

# “This is for the Brown Kids!”: Racialization and the Formation of “Muslim” Punk Rock

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## Abstract

Recent research shows that non-Muslims “read” Muslim and non-Muslim Others through an Islamophobic lens, whether the victims of Islamophobia are practitioners of Islam or not. Yet how Muslims and non-Muslims band together against anti-Muslim racism in nonreligious ways and venues is less understood. The author draws on a wide range of qualitative data to show how “Taqwacore” punks (*taqwa* means “God consciousness” in Arabic and *core* comes from *hardcore punk*) create a racial identity as “brown kids” that is panethnic and opposed to the major racial frames used to vilify Muslims and brown-bodied Others. Taqwacore punks do this by (1) using punk rock attitudes to call out whiteness and keep it out of their punk and (2) redefining punk in favor of “brown kids.” These findings expand a new body of scholarship that shows how marginalized youth are using popular culture to create new racial identities against whiteness.

## Keywords

racialization, panethnicity, Islamophobia, Muslim, popular culture, music

“The darkie ones are terrorists—How simple can it be?” is a lyric from “Post 9/11 Blues,” a poppy hip-hop track by Riz MC about life as the Other in the wake of anti-Muslim racism. With a peppy, tongue-in-cheek beat, the song underscores how non-Muslims “read” brown bodies through an Islamophobic lens (Blackwood, Hopkins, and Reicher 2013; Esposito and Kalin 2011; López 2011; Morgan and Poynting 2012; Peek 2011), whether the victims of Islamophobia are practitioners of Islam or not (Garner and Selod 2015; Selod and Embrick 2013; Tyrer 2013). Although Muslims and non-Muslims suffer from the “post-9/11 blues,” we know surprisingly little about how marginalized groups respond to anti-Muslim racism in nonreligious ways and venues (McDowell 2014; Michael 2013). Instead, the extant literature focuses mostly on how Muslims respond to heightened hostility through traditional religious channels such as putting Muslim identity first (Nader 2005), donning the

hijab (Abdo 2006; Haddad 2007, 2011), or joining Muslim civic society organizations (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009; Cainkar 2009).

This research uses the case of Taqwacore punk rock to examine how panethnic youth collectively respond to anti-Muslim racism in culturally provocative, nonreligious ways. The word *Taqwacore* is a hybrid term composed of *taqwa*, which means “God consciousness” in Arabic, and *core* from *hardcore punk*. Taqwacore is a geographically dispersed cultural community of bands, filmmakers, authors, and artists, mostly in the United States, who began

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socializing and collaborating after the release of Michael Muhammad Knight's (2004) novel about an imagined Muslim punk house in Buffalo, New York, titled *The Taqwacores*<sup>1</sup> (Fiscella 2015; Murthy 2010). Since its inception, Taqwacore has garnered a substantial amount of media attention from mainstream outlets including *Rolling Stone*, the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, *Newsweek*, *The Guardian*, and *Time*. This influx of media attention from mainstream outlets offers free publicity to Taqwacore bands, films, and authors. But this media also frequently misrepresents Taqwacores as a monolithic group of rebellious "Muslim punks" who, as the *Times* put it, "balance morning prayers with sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll" (Dalton 2010). In fact, Taqwacore is not entirely made up of Muslims or restricted to a mash-up of Islam and punk rock. Taqwacore is composed of secular Muslim, spiritual Muslim, and non-Muslim youth who call themselves "brown kids" or "for brown kids." For Taqwacores, *brown* signifies a strategic and positional (Hall 1988) punk rock stance against the stereotype that Muslims and brown-bodied Others are a monolithic group (Read 2008) defined by religious conservatism or extremism.

Punk rock culture is strongly associated with social nonconformity (Clark 2003; Hebdige 1979; Leblanc 1999) and independent cultural production (Moore and Roberts 2009; O'Connor 2008), both of which Taqwacores draw upon to create a resistant racial identity as "brown kids." From their perspective, punk rock is not a leather jacket, a style of music, a record collection, or a way of life (Andes 1998; Force 2009; Hebdige 1979). Punk is the bold act of embracing their status as the Other in a society that rejects and stereotypes them on the basis of race and/or religion. As one Taqwacore interviewee remarked, "Punk allows me to say, 'Hey, I'm a Muslim . . . I already know you can't accept me so here's a big fuck you to you!'" His use of punk fits well with other marginalized anti-oppression punk movements such as Afro-punk (Spooner 2003), Chicano-punk (Duncombe and Tremblay 2011), and Queercore punk (Halberstam 2003), which transform punk rock culture into a platform for nurturing and promoting peripheral spaces of belonging and identity. In line with this philosophy of punk rock, Taqwacores consider artists, musicians, and independent writers who rally against anti-Muslim racism part of their punk movement not because the sound or style fits standard accounts of punk but because the *message* is for "brown kids." Riz MC, the Pakistani British actor and hip-hop artist who wrote "Post 9/11 Blues," is a case in point. Taqwacores consider him punk because he embodies the defiant spirit of punk rock: he confronts

anti-Muslim racism head on and takes pride in his status as an outsider in mainstream British culture.

In this article, I show how Taqwacores create a racial identity as "brown kids" that is panethnic and opposed to anti-Muslim racism along two primary axes: (1) by calling out whiteness in punk and keeping it out of their punk and (2) by redefining punk in favor of racial and religious outsiders. A Taqwacore webzine blog titled "Redefining Punk, My Way" (Ahmed 2009) exemplifies how Taqwacores do this. The author, Tanzila Ahmed, a Muslim American activist and writer, blogs about the ways punk manifests in her life: "I'm straight edge, that's punk. I like making stuff, doing it on my own, and hate having other people do things for me. I'm DIY [do it yourself], that's punk." But Ahmed does not stop with this more established take on punk to describe what makes her punk. She continues,

People aren't listening to my people's politics and are beating up brown people in hate crimes? They think that all Muslims are responsible for 9/11? . . . Well fuck it. I'm going to organize as many people as I can to register to vote and create a political movement that can't be ignored. Fuck them, I'm punk. (Ahmed 2009)

For Ahmed, to be punk is more than making your own music or clothing. Punk is about raising your voice about racial and religious disenfranchisement. In this same post, Ahmed explains the motivations behind "redefining punk" her way (Ahmed 2009). On another Web site she references, a blogger had argued that punk is essentially about class inequalities. In response, Ahmed claimed that making punk primarily about class safeguards punk as a white space because it "marginalizes the very real disempowerment experiences of racial oppression and religious freedoms that my community exists in." She then goes on to call out racial exclusivity in punk, which lays the foundation for a "brown" punk rock identity that unites people from different racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds against whiteness.

## RACIALIZATION AND RESISTANCE

This research extends a growing body of research on anti-Muslim racism and the responses to it in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 (Abdo 2006; Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009; Blackwood et al. 2013; Cankar 2009; Chao 2015; Garner and Selod 2015; Haddad 2007, 2011; Nader 2005; Selod 2015;

Selod and Embrick 2013; Tyrer 2013). The main claim in this literature is that “race” is not strictly confined to physical characteristics such as skin tone. Cultural and religious characteristics such as a Muslim name, a hijab, clothing, or an accent can also be “raced.” A wide range of people are grouped into the “Muslim” category and subjected to Islamophobia, a hostile attitude toward Islam and Muslims based on the idea that Islam and Muslims represent a threat to the West (Ekman 2015; López 2013; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2015; Taras 2013). The fact that non-Muslims are misidentified as Muslim proves that Muslims are understood on racial, rather than solely religious grounds (Tyrer 2013).

The process by which Muslims become “raced” is captured by the concept of racialization, which entails grouping people together on the basis of physical or cultural traits and then ascribing a set of characteristics to that group (Desmond and Emirbayer 2009; Garner and Selod 2015; Omi and Winant 1994, 2013; Saperstein, Penner, and Light 2013). This process

draws a line around all the members of the group; instigates “group-ness,” and ascribes characteristics, sometimes because of work, sometimes because of ideas of where the group comes from, what it believes in, or how it organizes itself socially and culturally. (Garner and Selod 2015:1)

It is not physical or cultural sameness that make Muslims or brown-bodied Others a “race” of people; the perception, attitude, and practice of those who “produce, absorb, and reproduce representations” (Garner and Selod 2015:14) of Muslims is what serves as the basis of the racialization of Muslims. Yet racial group formation is not a unidirectional top-down process, nor is it solely determined by what Joe Feagin (2010) called the “white racial frame,” an implicitly universal, white-controlled lens that casts whites as superior to people of color. Marginalized individuals and movements also modify race through everyday acts of resistance and collective political struggle (Brown and Jones 2015; Omi and Winant 1994, 2013).

Taqwacore punk affirms that newly formed groups change, alter, and transform ascribed racial categories. Indeed, the ubiquity of anti-Muslim racism in American society is what stimulates Taqwacores to “relax and widen their boundaries” (Okamoto 2014:2) in pursuit of an umbrella pan-ethnic identity (Chan and Hune 1995; Cornell and Hartman 2007; Espiritu 1993; Okamoto and Mora 2014). By forming and asserting this new group

identity, they both disrupt common misconceptions of what it means to be Muslim in American society and establish new modes of cultural membership and belonging.

Similar to what Gayatri Spivak termed “strategic essentialism” (Adamson 1986), Taqwacores deploy an essentialist “brown” identity in punk to band people together against anti-Muslim racism. But Taqwacores do not merely *adapt* an ascribed identity. Instead, they *create* a “brown” identity that calls conventional religious, racial, and ethnic identities into question (Hall 1988). Taqwacores form this new “brown” identity by participating in “reflexive racialisation,” a concept that highlights how racially and ethnically marginalized individuals learn about their common struggles as “Others” and develop shared understandings of social inequality through self-generated, self-policed media (Parker and Song 2006). For example, David Parker and Miri Song study how British Chinese (Parker and Song 2006, 2009) and British South Asians (Parker and Song 2006) use Internet sites to learn about one another’s differences and common struggles with racism. They find that by engaging in “serious meditations” on Internet forums about what it is like to be Chinese or Asian in Britain, participants nurture a “growing reflexivity about race and ethnicity” that gets channeled into new senses of belonging and identity (Parker and Song 2006:579, 585). Taqwacores take “reflexive racialisation” a step further: rather than engaging in talk about who they are, they talk about who they are *not*: they are not white and they are not mainstream.

To understand how Taqwacores create a broadly defined “brown” punk identity, I show how these youth define themselves against whiteness and take pride in being the Other. The next section outlines the qualitative methods and data I used for this research. In the subsequent sections, I examine how Taqwacores create punk for “brown kids” along two axes. In the section “Keeping Whiteness Out,” I show that Taqwacores do this by pitting themselves against whiteness in punk rock milieus. Then in the section “Making Punk for Brown Kids,” I show how Taqwacores redefine “real” punk through the prism of racial and religious marginalization and in favor of “brown kids.”

## DATA AND METHODS

I use three sources of qualitative data (Crang and Cook 2007; Taylor and Bogdan 1998): 65 hours of participant observations, 20 in-depth interviews, and Taqwacore artifacts such as Taqwacore music, films, and the Taqwacore webzine. The majority of

these data were collected in 2009, 2010, and 2011 in the United States, when Taqwacore music, films, and public discussions about Taqwacore were at their peak. By the time I was wrapping up data collection in 2012, Taqwacore had “essentially evaporated” (Fiscella 2015:101), and many of the “original” Taqwacores were starting to claim, “Taqwacore is dead.”<sup>2</sup>

Between 2009 and 2011, I spent approximately 65 hours conducting participant observations at live U.S. music shows, attending film screenings and educational panel discussions about Taqwacore, and socializing with Taqwacores over coffee, food, or drinks. I attended live Taqwacore punk shows in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Chicago, and I traveled to Cleveland, Ohio and Brunswick, Maine, for Taqwacore film screenings and panel discussions. Limited in funding, I had to make the most of these trips, which meant making personal contact when the opportunity arose. For example, one night after a show in Cambridge, about eight friends and acquaintances waited on members of The Kominas and Sunny Ali & The Kid to load up their gear so that we could all go “party” afterward. We sat outside of the venue for more than an hour, talking. By the time everyone was ready to go, it was too late to buy alcohol for the party. Rather than dwelling on the lack of alcohol,<sup>3</sup> the group focused on assigning each person to a car headed to the Boston suburbs for the party. I got a ride with an Indian American woman who had a crucifix hanging on her rearview mirror; her other passengers were a white college guy and a member of The Kominas, a second-generation Pakistani American. When we arrived at the nice suburban home, one person passed around a bag of french fries, another offered homemade curry, and the host handed out ice cream sandwiches. By the time I got a ride back to the city, it was five o’clock in the morning. I had spent the entire night talking to a handful of religiously and ethnically diverse people who had attended their very first punk rock show earlier that night and loved it.

Interviewees were selected using purposive and snowball sampling (Babbie 2007). To get started, I focused on the “original” Taqwacores (as my interviewees termed them) because I wanted to learn about what drives people to create this community. I did this by cross-referencing the Taqwacore webzine and the Web pages of U.S. bands that identified as Taqwacore. It was at a live show in Cambridge that I met members and friends of The Kominas. A few months later, I traveled to Cleveland to a punk dive bar called Now That’s Class to reintroduce myself to The Kominas and

meet Al-Thawra, another Taqwacore band. My travel to these live Taqwacore shows proved essential to this research. It was at these events that I established rapport with Taqwacores and obtained important contacts for my study.

In total, I conducted and transcribed 20 semi-structured, audiorecorded interviews with key Taqwacore cultural producers, that is, people who took a direct role in creating, organizing, documenting, or producing Taqwacore music, tours, films, art, and website forums.<sup>4</sup> At the time of this study, most interviewees were in the United States, but I also interviewed Taqwacores living in Sydney, London, and Montreal via Skype. Interviews lasted one to two hours and were conducted in person ( $n = 6$ ), over Skype ( $n = 8$ ), telephone ( $n = 5$ ), and Gchat ( $n = 1$ ). The interview template was designed to ascertain how Taqwacores relate to other punk scenes and to traditional religious communities. At the close of each interview, I asked participants to put in me contact with other Taqwacores. Most of the time, Taqwacores suggested that I talk to the “original” Taqwacores: the people who had participated in producing, organizing, or documenting Taqwacore tours, music, music shows, blogs, and films since the scene’s inception. The majority of interviewees were between the ages of 21 and 26 years, but a few were in their 30s. About half of my interviewees had college degrees, and three were pursuing graduate degrees at the time of the study. The ethnic and racial breakdown of my interviewees was 35 percent South Asian, 20 percent white, 15 percent multiethnic, 15 percent Arab American, 10 percent South East Asian, and 0.05 percent Latino.

Realizing that researchers bring “characteristics, a history, a gender, class, race, and social attributes” into the research setting (Olesen 2003:350), I am reflexive about how my identity as a white woman shaped my interview data collection. When I started this project, I learned that Taqwacores had grown sensitive to outsiders, particularly white journalists, asking them “Are you Muslim? Where are you from? Where is your family from?” For this reason, I did not press participants to identify along ethnic or religious lines. Instead, during the course of the interview, Taqwacores claimed religious or ethnic identities in their own time and in their own terms. My interview data show that (1) Taqwacores bring up religion or ethnicity when talking about their opposition to Islamophobia, racism, or traditional religious institutions and practices, and (2) Taqwacores talk more about their encounters with whites and Islamophobia than they do about their ethnic backgrounds or religious

beliefs and practices. These findings compelled me to investigate the moniker “brown kids” further.

In addition to the observation and interview data, I downloaded and analyzed the Taqwacore webzine, an online blog and discussion forum that is independently published and managed by the Taqwacore network. On the webzine, Taqwacores author film reviews, music, and articles such as “Taqwacore Lyrics by Non-Taqwacores.” They also use this forum to debate religion and politics and to forge community. For this paper, I coded and analyzed 35 blog posts on the webzine that starts with its “manifesto” in 2009. In print form, these data come to 280 pages. In addition to the webzine, I collected publicly available blogs, podcasts, and news stories about Taqwacore from a variety of Internet sources throughout 2009 and 2010, after the release of the two films: *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* (Majeed 2009) and *The Taqwacores* (Zahra 2010).

The coding of these data proceeded in two different phases: open and closed coding. To create open codes, I read artifactual materials, participant observation notes, and interview transcripts “line-by-line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:143). For example, I created an open code called “defining Taqwacore” and included data from interviews, online sources, and observations that made reference to this subject, such as when an interviewee said “For me Taqwacore means . . .” or when a blogger wrote “Taqwacore is not about . . .” Later, after reviewing literature on racialization, I made an addendum to these codes by creating focused, hierarchical codes, using NVivo software, labeled Muslim, brown, white, and punk. These were terms the interviewees used to define what Taqwacore meant to them, whom it is for, what it is not, and how Taqwacore is misrepresented in mainstream media. By focusing on the language Taqwacores use to define what their community is *not*, I learned that they make punk for “brown kids” by pitting their punk against whiteness.

## “THIS IS FOR THE BROWN KIDS!”

On webzine comment threads, at educational panel discussions about Taqwacore, and in public and private interviews, Taqwacores talk about their firsthand experiences with anti-Muslim racism. They also make comments about the narrow representation of Muslims and brown people in American popular

culture (Bail 2015; Chao 2015; Shaheen 2001). Given that Taqwacore is rooted in a shared sense of punk rock angst about anti-Muslim racism, individuals do not even need to be culturally or spiritually Muslim to be Taqwacore. To underscore this point, Saeed, a Pakistani Canadian, calls Taqwacore “an idea” that gives “cultural misfits who are trying to reconcile their identities a space to gather and create together.” In line with these thoughts, P.C., a self-identified non-Muslim brown punk/goth/metalhead, says, “You know like for me, I’d be the only brown girl at most of the punk shows I went to.” Taqwacore, she contends, “brings together a bunch of people that were in isolated communities” and in this community they talk about racism, Islamophobia, and social rejection on a regular basis.

Punk is attractive to Taqwacores because it affirms their outsider status and has a long history of challenging some perceived oppressive force (Clark 2003; Haenfler 2006; Hall and Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979; Leblanc 1999; Moore and Roberts 2009; Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998). At the same time, Taqwacores view punk as a “white space” (Anderson 2015) that does not always provide a safe haven for racial and religious outsiders (Duncombe and Tremblay 2011). To correct this discrepancy in punk, Taqwacores use the antiestablishment “core” of punk (Azerrad 2001) to their advantage: they call out whiteness in punk as “mainstream” and position “brown kids” as the most “punk” because of their unique struggles with racist and religious bigotry in American society and the punk rock milieu, where differences are supposed to be celebrated.

## Keeping Whiteness Out

Taqwacores create a punk identity as “brown kids” by claiming that whiteness is a problem in punk and by keeping whiteness out of their punk. In this community, whiteness is not solely a matter of skin tone. Whiteness stands for racially dominant groups and ideas as well as Western imperialism, Christian supremacy, and everyday practices of racial and religious exclusion. For this reason, some whites, such as white Muslims or those who advocate anti-racist politics, are accepted as part of Taqwacore punk; they embody whiteness only to a degree.

Interviewees claim that white punks regularly test Taqwacores about their knowledge of punk rock history, insinuating that people of color are not genuine members of the subculture. P.C., a non-Muslim Taqwacore, explains that she never felt fully included in her local U.S. underground music scene. As a “brown girl,” she says that she was quizzed by

white punks about her capacity to appreciate “good” music and implicitly labeled a “poser.”<sup>5</sup> Angered by the racism, P.C. exclaims, “I’m as American as macaroni and cheese! I don’t understand why I wouldn’t like this music!” Sam, a Muslim Taqwacore who wears the hijab, says that she has come under attack in white punk spaces. She recalls an interaction she had with a white punk at a show in Sydney, Australia:

I remember one time someone came up to me to introduce themselves. I thought, “Oh, this is cool. It’s just someone wanting to get to know me.” But when we sat down later on [to talk], he was just like so, “You believe in Islam, right?” and I was like “Yes.” And he was like “I don’t know, I can’t say I agree with it.” And I said, “That’s cool, I suppose everyone has their own thing going on.” And he was like, “I don’t know, I don’t think you can be a punk *and* a Muslim.”

From Sam’s account, this white punk rocker did not simply state that a Muslim woman donning a hijab at a punk rock show surprised him; he claimed a Muslim cannot *be* punk. This idea that Muslims cannot be punk suggests that punk is Western, secular, and white, and that Muslims, especially women who are visibly Muslim, are at the opposite end of the punk spectrum. Before encountering white punks like this, Sam considered her Muslim identity relatively “thin” (Cornell and Hartman 2007:85); at a punk show, it was not a significant aspect of her self-concept. But experiences like this made her realize that others see Muslimness as “thick” (Cornell and Hartman 2007:85), a realization that propelled Sam to search out alternative punk rock spaces on the Internet. After doing Google searches for different combinations of “Muslim,” “Islam,” and “punk,” she found Taqwacore, a virtual community that welcomed and affirmed both her punk *and* religious identities.

Taqwacores also use Internet discussion forums (Parker and Song 2006, 2009) to elaborate on how some white punks dismiss the existence of white supremacy and unfairly equate Taqwacore with Christian punk. In an open forum on the Racialicious Web site (Peterson 2010) about the documentary film *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam*, one commenter wrote, “Religion and punk rock? That’s pretty much an oil and water type thing. The same thing goes for Christian punk.” Outraged by the remark, Taqwacores seized this opportunity to make the point that punk Muslims are not on equal footing with Christian punks. JT responded, “To make this movement of radical affirmation in the context of

white supremacy and global imperialism parallel to christcore is insulting. Christian punk is not formed primarily in relation to oppression or global persecution.” Like other participants on the forum, JT avows that making a comparison between Muslim and Christian punk is not only flawed, it is offensive as it makes global white supremacy invisible and inconsequential. On a similar note, Sabina England, a playwright and self-identified “Deaf Muslim Punk,” wrote on the thread,

WTF?!?!?! Muslims are a minority group in the United States, along with the rest of the Western world. We constantly face Islamophobia, xenophobia, and racism (based on our religion, skin colour, ethnicity, or nationality). Not only are we attacked for being Muslim, but some of us get attacked for our skin colour, too—especially Black Muslims (whether African or African American) and Middle Eastern Muslims—especially if they look “conservative” (with their long beards).

In this post, England racializes Muslim identity to make the point that a comparison with Christian punk is revolting: Christianity, she implies, represents the privileges associated with the dominant white race in Western societies; Christians can choose whether they want to identify as Christian, just as white people can choose whether to acknowledge race and racism. Muslims, on the other hand, seldom have that choice. They do not get to pick and choose when to make their religion salient, especially if they wear religious markers or “look” Muslim (Selod 2015). And unlike Christians, Muslims do not get a chance to voice what religion means to them in their own words (Bail 2015).

Bearing in mind that Taqwacores feel that white punks are insensitive to racial and religious oppression, many Taqwacores are apprehensive about whites getting involved in their community. Sam feels that Taqwacore is supposed to be a “tight-knit” group of people who share similar beliefs and experiences “so it’s a little bit odd,” she says, “when a white person comes in and says that they want to embrace this culture.” Similarly, when I asked Zahira, a Taqwacore blogger, about who belongs to Taqwacore, she responded,

I mean it has been a little weird that there are people who have been identifying as Taqwacore who are not Muslim and not *really* punk. Um, and, I think it’s kind of toes the line of exoticizing this movement. And that part makes me

uncomfortable. The exotification of this space. I really do think it should be a safe space for people who identify in this way versus the exotification of people in this community and then trying to like fit in.

When I pressed Zahira to specify the people who exotify Taqwacore, she answered in a direct tone, "They are white and they are not Muslim and they don't really listen to punk music." She "takes issue" with white, non-Muslim people calling themselves Taqwacore: "We're doing this for ourselves. We're not doing this to teach white folks," she adds.

Some Taqwacores feel that they need to keep whites out because whites pose a threat to their safe space and weaken their collective identity as "brown kids." A wariness of whites surfaced on the "Redefining Punk, My Way" comment thread (Ahmed 2009) when a white participant wrote that he feels "welcomed here" and that "labels should help us understand something, not be cordons that lock us off from something." Of the 28 comments on that stream, this individual had posted 46 percent of them and in the process managed to provoke a heated discussion about the place of whites in Taqwacore, specifically on this forum that sought to redefine punk on the basis of racial and religious oppression. In response to the many posts that advocated colorblind (Bonilla-Silva 2003) "unity" in punk, one commenter noted that the thread was being overtaken by a person of privilege who yearns to be "enlightened by this exotic space." To make the point, this person quoted a part of the article "Obscuring the Importance of Race" (Grillo and Wildman 1991) that reads,

So strong is the expectation of holding center-stage that even when a time and space are specifically designated for members of a non-privileged group to be central, members of the dominant group will often attempt to take back the pivotal focus. (p. 402)

The white punk responded,

I do sincerely apologise for being enthusiastic and wanting to engage in dialogue at every opportunity . . . I wasn't aware that as "the white non-muslim man" I was suppose to be excluded, nor that it was wrong of me to participate.

Although some Taqwacores warn that whites dilute the political edge of punk for "brown kids," others argue that whiteness is an elusive category

that cannot be tacked onto all light-skinned individuals in the same way and to the same degree. Accordingly, the Taqwacores who feel that whites can belong argue that some whites fight against racism or experience other forms of oppression. For instance, they acknowledge that Muslims, like the author of *The Taqwacores*, Michael Muhammad Knight, are white but benefit from whiteness only to a degree. As a convert to Islam, Knight is subject to Islamophobia and therefore does not receive the same religious freedoms as do white Christian or secular members of U.S. society (Moosavi 2015). Additionally, many Taqwacores argue that the white punks who promote and blog about Taqwacore albums, artists, and movies fit into Taqwacore because they *support* Taqwacore. In a private interview over Gchat, Saima writes,

Well, when i first found out white ppl were involved in the scene, i thought "what the fuck?" and i didnt understand at first, but i figure that if they are part of the scene as an act of solidarity to rally with an oppressed minority group that is widely hated and loathed by society at large, it makes a lot of sense because that's punk as fuck, and I think for white people getting involved with the Taqwacores scene, it's a way to show support for brown artists that are normally ignored by the media, then I think its a wonderful thing.

At first Saima did not think white non-Muslims belonged in Taqwacore, but she now feels that white people are an important asset to its cultural dissemination. From her account, white people who stand by socially marginalized groups are "punk as fuck" but she does not say they *are* Taqwacore. Instead, a select group of whites are included because they stand by the "brown kids" who comprise its core. Some of the white members share this idea. Matt, who plays in a Taqwacore band, does not feel Taqwacore is for him. Rather, he clarifies, "I always feel like I'm supporting it," which he adds mostly means he supports the lead singer of the band who is more genuinely Taqwacore because of his Arab heritage. The media never asks Matt for interviews, and he claims, "a lot of the times fans won't even know who I am." But Matt is satisfied with the arrangement. In the band, he has the opportunity to play percussion instruments from the Middle East (without looking like he is exploiting it), and he likes being in a band that addresses imperialism, racism, and classism in its music.

Taqwacores make punk for “brown kids” by vocalizing their opposition to whiteness in punk and keeping it out. Yet Taqwacores do not simply use skin tone to determine whiteness; instead, whiteness is viewed as a practice of racial and religious privilege, bigotry, and exclusion. Accordingly, Taqwacores feel that the whites who contribute to the creation and dissemination of Taqwacore by playing in bands, writing books and blogs, and reviewing its music, are “punk as fuck,” and Taqwacore punk to a degree, because they stand against anti-Muslim racism. To the contrary, whites who downplay racial and religious injustices are not really punk because they maintain exclusive white punk rock spaces that are unwelcoming to “brown kids.”

### Making Punk for Brown Kids

The other primary way Taqwacores create punk for “brown kids” is by redefining punk in favor of racial and religious Others. They use *punk* as a synonym for “brown kids” who feel triply marginalized by white-dominated punk rock, mainstream American society, and traditional ethnic and religious communities. Jehangir, a punk rock character who plays the part of an unorthodox spiritual guide in *The Taqwacores* (Zahra 2010), epitomizes this stance when he claims that Taqwacore is where “all the crazy rejects and fuckups of the community come together . . . nobody likes them. Muslims say they’re not really Muslims. The punks say they’re not really punks.” As Jehangir’s remark that “nobody likes them” suggests, Taqwacores take pride in being the true punk rock outsiders. Being a “reject” and a “fuck-up” is social assurance that Taqwacores do not obey social conventions, even punk rock conventions.

The webzine blog titled “Redefining Punk, My Way” (Ahmed 2009) captures how Taqwacores use punk to deliberately mark themselves as outsiders. In this blog, Ahmed argues that “real” punk is problematically likened to “gutter punk,” which she characterizes as living in the streets, not voting, and believing in anarchy. But, Ahmed expounds, “I always found this contradictory because to me, the people I saw in punk spaces were primarily white. Contradictory because to me, white people epitomized privilege. And how real could ‘gutter’ punk be if they were white?” She continues,

The privilege of race and the privilege of religious freedom are very real privileges that mainstream [i.e. white] punk rockers do not have to deal with. But as Taqwacore, it’s something that all of us have had to deal with. Every single one of us.

In this post, Ahmed stresses that punk rock should be about racial and religious oppression, a redefinition of punk that marks Taqwacores as more alienated, and therefore more “punk,” than white “gutter” punk. Although many participants on the forum applaud Ahmed for differentiating race and religious oppression from classism and poverty (i.e. “gutter punk”), others advocate a more intersectional approach to the redefinition of punk. In step with the idea that whiteness is not solely a matter of skin tone, one participant posts that racism and classism are “not mutually exclusive” and that many brown punks also identify with anarcho-punk or “gutter” punk such as Chicano punks in Chicago. The post goes on to explain, “the fact is this; white or not, all of us in the first world benefit from imperialism/colonialism in a global context. our [*sic*] privilege in America is an amalgamation of race and class.”

Another way Taqwacores make punk for “brown kids” is by embracing stigmatized racialized signifiers, such as the *keffiyeh* (traditional Arab head-dress) in punk rock spaces. Members of The Kominas (which translates to “scumbag” or “scoundrel” in Punjabi) played loud Bollywood-esque punk riffs while sporting traditional Arab garments at a live show in Cambridge. In the context of a majority white performance bill, the lead singer’s turban, *thawb* (an ankle-length garment with long sleeves), and sandals marked an unconventional space for the performance of Muslim identity. In doing so, he also interrupted the racial homogeneity of the larger, mostly white, punk rock milieu. Also, had The Kominas not been wearing “Islamic” attire at the Cambridge show, they might not have gotten the attention of the entire room when they announced “This next song is called ‘Sharia Law in the USA!’,” a song that pokes fun at Islamophobes by likening Islamic law to U.S. beliefs about Muslims as the “Antichrist.” When Basim Usmani, the lead singer, was asked by a Sepia Mutiny blogger (Taz 2008) about the underlying purpose of his band, Usmani responded, “That race politics have a place in punk. That cultural sources aren’t just Black American or White, but that they come from all corners of the globe. That we aren’t Sand People from Planet Tatooine [*Star Wars*].”

Making Muslim identity visible in punk rock venues not only solidifies the boundaries of Taqwacore punk for “brown kids”; doing so also disrupts racial stereotypes that Muslims are a monolithic group defined by uniform beliefs, practices, and values. Consider the story Saeed shared about his white punk rock coworker “Buzz.” He says Buzz challenged him all the time about “Muslim punk” and refused to see it as different from “Christian punk.” Buzz felt that



Christian punk had “bastardized punk,” and he was defensive when he heard that Muslims were playing punk rock. After watching the documentary about Taqwacore (Majeed 2009), Saeed says Buzz was awakened to the idea that “Muslims can be defined in many different ways,” not only by their relationship to Islam. Once realizing, as Saeed put it, that “Muslims in this day and age are marginalized and they need a voice to express themselves,” Buzz “got behind” the film and started supporting it through his writing and publicity connections. The fact that the film enlightened Buzz to the racialization of Muslims resonates with what Noah, another white punk, told me about Taqwacore opening up his eyes to his ethnic biases. He says, “You’re looking at these people, at these dudes, at The Kominas themselves and any stereotype anybody might have about the cultures that they belong to . . . you [end up thinking] ‘Oh wait, there are different kinds of everyone.’”

Taqwacores frequently scream, “This is for the brown kids!” at their shows and inject comments about what it is like to be immigrant, Muslim, brown, and desi<sup>6</sup> during informal conversations, at panel discussions, film screenings, and on t-shirts. Taqwacore bands also write lyrics or entire songs about racism, xenophobia, and Western imperialism in different languages such as Punjabi and Spanish. The multiracial band Al-Thawra (“The Revolution” in Arabic) translated its lyrics into Arabic, Spanish, and English on its liner notes, and the front cover of its first album reads “Who Benefits from War?” in each of these three languages.

Sound, song titles, and lyrics are also significant components of punk for “brown kids” (McDowell 2014). Al-Thawra describes its sound as “not your run-of-the-mill hardcore sound, as we mix elements of traditional Middle Eastern music instrumentation; heavy, sludgy, crust punk; and experimental music influences” (Al-Thawra 2011), sonic qualities that create cultural space for “brown kids” at punk rock shows. In addition, lyrically, the music of Al-Thawra addresses poverty, empire, and Orientalism, and their lead singer regularly blogs about U.S. intervention in the Middle East. Other groups, such as Sunny Ali & The Kid, put out electro-indie pop songs such as “Muslim Rage,” which is part of a global protest against a 2012 *Newsweek* cover story that paints a picture of zealous, anti-U.S., brown men under the headline “Muslim Rage.”<sup>7</sup> Consistent with #muslimrage tweets, “When you realize that if you have a 5 o’clock shadow it can be deemed a security threat” and “Only newsworthy when behind a gun and not in front of it,” the electro-pop song “Muslim Rage”

by Sunny Ali & The Kid describes a “Muslim holocaust” where “there’s drones up ahead; drones in your bed; drones in your home.”

The effort to unite “brown kids” against whiteness seems to work. It was not unusual to see Indian Americans, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans dancing alongside one another at Taqwacore shows. When The Kominas played live at the Bowdoin College campus pub, about 50 students attended the show. Whites were in the majority, but there were also young Asian men and women, Indian women, and Black women and men at the show. The friendship groups were not ethnically exclusive: people of different ethnicities were dancing and laughing together. Most were dressed like typical North American college kids, not punk rockers. They donned khaki pants and button-up shirts or sweat-shirts and jeans. The only people there who appeared “punk” were some of the band members and a Latino man with black clothes on and an earring in his ear. In an in-depth public interview on Issue Oriented (Kauffman 2009), a punk rock podcaster, Shahjehan Khan, the guitarist for The Kominas, boasts about the diverse people who come out to see his band play live. He likes to see “girls in hijab” at his show “rocking out” because they shatter his own perceptions about Muslims. Khan continues,

We talk a lot about people’s perceptions. About what it means to be Muslim. What it is to be desi. South Asian. To be the Other. But I obviously, I think we, we have our own perceptions of the way we think people are.

He says his audience shatters his own perceptions of who Muslims are and talks about the ways in which Taqwacores are expanding who is punk rock. Khan describes one such audience member: “He was just like me—he wears glasses. Balding. And he’s having fun at a punk rock show, and that’s not what he’s used to (Kauffman 2009).” For Khan, this is remarkable because it provides evidence that they are making punk rock relevant to new audiences, audiences that ordinarily do not think punk is for them. Another Taqwacore elaborates, “It’s definitely earth shattering to see people . . . that you wouldn’t expect to be at a punk show. And then realizing that you yourself aren’t expected to be at a punk show (Kauffman 2009).” “Brown kids” are not expected to be there, they imply, because they do not fit the profile of a typical punk rocker: white youth who come from Christian or secular backgrounds. The fact that they are showing up is, as one interviewee put it, “punk as fuck.”

## CONCLUSION

This research expands new scholarship on collective responses to anti-Muslim racism. It shows how Taqwacore punks collectively resist anti-Muslim racism in decidedly nonreligious ways. They do this by creating a racial identity as “brown kids” that stands against whiteness within the context of punk rock, a music culture rooted in antiestablishment identities and politics.

Taqwacores make the case that although punk is supposed to provide refuge for social misfits, racist and religious bigotry still finds expression in white-controlled punk rock spaces. Some white punkers claim to have authority on what punk means and often discount the racial struggles that brown-bodied and Muslim youth face in Western societies today. Some even go so far as to claim that a person cannot be punk *and* Muslim, insinuating that all Muslims are first and foremost defined by Islam, and nothing more. By calling out whiteness in punk and larger U.S. society, Taqwacores create their own punk rock space, one that is set apart and critical of white “mainstream” punk. In the process, they establish racism as something more complex than the traditional American white versus black divide. As they do this, they create a racial identity as “brown kids” that refuses to be defined by skin tone or a shared religious practice or ethnic background, but rather by an appreciation for *difference* that both magnifies and vilifies white supremacy.

The ways in which Taqwacores use the antagonistic edge of punk rock (McDowell 2014; Swidler 1986) to destabilize conventional racial and ethnic categories in U.S. society is akin to recent interdisciplinary studies on Muslim and desi youth culture (Aidi 2014; Sharma 2010) that suggest an antiracist, postcolonial politic is transforming racial landscapes. In *Hip Hop Desis*, Nitasha Sharma (2010:5) coined the term *global race consciousness* to underscore how desis and Black artists bond through hip hop music and in effect conceptualize “race” as “rooted not in a shared biology and identity but in a shared ideology and consciousness of how power operates through racism.” She showed that in doing music that is historically rooted in the Black American experience (Lipsitz 2007), desi youth grow aware of how different communities are racialized across time and space. In response to this newfound consciousness of race and racial formation, they use hip hop music to both construct desi as a race and assert desi identity into the larger hip hop milieu. Similarly, in *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture*, Hisham

Aidi (2014) showed that Muslim youth are merging Islamic, Afrocentric, Asian, and Latin American sounds and signs to create a new transnational identity of difference, an identity that is “lobbying to not be counted as white” (p. 164). Muslim youth are being pushed away from whiteness, Aidi inferred, because whites are the ones talking about “Islamic extremists” and initiating policies that target brown people as the enemy within.

Young people are using popular culture to form new racial identities across and beyond Muslim communities. To advance this scholarship, future studies should consider how Muslims and those perceived as Muslim draw on subversive music genres to construct new transnational identities of belonging that stand against whiteness and white supremacy. Another valuable contribution may be to examine the internal tensions that arise as Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim try to keep their diversity intact (Okamoto and Mora 2014) while working to maintain group identities that connote solidarity to external audiences. Future research must also scrutinize the ways in which the identities of newly formed panethnic groups are shaped, limited, and transformed by existing power relations (Brown and Jones 2015). For example, how do independent and mainstream media depict the politics of brown and Muslim youth in its coverage of underground youth culture? How do marginalized youth use Muslim signifiers to address the prevalence of anti-Muslim racism in mainstream media? Answering questions such as these will move us into a more nuanced discussion of the ways in which people respond to, grow from, or get quashed by the anti-Muslim actors and fringe groups that have more economic and emotional resources (Bail 2015) for determining what people think about Muslims. These data can be useful as marginalized social actors and movements make strategic decisions about how to counter dangerous narratives about racial and religious minorities in the media.

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## NOTES

1. In this punk house, a wide range of Muslim youth fuse Islam to their respective subcultural identities: the straight-edger is a Sunni who abstains from drugs and alcohol; the drunken, leather-clad punk is a Sufi who acts as a spiritual guide in the book; and the feminist riot grrrl is unapologetic about her appearance: she wears a *burqa* adorned with punk rock patches.
2. Taqwacore, like other music scenes (Bennett and Peterson 2004; Roy and Dowd 2010), has morphed into new scenes or has been adapted in new locations such as Indonesia (Fiscella 2015).
3. Drinking and smoking marijuana were commonplace at some of the Taqwacore gatherings I attended, but these activities never seemed compulsory or central to the scene. I regularly noted that people abstained, sometimes for religious reasons.
4. To ensure participant confidentiality, I use pseudonyms to reference the interviewees I spoke with in private. I use the real names of individuals when referring to publicly available interviews and materials such as the Taqwacore webzine. Some sources may have two different names (the pseudonym and real name) in this text.
5. The epithet *poser* is an egregious insult in punk. It refers to a person who buys punk stuff and may look punk but is not committed to punk as a way of life (Andes 1998) and does not know much about the history of punk or its more obscure music (Force 2009).
6. *Desi* is an umbrella term commonly used to reference diasporic identities and cultures from South Asia.
7. For more on the controversy about the *Newsweek* cover, see Mirkinson (2012).

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