“Muslim Cool: Blackness, Hip Hop and American Islam”

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In a kind of sonic religion, some American Muslims chart their religious genealogies through black American music—that extend in time through hip hop, Jazz, and African Muslims enslaved in the United States to Islamic Africa and the community of Prophet Muhammad. In American Muslim communities marred by anti-black racism these genealogies strengthen African American Muslim claims to religious authenticity. These genealogies are also useful beyond the African American Muslim experience to support the claim of indigeneity asserted by the broader American Muslim community. This is a claim to being “native” Americans rather than foreigners and is offered as proof that Islam is an American religion, equal in its indigeneity to Christianity and Judaism. Thus, the assertion of these narratives of origin confronts racial hierarchies within American Muslim communities as well as a discourse in the United States that represents America’s Muslims as perpetual foreigners. In this paper, I will take up these narratives by exploring the central role hip hop and young Muslims are playing in articulating American Muslim identity through blackness. Specifically, I will examine what I term “Muslim cool.” I will argue that Muslim cool is a way of thinking about and being an American Muslim that is shaped by the epistemology of hip hop. Furthermore, I contend that as a practice of American Muslim identity, Muslim cool also operates aesthetically at the intersection of black cool, the ‘hood and Islam. Thus, as a kind of cool that is tied to black expressive culture, through Muslim cool the performance of blackness becomes a means of Muslim self-making. By examining one aesthetic practice of Muslim cool—a specific headscarf style—I will show how Muslim cool intervenes in the racial hierarchies in American Islam and anti-Muslim discourse in the US by testing the performative boundaries of race and religion.