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Nationhood, identity and subcultures: A case study of the Norwegian rap duo Karpe

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore processes of identity formation among ethnic minorities in Norway. By performing a close reading of the lyrics of seven songs written by the rap duo Karpe, I show how the group use their music to make apparent the adverse consequences of absolutist understandings of national belonging on their own subjectivities. Through their lyrics, Karpe send a clear message to their audiences: the definition of what it means to be Norwegian needs to be extended, and new ways of belonging ought to be normalized, so that ethnic minorities can embrace their multicultural backgrounds without fearing this will compromise their perceived belonging to the national community. Karpe's incredible success among the Norwegian public, as it enables them to carry ideas of political significance across groups, makes the analysis of their music of mainstream interest. By using rap lyrics as an object of analysis, I also highlight the function of cultural expression as a means to resist and rethink hegemonic discourses of fixed national identities – and even act as a vehicle for the development of post-national patterns of identification.

KEYWORDS

migration
post-national identity
national belonging
rap music
Norwegianness
Karpe Diem
cultural expression
ethnic minority

INTRODUCTION

> Since the mid-nineteenth century a country's music has become a political ideology by stressing national characteristics, appearing as representative of the nation, and everywhere confirming the national principle. […] Yet music, more than any other artistic medium, expresses the nation principle's antinomies as well.
>
> (Adorno 1989: 155)

On 22 July 2011, Anders Breivik single-handedly committed the worst assault on Norwegian soil since the Second World War. The horror of this attack disclosed an active, combatively anti-immigrant margin that views the State's welcome of cultural pluralism as a threat, an aspect of Norway that was hardly known outside the country and meagrely understood within it (Eriksen 2013: 2). In the aftermath of the attack, ceremonies were held guided by the need to restore feelings of inclusiveness in the country. One example is a memorial concert organized in Oslo's Cathedral a week after the atrocities. Among those invited to perform were a rap duo called Karpe[1] composed of two Norwegians with Muslim and Hindu backgrounds, Magdi Omar Ytreeide Abdelmaguid and Chirag Rashmikant Patel (Magdi and Chirag from now on). Over the last twenty years, the two of them have achieved tremendous success, with albums topping the national music charts for weeks following their release (Revheim 2016). Karpe's presence at this event, considering their status as members of ethnic minorities,[2] illustrates a desire to engage in a renegotiation of nationhood in the wake of the growing cultural diversity characterizing contemporary Norway (Sandve 2015; Knudsen et al. 2014).

Both the terrorist attack and the events organized in its aftermath exemplify two opposed responses to the increasing lack of coherence of the nation state as a unifying political and cultural unit. Here, Breivik embodies a drastic turn towards a nationalism characterized by its aspiration to return to an imaginary past of bounded and homogenous communities (Gullestad 2006). The ideas expressed in his manifesto undeniably reflect this (see Berwick 2011). By contrast, the commemorative ceremonies – and as I will argue in this article, Karpe – represent a future-oriented, idealistic projection of a post-national framework of social relations. The post-national view considers civic and political values as sufficient to build and maintain steady democracy, so that shared cultural and ethnic factors are no longer essential (Soysal 1994; Bauman 2004). Here, the fundamental link between territoriality, culture and identity, which used to characterize the nation state, becomes weakened (Antonsich 2008) or disappears entirely (Habermas 2001). The nation state therefore loses its function as the ultimate platform for belonging (Ferry 2005).

In Western European countries, waves of mass-immigration following the Second World War and the increasing diversity it engendered brought a need to redefine principles of belonging to the nation (Castells 2009; Croucher 2004). Departing from a language of belonging frequently based on lineage, this led to the establishment of discourses of 'cultural insiderism' where cultural diversity is seen as a barrier to the maintaining of a coherent imagined community rather than as a means to transform and extend the meaning of nationality (Anderson 1983; Gilroy 1993). As cultural kinship has come to dictate who belongs and who does not, cultural hybridization is often framed as exclusive to the elites, who already possess the necessary cultural baggage to be ensured

1. Karpe were known as 'Karpe Diem' until 2018, when they officially changed their name.
2. It is worth specifying, since I will be using the terms minority/majority throughout the article, that I acknowledge that the power relations embedded in the terminology should not be reduced to one of numbers – and that the multidimensional aspect of power cannot be fully captured through such dichotomous opposition (see Brah 1996: 184).

an insider to the nation, and may therefore benefit from exposure to cultural diversity (Pels 1999). Meanwhile, non-privileged immigrants, who have not chosen the life in-between cultures, are thought to solely experience confusion and longing for the place left behind – and are consequently forced to prove their allegiance to the nation by displaying a single, coherent cultural identity.

Using the lyrics of Karpe as an object of study, I take issue with such discourses by showing not only that the advantages of cultural hybridization are by no means exclusive to cultural elites but also that such hybridization may in fact drive actors to imagine new, post-national patterns of identification that do not dependent on exclusive, binary understandings of belonging to the nation. By using rap lyrics as an object of analysis, I also aim to highlight the function of cultural expression as a means to both resist and rethink hegemonic ideas of fixed national identities.

How, then, is national belonging negotiated in Karpe's lyrics? And how do these expressions challenge absolutisms ascribed to identity constructions? In answering these questions, I start by outlining a theoretical framework drawing on existing literature on identity, belonging and subcultures among migrant populations. I then introduce the case study with a contextualizing section on Norway and Norwegian rap music before conducting a thematic analysis of seven of Karpe's songs, looking at how identity and belonging are negotiated through the lyrics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The everyday lives of transnational migrants are often characterized by identification with and participation in one or multiple spaces of belonging, leading to plural identities and allegiances (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). But as a consequence of nation-building projects centred on exclusivist discourses of belonging, having multiple allegiances is often seen as unreconcilable with being fully 'integrated' into a host society and fluid, plural identities – at least when not sported by members of the cultural elite – tend to be regarded as a lack of origin rather than as a valuable outcome of growing up with multicultural backgrounds (Dervin and Ragnarsdóttir 2014). Consequently, migrants in contemporary western societies are often expected to prove their allegiance to the nation by displaying a single cultural identity.

Identity is also intrinsically linked to our subjective experience of discourses of exclusion (Brah 1996; Pratsinakis 2018). Individuals may for example feel at home in a society, but be reluctant to publicly display and/or express outwards identification with this same society because of experiences of social exclusion (Sigona et al. 2015). These dynamics are important for identity formation, as the process becomes entrenched in hierarchies of difference whereby the gaze of others shapes our identification with a given group (Gullestad 1996; Hall 1996). As difference has come to be framed through discourses of cultural incompatibility, expressions of different cultural traditions are also likely to get pushed back if they are seen as a barrier to the construction of a homogenous national identity (Dieckhoff 1996).

Young people tend to be more affected by the potential oppositions between the cultural orientations they are exposed to, because their identities are still in formation, but also because their age makes them likely to want to liberate themselves from their families (Erikson 1995; Levitt and Waters 2002). As they learn to navigate between the institutions of their parents' ancestral homes and those of their countries of residence, second-generation youth

specifically are more likely to engage in a (re)negotiation of cultural norms (Levitt 2009). Such premises may incite them to pursue alternative frames of identification in other cultural spheres than the ones available from their families/home countries or those of the host country.

It is in these alternative cultural spheres, or 'grey zones' (Vestel 2004) that meaningful changes in patterns of belonging occur, diverse traditions get entangled and new hybrids develop. In his book on the interactions of Dutch-Moroccan youth on online forums, Leurs (2015) provides a good account of such dynamics. Here, the forums are used to shape a subaltern public sphere in which the youth are able to construct their own collective identities through the development of a 'transnational habitus' that differs from that transmitted by their parents or by the cultural majority (Leurs 2015: 49). It is their common experience, and their desire to recreate a space of their own – *a homing desire* that unites them (Brah 1996). Appadurai's ethnoscapes (1996), imagined spheres where migrants collectively form a 'third culture' that takes a meta-national form of existence, are another suitable analytical tool to think about these 'grey zones' in culture.

Within these, 'grey zones' often lies an acknowledgement of the irrelevance of the nation state as the ultimate platform for belonging (Ferry 2005). Such a view, often called the post-national view, enables the flourishing and embracing of fluid identities by leaving behind the categorical, absolutists framings of belonging to the nation (Bhabha 1994; Dittmer 2010). Civic and political values thus prevail over shared cultural and ethnic factors in shaping feelings of community (Bauman 2004). For Knudsen (2014), Karpe's presence at the remembrance ceremony in August 2011, considering their minority backgrounds, symbolizes a desire to embrace new, post-national ways to belong. The duo's presence is even more significant since, as I will show, their lyrics both embody and encourage this post-national view.

A post-national perspective is also useful to understand young people's engagement in rap music.[3] Rap music found its source in the 1970s in the United States (Bradley and Dubois 2010). It prospered within young, urban, multicultural settings before expanding globally in part due to its appeal to groups struggling for recognition (Rogstad and Vestel 2011). Through the way it speaks out on the realities of individual experiences and engages with articulations of social phenomena 'from below', rap music is often described as a culture of resistance, a subculture formed in opposition to the standards and languages of dominant groups in a given society (Potter 1995). By engaging in these discursive practices, rap music also plays a dynamic role in the public sphere (Mitchell 2000; Nærland 2014).

Today, the genre is known for its diversity, its hybridity and its transnational dimension – which is often reflected in the subjectivities of its practitioners (Mitchell 2001; Born 2000). The way rap music has come to affirm both the multicultural and transnational has made it a powerful tool against fixed discourses of national belonging, which helps explain its appeal among the cosmopolitan youth (Gilroy 1987, 1993). The contesting voice of rap music, then, can also be used to encourage the upholding of anti-dualist, hybrid patterns of identification – making the genre a valuable tool to empirically understand how identities are negotiated in new (cultural) surroundings.

AIMS AND METHODS

In this article, sociological hermeneutics are used to see how Karpe's lyrics and the specific experiences they reveal fit into wider academic debates on

3. Here, hip hop is considered to be a 'culture', with rap being the music genre that stems out of it (Pough 2015). Though both terms are often used interchangeably, Karpe tend to refer to themselves as a rap group. For consistency, the term rap will therefore be used throughout the article.

national belonging and identity both in Norway and globally. Sociological hermeneutics endorses the reading of social phenomena by looking at how particular occurrences are understood and experienced by those who engage with them (Bauman 1978). Rap music is a powerful medium to do so since it provides us with a direct insight into representations of the self (Hawkins 2002; Pough 2015). At the same time, the genre's rootedness in the social, its aesthetic grant for critique and its position within the public sphere as a so-called 'subculture' makes it an ideal tool to access diverse perspectives on contemporary issues.

Norway is a compelling place to conduct this study for two reasons. First, the country has often been overlooked in migration studies because of its lack of direct colonial involvement and its recent emergence as a migration destination (Gullestad 2006). Second, it is often portrayed as a social utopia with high levels of social inclusion, and so there remain few critical studies on Norway in the English language. I consider that it is precisely Norway's equivocal position in social imaginaries, combined with the fact that ethnic Norwegians are probably the most privileged within the 'Global North' that makes it a valuable case study for the rise of nationalism and its responses. Karpe's unique position in Norwegian society, in turn, makes the analysis of their lyrics of mainstream interest. Indeed, Karpe are, perhaps more than any other Norwegian artists, known for being outspoken on social issues, and they have often been described as ambassadors for the Norwegian youth. For example, when receiving a musical award in 2010, the duo was celebrated for their stance on openness and their celebration of diversity, which was said to have turned them into important role models (Gullskoify 2011).

The lyrics from seven of Karpe's songs were used for the analysis. The songs are 'Lett å Være Rebell i Kjellerleiligheten din' ('Easy Being a Rebel in Your Basement Flat') (Appendix A),[4] 'Påfugl' ('Peacock') (Appendix B), 'Tusen Tegninger' ('A Thousand Sketches') (Appendix C), 'Byduer i dur' ('Humming City Pigeons') (Appendix D), 'Vestkantsvartinga' ('The Black Guy from the West Side') (Appendix E), 'Identitet som Dreper' ('Identity that Kills') (Appendix F) and 'Kunsten å være Inder' ('The Art of Being Indian') (Appendix G). The songs were chosen for their prominent and recurrent references to identity and belonging. All were published between 2004 and 2016, thereby providing a good overview of Karpe's career. Only two of the songs included are from the same album – 'Humming City Pigeons' and 'The Black Guy from the West Side' – though the version of 'Humming City Pigeons' employed here is a modified one performed during a remembrance ceremony held a year after the terrorist attacks, rather than the original studio recorded version.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to guide the analysis. CDA's emphasis on language as both socially constructed and constructive makes it a suitable methodological framework to unveil how power is reproduced and/or resisted through texts (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). The focus will be on how Karpe's use of language either reproduces or resists dominant discourses on belonging and identity formation in Norway. An emphasis on how Karpe's lyrics interact with the socio-political context within which they were written will therefore be upheld throughout the article, complementing the thematic analysis. The thematic analysis, in turn, will engage with ambiguities inherent to language-use, as most straightforwardly observable through the employment of rhetorical devices and metaphors. Here, the aim is neither to disclose a hidden meaning nor to articulate a fixed one, but to produce content through textual interpretation (Kramer 2011). Within this stance also

4. Full transcriptions and translations of the tracks under consideration are available as appendices at: https://www.academia.edu/81891954/Appendix_Nationhood_identity_and_subcultures_A_case_study_of_the_Norwegian_rap_duo_Karpe_J_S. Accessed 8 August 2022.

lies an acknowledgement that there will always be other readings of the text and that my own interpretation does not necessarily replicate the intentions of the authors, or the understanding of other readers.

Two points are worth emphasizing in this regard. The first is positionality. My interest in this topic inevitably grew from my own experience listening to Karpe's music, but also growing up in Norway with a multicultural background. Unlike Karpe, however, I belong to the white majority – and was never tasked with proving my Norwegianness to strangers, as it was thought to be signalled through my physical appearance. Obviously, this will have implications for my ability to capture the intended meanings behind Karpe's words. The second has to do with transcription and translation. The transcription of lyrics, as an interpretive act of translating sound into writing, entails particular choices as to spelling, line segmentation, etc. In this respect, I hope my use of collective, crowdsourced internet transcriptions from Genius.com will provide a more 'objective' and community-engaged account than one person's ears would have (i.e. if I relied solely on my own transcriptions). Though the analysis was conducted with the lyrics in their original language, the writing up presented in this article uses translations – both my own and, in some cases, sourced from www.genius.com. To prevent meaning from getting lost in translation, additional contextual information was provided in footnotes when necessary.

CASE STUDY

In this section, I provide an outline of recent trends in migration governance and nationalism in Norway before tracing the advent and evolution of Norwegian rap music, especially that produced by artists of minority backgrounds. To shed light on how Karpe's tracks reflect the social context in which they were written, examples from their lyrics will be employed to illustrate specific points throughout the text.

Between 1995 and 2011, the number of immigrants in Norway tripled – from 215,000 to 600,000 – without counting the additional 210,000 'mixed' children with one foreign-born parent (Eriksen 2013). These are significant numbers for a country of 5 million inhabitants. As the country was for the first time faced with significant 'non-western' immigration, ideas of lineage and shared cultural factors, which had first been used in the nineteenth century to build a coherent 'Norwegian national identity' prior to the country's independence from Sweden, were redeployed (Opsahl 2012; Sandve 2015). Notions of Norwegianness that looked down on urban, global lifestyles in favour of images of the rural and folkloric were also promoted (Eriksen and Sajjad 2006). This form of nationalism, as it was developed prior to independence, was often seen as a constructive and emancipating force – something that Gullestad (2006) believes contributed to the lack of self-reflection regarding its negative aspects in present-day Norway.

Despite the government's efforts to establish policies that would promote equal opportunities for immigrant populations, the latter remain overrepresented in unskilled and semi-skilled work (Rogstad 2007). This reality is referred to by Chirag in 'The Art of Being Indian' where he raps 'Many predicted me a future as a cleaner'; 'You want to give refugees cleaning-jobs'. Ethnic minorities also earn significantly less than majority Norwegians of the same age and with the same level of education, and unemployment rates are three times higher among immigrants than they are among members of the majority (Gullestad 2006: 46).

In Oslo, where about one out of three inhabitants is or has parents who are foreign born, the ethnic divide is also manifested geographically. The Aker river separates populations between east and west, with some neighbourhoods in the east having over 50 per cent residents with two foreign-born parents while the average in the west is about 5 per cent (Municipality of Oslo 2009). This residential segregation is denounced in Karpe's song 'The Black Guy from the West Side', where the lyrics describe the experience of growing up as ethnic minorities on the west side of Oslo and the consequences of the city's residential segregation. Among these consequences is the lack of grounded information concerning the lives and experiences of minorities 'Looks at me strangely, has never seen a coloured man before', 'No one there [the west side] has heard anything about haram and Ramadan before'.

Because of residential segregation, many majority Norwegians have little to no contact with ethnic minorities and rely on impressions communicated through mass media (Gullestad 2006). This is alarming considering media coverage plays an important role in the pathologizing of social and cultural diversity – all-too common parallels between immigration and crime rates being an example (Lindstad and Fjeldstad 2005; Andersson 2005). Karpe refer to this in 'The Art of Being Indian': 'Cause it's a fact that black people are everywhere, and VG[5] knows they are behind when anyone is assaulted'. The emphasis on a perceived omnipresence of ethnic minorities refers to the extensive media coverage on immigration that not only frames the latter as a pressing social issue needing regulation but also repeatedly exaggerates the actual figures of migration into Norway. The ensuing experience of prejudice is expressed in 'The Art of Being Indian' through references to seemingly benign comments and/or questions from members of the cultural majority:

> I go to a party and the chicks ask me about the B-Gang[6]
> 'Why are you vegetarian, what you know about Al-qaeda?' […]
> and if you're a lil brown, you're a lil Bin Laden. […]
> that I have to give explanations for every fucking honor killing.

Other examples include: 'You're not afraid because it's unknown,[7] You're scared because you think you know me and I'm uneasy' in 'A Thousand Sketches' and 'You're all cut from the same cloth[8] […] Mullah, mullah, mullah' in 'Easy Being a Rebel in Your Basement Flat'. Mulla Krekar is an Iraqi Kurd living in Norway who was sentenced to five years in prison in 2012 for making repeated death threats against Norwegian politicians. Together with the phrase 'You're all cut from the same cloth', the lines suggest others are compared to Krekar solely because of their common ethnic and/or religious background.

In terms of its integration policies, the Norwegian government has had a penchant towards egalitarian individualism, a characteristic feature of Nordic countries (Gullestad 2002). Egalitarian individualism considers that individuals have to feel alike in order to be equal (Jonassen 1983). Consequently, equality in Norway is frequently understood as assimilation. This approach is also rooted in linguistics, as the Norwegian words for equality and similarity stem from the same root, *likhet* (Eriksen 2013). While demanding equality might therefore be an acceptable and even admirable thing to do in Norway, alleging difference is harder to serve ideologically – giving the impression that Norwegian governments, although proficient in legislating equality, are less proficient in handling diversity.

5. A widely read tabloid newspaper.
6. The B-Gang is one of several gangs associated with Oslo's underworld. It has been around since the 1990s and is said to have originated in the Pakistani community.
7. Here, the use of the term unknown refers to the typical argument that racism comes from a lack of exposure to diversity and thus translates into a fear of the unknown.
8. The literal translation of the Norwegian saying would be 'You're all made of the same wool' – that is, you are all the same.

Typically, immigrants are expected to integrate and embrace 'Norwegian values', which are scarcely defined, except through their vague connection to democracy and gender equality (Gullestad 2006). Currently, language abilities, kinship (last name), physical appearance and religious practice are seen as more significant in determining national belonging than citizenship. Identifications therefore tend to be forced upon members of the minorities in either/or-isms of not having a 'Norwegian physical appearance' or a Norwegian name, despite their Norwegian nationality (Gullestad 2006). This is referred to in 'Easy Being a Rebel in Your Basement Flat': 'dogs born in stables aren't horses or farm animals' where dogs is used condescendingly to refer to immigrants, and the lyrics imply being born and raised in Norway is not sufficient to be considered fully Norwegian. The perceived incompatibility between citizenship and physical appearance is also mentioned in the lines: 'I'm not a racist but is that makeshift passport of yours supposed to be important' in 'Easy Being a Rebel in Your Basement Flat' and 'He looked at my passport and threw glances and struck me' in 'A Thousand Sketches'.

On the rising tide of the anti-immigrant sentiment described by Karpe, the 2017 elections showed a triumph of the conservatives, marking the first time a conservative-led government has secured a second term since 1985 (Henley 2017). FrP ('The Progress Party' in English), a far-right populist party, were in government until 2020 when they withdraw from the coalition. Although labelled as the far right, FrP is considered inferiorly hostile in its nativist discourse and ideology than other populist right wing parties in Europe (Nærland 2016). Nevertheless, the party has actively advocated severe immigration and integration policies, which has drawn them as assertive critiques (Nærland 2016). Their discourse, mirroring a shift in conventional wisdom surrounding conditions for national belonging within western societies, is to a large extent centred on deep cultural differences and/or incompatibility (Gullestad 2002). Within such discourses, plural identities are seen as a threat to the nation-building project, rather than as a force to extend the meaning of Norwegianness (Gullestad 2002).

This overview brings nuances to the commonly utopian depiction of Norway. By and large, the country's framing as one with few social problems appears to contribute to the lack of dialogue regarding experiences of racism and social exclusion and hinder their voicing in the public realm. This only increases the public (and scholarly) relevance of Karpe's music, whose lyrics brings forward their own experiences of navigating this social context. In the next section, I introduce the development of Norwegian rap music and its role within the local public sphere.

NORWEGIAN RAP MUSIC AND KARPE

Rap music first reached Norway – and principally Oslo – in the 1980s, but its popularity in the Norwegian context is relatively recent (Nærland 2016; Holen 2004). When the genre first arrived in Norway, lyrics tended to be written in English. In the 2000s however, a phase of 'Norwegianization' gave birth to a growing Norwegian-language rap scene (Brunstad et al. 2010), which established the hybrid character of Norwegian rap as the transnational genre became mixed with the local, small-scale language of Norwegian to reveal and articulate local issues (Bennett 1999). This change of language also impacted the way people could relate to the lyrics, since the issues addressed were expressed in the language through which they were experienced (Brunstad et al. 2010).

Around the same time as this language shift, ethnically mixed groups rapping in Norwegian started appearing across the country and particularly in Oslo as part of a 'second wave of Norwegian rappers' (Brunstad et al. 2010; Holen 2004). As more artists of minority background got involved in the scene, Norwegian rap lyrics began outwardly denouncing experiences of racism and social exclusion (Holen 2018; Rogstad and Vestel 2011). Karpe, who started making music in 2000, were important figures in this development. They have, throughout their career, frequently rapped about issues of public importance – something for which they were praised on the government-owned broadcasting company NRK in 2015 (P3.no 05.11.2015 in Nærland 2016: 92).

In only a few years, the duo acquired an incredible amount of success among the Norwegian public, arguably placing them among Norway's most popular contemporary artists (Holen 2018). In 2006, Karpe were for example acclaimed in a Norwegian newspaper (*Dagsavisen*) for their role in reviving and saving rap in Norwegian (Holen 2018). Four years later, in 2010, they were the first Norwegian rap group to top the national music charts (Holen 2018). That rap music is popular is not surprising in itself. What is surprising here is how such explicitly political lyrics with a clear message and high level of self-reflexivity appear to be so well received by a broad audience consisting of both immigrants and non-immigrants (Rogstad and Vestel 2011: 257). Adding to this, Karpe's latest philanthropic project has undoubtedly contributed to forming their position as influential actors in contemporary Norway. On 17 August 2020, the duo announced that the royalties of their entire music catalogue would be funnelled into a new fund – rather than going to a record company – and distributed once a year to projects helping refugees, asylum seekers and/or immigrants both in Norway and globally (PAF 2020). The group's unique position in the Norwegian public sphere, both through their music and through their social initiatives, makes the analysis of their lyrics of increased mainstream interest.

Notable about Norwegian rap produced by ethnic minorities is their use of language, and especially their multiethnolectal linguistic practices (Brunstad et al. 2010; Opsahl and Røyneland 2016). These mostly consist in adding Norwegian suffixes to words borrowed from other languages and dialects such as Kurdish, Berber, Urdu or English (Opsahl 2009). The term *kebabnorsk* (kebab Norwegian), first used in 1995, is now a widely accepted term to designate these practices – so much so that *kebabnorsk* has gotten its own dictionary (Østby 2005). In their song 'The Black Guy from the West Side', Karpe refer to *kebabnorsk* as being common language on the east side of Oslo. Chirag, who grew up on the west side of Oslo, also mentions difficulties in communicating with individuals from the east side because of his lack of knowledge in slang. The perception that access to these linguistic practices is the reserve of certain groups reinforces the idea that they are, through their exclusionary aspect, used to challenge accepted language ideologies (Cutler 2008; see also UPUS 2009[9]). Importantly, this linguistic phenomenon is not restricted to performers. Brunstad et al. (2010) observe a parallel between the linguistic practices encountered within groups of adolescents in Oslo's multilingual settings and affiliations to hip hop culture, suggesting that the practices are taken forward from the rap scene into everyday life. By using *kebabnorsk* in their music, Norwegian rap musicians – including Karpe – have popularized such speech styles. These lexical borrowings, in turn, have contributed to expanding the Norwegian language, giving it a post-national character.

9. In the UPUS-project (UPUS 2009), these multiethnolectal speech styles were studied by interviewing young Norwegians about their linguistic practices. An interviewee specifically saw these hybridities in language as a reflection of diversity and togetherness, adding 'this is our dialect [...] the minority' (Brunstad et al. 2010: 237). When a boy was asked to define some *kebabnorsk* terms, he answered 'those who don't understand, they don't need to understand' (Brunstad et al. 2010: 247). Similarly, the writers of the research underline 'we are obviously not the main target audience of this [...] however, kids in multilingual environments in Oslo have no problem understanding what's going on' (Brunstad et al. 2010: 247).

10. A reference to the oil resources of the country.

11. Word typically used to designate Norwegian folk costumes.

Considering how the local and global are negotiated through language is useful in analysing patterns of post-national identification. The relationship between language and identity was further explored in Vestel's (2004) study of a youth-club in an eastern suburb of Oslo. Here, the creation of a common, hybrid language, went hand in hand with an impulse to diminish the significance of their parent's areas of origin and focus on aspects proper to the community (Vestel 2004). Rap music was used by the youth as a medium to reflect on their ethnoscapes of cultural differences, but where nationality lost its importance. Similarly, Sernhede (2007) underlines how hip hop culture in Sweden takes the form of a 'third space' (see Bhabha 2004) for minority children, a space where they can construct meaning in-between the expectations of their parents and Swedish society – which is important for them since they otherwise are seldom able to recognize themselves in pop culture artefacts. By contrast, hip hop culture provides a platform where everyday life is described in their own terms.

Identity formation has been a predominant theme in Karpe's music. That the sampled songs for this study – which were purposely selected for the recurrence of references to processes identity formation – range from the beginnings of their career in 2004–16 (the most recent song included in the analysis), reflecting the continuous relevance of the topic in their music. Karpe's openness on the difficulties of growing up between cultures has made them important role models for Norway's multicultural youth. Excerpts of interviews conducted by Holen in Oslo's multicultural suburbs (2018) illustrates this: 'It was almost as if Karpe was rapping about me' and 'I heard Påfugl [peacock] at a time where I was asking myself many questions about who I am, and where I fit in' (in Holen 2018: 29). In the remainder of this article, and building upon this contextualizing section, I will conduct an in-depth, thematic analysis of how these processes of identity formation are discussed in the duo's lyrics.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Karpe's lyrics repeatedly denounce the incompatibility between their multicultural background and being perceived and/or accepted as Norwegian. In 'Easy Being a Rebel in Your Basement Flat', this is done directly in constructions such as: 'You will never be a Scandinavian' and through allusions to the welfare state such as: 'Monkeys in my apartment building and Abu Bakr in my cockpit. Is this what my tax money is used for?' and 'picking fruit in our oceans'.[10] Here, the underlying assumption is that minorities do not have a right of access to collective resources (my money, our oceans), which in turn suggests that they are not seen as belonging to the national community. The impression of being unwanted is expressed in conjunction with allusions to differences that are either outwardly observable or manifested through references to culture and traditions. In 'The Art of Being Indian', Chirag sings: 'I'm happy I live in Norway, But I'm still the wrong man with the wrong name and colour' and 'Born and live in a country where you want me out from, Watch out, watch out, the bunad[11] is turning into Burka!'. The parallels drawn between cultural difference and belonging to the nation poignantly resonate with earlier discussions on discourses of perceived cultural incompatibility in contemporary western societies. Karpe's awareness of assimilationist policies that call for immigrants to eventually become 'similar' to ethnic Norwegians is also evident in their lyrics. In 'Easy Being a Rebel in Your Basement Flat', for instance, where the chorus reads 'If you only knew what I would do to

become like you, become like you, be-be-become like you', their difference is expressed as a source of frustration.

As per the literature (Gullestad 1996; Hall 1996), the gaze of others appears to have an effect on how Karpe see themselves: 'He is what you're saying' in 'Identity that Kills' and 'They said I was' in 'A Thousand Sketches'. The gaze of others also seems to affect how they interpret and perceive their differences to the cultural majority. In 'The Art of Being Indian', Chirag talks about looking silly on skis and having a moustache in first grade, both of which contrast with the image of stereotypical Norwegians who are said to be born with skis on their feet and who usually grow facial hair relatively late. Karpe's lyrics also repeatedly manifest a perceived inability to fit in. In 'Identity that Kills', the fact of being designated as foreign everywhere is alluded to: 'And here at home, they call him a foreigner'; 'And over there, they call him a foreigner' and 'He's not one of these, nor one of those'. In 'Peacock', the inability to fit in anywhere 'I was always too white for my friends, but too black for the others' and 'Have always fitted in, but stood out' as well a lack of clear-cut allegiances 'So where is home now?' is made apparent. In 'A Thousand Sketches', Magdi sings: 'They said I was grey, because I was out last night, but I believe in judgment day'. Here, he plays with elements that are typically seen as incompatible: believing in judgement day, which is associated with religious belief, and going out to party.[12] Anyone who does both, becomes 'grey', suggesting the process of categorizing others extends even to those who do not fit into fixed frames of national belonging.

In 'Identity that Kills[13]', the song where processes of identity formation are most outwardly addressed, questions of ethnocultural belonging are repeatedly expressed through dualisms. These are enhanced through recurring oppositions:

> He is half Norwegian, he is half Egyptian
> He goes to parties, no he is always sober
> He lives with his father, he lives with his mum
> He eats brown cheese,[14] falafel and shawarma
> He lives on the hill,[15] (hey) he lives in block-flats (but)
> He knows Arabic, he speaks Norwegian (damn)
> But he is brown, hello please; he is white!
> He celebrates Christmas, it's a feast when it's Eid
> But he is rich, come on man; he is poor!
> Hi, he's white, no, look at it; he is a black dude!
> He sees advantages and he sees disadvantages.

Through these oppositions, Magdi compares things stereotypically affiliated to Norwegianness with elements usually associated with individuals from minority backgrounds, distinctions that carry a hierarchical weight. The mention of wealth differences refers to poverty being viewed as an identity marker for immigrants when compared with the wealthy white-Norwegian majority who identify with material prosperity (Vereide 2011). This line could otherwise imply that Magdi feels minorities are seen as 'poorer' because they do not possess the same values, or the same cultural capital. Dualities are also emphasized by playing with cultural elements, once again reflecting previous discussions on the centrality of the cultural incompatibility argument in constructing boundaries for national belonging. By doing so, Magdi takes issue with the idea that Norwegianness can be measured through culture

12. This is based on my own interpretations of the original Norwegian lyrics *ute om natta* ('going out during the night').

13. The song title comes from a book of the same name by Amin Maalouf (1998), where the author criticizes fixed, entrenched patterns of belonging, which marginalize whoever chooses more complex identities. Maalouf argues multicultural backgrounds can be rewarding and empowering, but only if we are given the opportunity to embrace multifaceted identities. This undoubtedly reflects the themes approached in the article and makes the analysis of this song valuable.

14. One of the country's most iconic foodstuffs, considered an important part of Norwegian cultural heritage.

15. 'The hill' here refers to Holmenkollen, the hill, which overlooks Oslo, that holds both a ski recreation area and the famous Holmenkollen ski jump. Its residential areas are known to be the among the wealthiest of Oslo.

(Vereide 2011). The first verse ends with 'Even if identity kills with a hyphen in between', whereby this imposed dual identity is articulated as painful.

The use of dualisms continues into the song's chorus, which just like the verse, plays with oppositions:

> I am both black and white, I am both happy and sad
> I am both poor and rich, a fool and an alchemist
> I both agree with eye for an eye and being a pacifist
> And you think you know me because you might have known that.

Again, these can be interpreted as symbolizing disparities between what is typically associated with majority Norwegians and what is not. Two elements, however, are to be considered. First, the use of the conjunction 'both' suggests Magdi, despite acknowledging the dualities, chooses to position himself in between. Second, and most importantly, the pronoun employed shifts between the verse and the chorus. In the verse, the dualisms are felt as imposed, as underlined through the use of impersonal pronouns: he is talked about, rather than talking for himself. But in the chorus there is a shift to the personal pronoun 'I'. In this act of agency, Magdi explicitly rejects the dualist frames of identification forced upon him. The chorus and the verse can be interpreted as an attempt to underline the discrepancy between his own understanding of his identity and society's understanding of him (Vereide 2011). By rejecting these binaries, he reclaims the power to define his own identity in the grey areas.

Strikingly, in the second verse in which Magdi sings in Arabic,[16] these oppositions are not presented as mutually exclusive, but rather as existing together.

> His father's Egyptian, his mother's Norwegian
> His father's Muslim, his mother's Christian
> Half white and the other half brown
> […]
> He's got the good things of his father and the bad things of his father
> He's got the positives of his father and the negatives of his father
> He's not rich or poor
> His heart beats with the two countries
> He was born between them
> I know Amin Maalouf wrote, he wrote about circumstances like this.

Through the line 'His heart beats with the two countries', Magdi emphasizes his refusal to choose between his identities. Whether the decision to sing this verse in Arabic is a conscious manifestation of a feeling that hybrid identities are more easily embraced in his fatherland is unclear. Still, this account provides a more positive outlook on navigating his multiple selves, where Magdi is able to embrace and engage with both the positive and negative aspects of the different sociocultural contexts he is exposed to.

Throughout the chosen songs, Karpe recurrently use bird species to refer to themselves or others surrounding them. In 'A Thousand Sketches', a bird metaphor is used by Magdi when describing a security officer looking at his passport and throwing unpleasant glances at him: he becomes a 'bird on the floor' to whom the officer had to cut the wings off before he 'got the chance to sing'. Here, Magdi refers to the perceived inconsistency between his

16. The Arabic translation was taken from Vereide (2011).

passport and his physical appearance, disclosing how his ethnic background is perceived as problematic when having to prove his belonging to the nation (Sandve 2015).

The use of birds is significant since birds are migrating beings, but becomes even more noteworthy when considering the way in which the attributed bird changes according to the context outlined for its use. In 'Humming City Pigeons', Karpe refer to Oslo's residents as city pigeons, banal birds, which not only are found in nearly all urban areas globally but are also generally perceived as filthy. In 'Peacock', released two years later, Karpe explicitly assume the bird identification 'I am a peacock'. The choice of peacocks bears multiple connotations. Peacocks, a bird species native to South Asia, are the widely celebrated national birds of India where Chirag's parents are from. Despite the length and size of their feathers, peacocks are capable of flying, suggesting significant strength. But peacocks also stand out, through their loud calls that make them easily noticeable, but especially through their majestic, colourful feathers. Here, the variety of colours are what make the bird both special and beautiful.

Strikingly, the use of the peacock to refer to themselves appears to coincide with an increased pride in their multicultural backgrounds. In 'Peacock', Karpe talk about trying to 'part my curly hair in the middle with hair wax', having your hair parted in the middle being typically associated with ethnic Norwegian populations living on the west side of the city. Soon after, the lyrics read 'but when that kid grows up, he will see the tail behind' implying that with time, youth from minority backgrounds will start realizing and embracing the strengths inherent to their multicultural backgrounds. That Chirag himself disclosed in an interview that 'Peacock' was about turning one's otherness into a strength (730 2012) substantiates this interpretation. It is significant in this regard not only that 'Peacock' is the second most recent out of the seven sampled songs but also that it was written following the 22 July attacks, since its framing of multiculturalism as a strength directly responds to Breivik's racist ideology.

The use of peacocks is all the more noteworthy in the Norwegian context since the birds are often used as emblems of vanity, something presumably frowned upon in a society where behaviours are guided by Janteloven, a deeply embedded moral code, which stresses humbleness as a central value driving society forward (Bromegard et al. 2014). The effects of Janteloven on everyday life in Norway, though not spoken about directly, are alluded to in two lines of 'Humming City Pigeons': 'And the prime minister speaks to me as his if I were his brother' and 'We are all principal characters in the capital'. Contrasting with this celebration of humility, Karpe's use of peacocks translates as a call for empowerment and pride among members of the minorities. Here, colours are used to capture diversity, but these colours are envisioned from within rather than only as external to the individual (Knudsen 2014). A parallel can be drawn to how meaning is negotiated within aesthetics of representation in postcolonial movements, where pejorative connotations are reversed and turned into a source of empowerment (Triki 2007; Rollefson 2021). This also speaks to earlier discussions on popular understandings of equality in Norway acting as a barrier to alleging difference and, in this case, taking pride in this difference.

Lastly, Karpe's songs also express hope. In 'Identity that Kills', after referring to dualisms attached to identity construction as painful, Magdi sings 'But I trust and believe that a day is coming'. In 'Peacock', the lyrics assert a

window for change: 'Everything in between was like a grey area on my map; We made it through and on the way we found the staircase up here'. The reference to the grey area, though not necessarily intended by the author, is noteworthy considering 'grey spaces' between cultures are characterized as environments where meaningful changes in patterns of belonging occur in the literature (Vestel 2004; Appadurai 1996). Later in the song, Karpe also rap 'So I was the bridge between black and white'. The use of the word 'bridge' in combination with the personal pronoun 'I' suggests the singer sees himself as uniting these dualisms. The last verse of 'Peacock' contains two lines, which are both a pertinent and beautiful way to wrap up the analysis:

> You are from everywhere, your passport is the rainbow
> And those who only see you as one-dimensional have chosen the wrong bird.

DISCUSSION

By accounting for their individual experiences, Karpe bring to light the forces that make identity formation difficult and, particularly, the adverse consequences of absolutist understandings of national belonging on their own subjectivities. It is interesting in this regard to consider the extent to which these lyrics reflect the flourishing of a new movement within the Norwegian rap scene (or public sphere more generally) that encourages both fluid and post-national patterns of identification. Thinking about the potential of Karpe's music to drive societal change is pertinent when considering the popularity of their music in Norway (Revheim 2016). But Karpe themselves also embody this role as precursors in their lyrics. In 'Peacock', they refer to themselves as having a duty to represent members of the minorities with the line 'We are the only band who can represent them'. In 'Easy Being a Rebel in Your Basement Flat', they speak of the far right criticizing their music precisely because of its threatening nature and its emancipatory potential, rapping: 'Karpe has opened enough doors now, time to close some'. This awareness of their role in the public sphere indicates that Karpe is using their music to purposefully encourage individuals to take pride in and exploit their cultural hybridity regardless of their background. An analysis of the reception of Karpe's music, and whether it can be said to foreshadow a movement of any kind would form an interesting ground for a future study. Even assuming the music does simply reflect evolving trends in society,[17] however, it remains relevant as an object of study, since it provides us with an insightful account of how Karpe experience social change.

Karpe's popularity illustrates a general trend by which rap music has departed from its position as a subculture to being accepted by mainstream commercial interests in Norway (Brunstad et al. 2010). This raises questions regarding the very labelling of their music as a subcultural phenomenon. At the same time, the far-reaching popularity of Karpe's music bears the risk of turning the musical product into a commodified object, simply providing for the needs and obeying the laws of the market economy to which it is subordinated (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997). If this is so, the duo's very commodification as symbols through the popularity of their merchandise and other marketing strategies (Gjestad 2017) could risk lowering the impact of their message by diminishing both its political significance and the way it is felt by the audience. Still, the negotiation of dominant discourses typically

17. Following CDA's emphasis on language being both socially constructed and constructive, whether Karpe's lyrics reflect or influence the society within which they were written is arguably a trivial question – as it is most likely that both hold true (the question, then, would be to what extent they do).

found in subcultural expressions remains a central aspect of Karpe's music. By bringing their experiences to a wider consciousness, their music contributes to fostering a much-needed plurality of discourses in the Norwegian public sphere. Drawing on Lipsitz (1994), I therefore argue that it is specifically Karpe's ability to function through, and not outside, existing structures that characterize their music's usefulness as a political tool. The popularity of Karpe's music enables them to carry ideas and symbols of political significance between and across groups, sharing the message that they too can and should be able to benefit from the advantages of cultural hybridization to wider audiences.

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of Karpe's lyrics reveals a desire to move beyond absolutist discourses that frame identity formation as necessarily demarcated by fixed, dualist understandings of national belonging – and move towards a post-national framework in which hybrid and fluid identities can be embraced. Through their music, Karpe send a clear message to their audiences: the definition of what it means to be Norwegian needs to be extended and new ways of belonging ought to be normalized. Doing so would enable cultural minorities to exploit the advantages that come with having a multicultural background without the fear that this compromises their perceived belonging to the nation in the eyes of others.

Turning cultural expression into objects of sociological analysis reveals the multiple ways by which individuals express resistance to dominant discourses. In this case, Karpe's lyrics have provided us with a direct insight into the duo's experiences of navigating identity politics in contemporary Norway, thus applying sociological theory to lived experiences. The empirical value of this case study, therefore, lies in that it does precisely what Gullestad argues is the best way of rethinking national identities: listening to those who resist them (2002: 308).

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