'negritude' that is oppressed, but one that oppresses, that is ready to abandon all normativity, not to emancipate its bearer, but to subjugate others" (Kobrin and Simon 2017).

Drawing on the popular narratives of Timati's chronic inauthenticity, this reading overlooks that Teymuraz's emergence was entangled in the attempts to manage the stigma of copying US artists, implicated in Timati's contradictory pursuit of originality and Russian hip-hop authenticity. Timati is understandably not read as the voice of the subaltern because of his proximity to power and authority. The figure of Teymuraz is therefore dismissed as something that distorts discourses of authenticity and resistance accompanying figures representing Western post-coloniality, such as M.I.A. However, the framing of Teymuraz as twisted Russian 'negritude' that perversely usurps hip-hop as music of resistance is invested in politics of cultural purity and authenticity, ignoring the charges of commercialism and inauthenticity that haunted M.I.A.'s persona and career (Rollefson 2017). Timati neither claims to be oppressed nor attaches himself in any straightforward way to the discourses of resistance. He repeatedly maintains that the idea behind Teymuraz is to appeal to the broadest audience possible, claiming that his music is first of all business.

Instead of looking at Teymuraz as a distorting aberration, it may be more fruitful to read the figure as a part of the larger 2010s Russian hybrid cultural trend of aesthetic populism and Timati's longer project of racial translation, the reading I have offered in this article. As part of the aesthetic populism trend, the character of Teymuraz is based on proximity, populism, post-irony, and appropriation of the voices of the subaltern, not on the representation of their voices through politics of purity, resistance, and authenticity. The figure of Teymuraz is contradictorily positioned vis-à-vis the racialized men: appropriating their voices yet containing

elements of social critique, recirculating xenophobic clichés about men from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and undermining them; promoting patriotic anti-racism, yet partaking in imperialist discourse. Sustained by social media virality and signaling the rapper's proximity to 'the people' and the racialized men, Teymuraz exploits and transgresses Timati's chronic hip-hop inauthenticity, endorses products, mobilizes and challenges xenophobic prejudice, and revalorizes the subaltern through hip-hop modernity and the fantasy of migrant economic uplift in Moscow.

Endnotes:

1. The word *dzhigit* is a Russian loan word from Turkic languages for 'young man'. The word is used in the North Caucasus and Central Asia to describe a skilled equestrian or a brave young man. I use the word to highlight Timati's borrowing from the traditions of the North Caucasus in the video.
2. I chose to transliterate, rather than translate, the Russian word *негр* (*negr*) in the quote to preserve the difference in connotations between this word as used in Russian and its racially offensive English language cognates. The word *negr* is still routinely used inoffensively for Black people in Russian, as it is in Timati's example. However, it might be used as a slur in other situations (some people in Russia call Timati *negr* derogatorily, used as a slur). Under the influence of English-language popular culture, there have been extensive discussions among younger Anglophones in Russia (anti-racists, intersectional feminists, Afro-Russians) about whether the term is still acceptable to use (more on these discussions and their generative effects in Yangeldina 2023).

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