

THE PEASANT GHETTO: SERBIAN HIP-HOP REVISITS THE COUNTRYSIDE

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Abstract: This paper traces the development of the Serbian hip-hop scene in its ever-changing social context from the late socialist 1980s, through the wartime 1990s, to the transitional 2000s, focusing on local conceptualizations of the notion of the ghetto and different ways in which hip-hop reflects the rural-urban divide in Serbian society. From rapping in rural dialects to satirically praising narco-agriculture, Serbian rappers have made quite a unique contribution to the hip-hop “Internationale” as a global movement with distinct origins in the New York City neighborhood of the South Bronx. Their concept of the peasant ghetto (seljački geto) is, at the same time, a form of social commentary on the state of the rural communities in the country and a diagnosis of present-day Serbia as a closed society with a legacy of international isolation following the Yugoslav wars and a peripheral and deprived position in the modern global world order. On the other hand, the substantial interactions and mutual influences between the Serbian hip-hop and turbo-folk scenes emphasized in this paper are another indication of the problematic distinction between urban and rural in the Serbian cultural context, at least in the realm of entertainment and popular music. The relationship between these two genres becomes even more interesting if hip-hop is observed as a distinct cultural foreign import with an indisputable urban background and turbo-folk is understood as the sole home-grown form of popular music in Serbia with now-remote rural origins.

Keywords: *hip-hop; Serbia; ghetto; urban-rural divide; turbo-folk*

Geto (i)storija: A Very Brief History of Serbian Hip-Hop

During the 1980s rock and pop musicians in socialist Yugoslavia started to experiment with rapping, displaying their awareness of this up-and-coming global musical trend with cultural roots in the South Bronx.¹ The first Yugoslav hip-hop release, the *Degout* EP (Jugoton, Zagreb, 1984) by Belgrade hip-hop pioneers The Master Scratch Band (otherwise a team of electro-pop producers), was recorded in Belgrade's Druga maca studio free-of-charge because the group's music was appreciated at the time as innovative and "radically different." Nevertheless, hip-hop sprouted in Serbia in the early 1980s with the formation of the first "b-boy" groups focused on breakdancing. Many of these "b-boys" were of Romani origin, and thus Serbian hip-hop might have truly emerged in the "ghetto" after all.

Serbian hip-hop tradition has it that in the late 1980s Branko Bojović, also known as Bane Sanšajn, went to the USA on a student exchange, where he found himself at an N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) concert. Thoroughly impressed with the "Black Beatles" from Compton, he sent several tapes back home and, upon returning to Belgrade in 1988, formed the band Green Cool Posse, which later reemerged as Sanšajn (Sunshine). The year 1988 also saw the formation of another pioneering hip-hop band, Who Is The Best, led by Aleksandar Džankić, also known as MC Best, who played an important role in the rise of hip-hop culture in Serbia with the *Geto* radio show he launched in 1992 on Belgrade's Radio Politika.

The early days of hip-hop in Serbia thus coincided with Slobodan Milošević's climb to power. In 1995, when the first official hip-hop albums were released, Serbia was already in a deep economic and political crisis; the country was engaged in the bloody ethnic conflicts that were raging throughout Bosnia and Croatia, isolated under UN sanctions, and practically excluded from the rest of the world. The emerging hip-hop scene felt quite detached from the spectacle of local politics that dominated the public sphere and attempted to form its own "counter-public" sphere, one preoccupied with the daily business of survival under the unfavorable circumstances. While the mass demonstrations in

¹ For example, Du Du A (the song "Hop Ap Du Ap" on the album *Primitivni ples*, 1983), Bijelo dugme ft. Bora Đorđević ("Pediculis Pubis" on *Bijelo dugme*, 1984), Riblja čorba ft. Goran Bregović ("Disko mišić" on *Istina*, 1985), and Đorđe Balašević ("Šugar rap" on *Tri posleratna druga*, 1989). Other prominent Yugoslav artists who experimented with rapping in this period include Dušan Kojić Koja (from *Disciplina kičme*) and Rambo Amadeus.

Belgrade, which lasted from November 1996 to February 1997, resonated with the slogan “Belgrade is the World,” rappers emphatically claimed “Belgrade is a Ghetto.” This voice emerged from the utterly desperate social setting, the result of political isolation and the criminalization of society.² Hip-hop began to communicate political messages to a self-contained population and age group otherwise uninterested in politics, fueling the local counterpart to what Adam Krims refers to as the “cultural resistance industry” (2000: 1). In a social context marked with isolation that constantly exposes everyone to frustration and disappointment (even those with excessive, but temporary and unstable privileges), all people can do is claim a spot within a system they basically disrespect. In the wider context of the changes youth cultures underwent throughout post-socialist Europe, which augmented the sense of loss, disorientation, and degeneration (see Szemere 1996), it was probably hip-hop that raised the loudest (and more or less unarticulated) voice. (For a thorough historical overview of the development of the hip-hop scene in Serbia, see Musić and Vukčević 2017: 85–108; Šentevska 2017a: 246–248). Under the current circumstances of the music industry in Serbia, largely affected by the government’s austerity measures and their devastating economic results, the hip-hop community seems to remain firmly in a “ghetto” imposed by harsh economic circumstances, rapidly decreasing access to mass media and wider audiences (who tend to observe hip-hop as a long-lived, yet passing fad), and the overall competitiveness of the global music market.

Making Sense of the (Imaginary) Ghetto

Already in the mid-1990s, when the first official releases came out, two driving forces centered on the notion of the ghetto powered Serbian hip-hop. I have described them (Šentevska 2017a: 247) as a “centripetal force” – epitomized by stories about a desolate life and its confines – and a “centrifugal force” – expressed by strategies of escape from such a life (either through crime, politics, or show business). The first driving force gave hip-hop a sense of self-containment and pride in representing the local – “hood,” city, country – all perceived

² *Dobro došli u Beograd, mnogo više crno nego belo, / Probaj da se buniš dobićeš utokom u čelo. / BANG, utokom u čelo, čije je to delo / Da moj grad je najveće selo.* – Welcome to Belgrade, it’s more black than white, / Try to rebel and the bullet you will get. / BANG!, bullet in the head; Whose deed it might / be, that bloody hicks are all you have met. Who Is The Best, “Welcome to Belgrade,” on the album *Welcome to Belgrade*, 1996 (Quoted in Vuković 2009: 205).

as a “ghetto.” The second led to innumerable crossovers that set the stage for rapping in any conceivable situation, from “hip hoperas” to reality TV shows and hip-hop versions of the greatest turbo-folk hits, not to mention the overwhelming presence of DJs, graffiti, hip-hop choreography, and fashion across the media landscape. According to musicologist Iva Nenić, the notion of ghetto in the Serbian hip-hop context refers to both the “ghetto” as a part of the city inhabited by members of the middle class with a perhaps overdeveloped sense of belonging to their “hood” and Serbia as a “ghetto” (Nenić 2006: 160–161). This prevailing, yet rather selective conception of the ghetto (which excludes members of economically disadvantaged communities as participants in hip-hop culture) confirms Loïc Wacquant’s observation that in the European context the use and understanding of the term is highly problematic and contestable. According to this French sociologist who has studied contemporary developments in African-American ghettos, “a ghetto is not simply a topographic entity or an aggregation of poor families and individuals, but an *institutional form*, a historically determinate, spatially-based concatenation of mechanisms of *ethnoracial closure and control*” (Wacquant 1997: 343). Moreover, the ghetto is a socio-spatial formation that is *culturally uniform* and based on the forcible relegation of a “negatively typed” population (such as Jews in medieval Europe and African-Americans in the modern United States) to a reserved “frontier territory,” where this population develops under duress a set of parallel institutions that serve both as a functional substitute for, and as a protective buffer against, the dominant institutions of the encompassing society (Wacquant 1997: 343). Put differently, four major forms of racial domination – namely, categorization, discrimination, segregation, and exclusionary violence – qualify a place as a “real” ghetto (Wacquant 1995; see also Venkatesh 2000). Accordingly, what is perceived as a ghetto in Europe (Western *and* Eastern) usually does not meet the grade. Hip-hop narratives of marginality and their ghettocentric imagery communicate a metaphor, not the real ghetto: hip-hop now dominantly “lives in the ghetto of the white imagination” (Queeley 2003: 2). Searching for the “real ghetto” in Serbian hip-hop is not likely to take us to places that meet Wacquant’s criteria (such as Roma settlements that are real and are ghettos),³ but rather to the middle-class homes of the Eastern European counterparts

³ Even the acclaimed rap duo Gipsy Mafia from Zrenjanin, brothers Skill and Buddy O. G. (Ferid and Emran Ajeti) did not grow up in a Roma settlement (see Vujančić 2016). On the Romani hip-hop culture in Serbia, see Banić-Grubišić 2013.

to “wiggas” (“white niggers”; see Kitwana 2005; Neal 2004; Yousman 2003; Ledbetter 1995).

In the turbulent 1990s (against the backdrop of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia), one part of Belgrade developed a mythical aura of being the ultimate “ghetto within a ghetto,” that is, within “the great ghetto” of Serbia – New Belgrade (Novi Beograd), which is also the mythical birthplace of Serbian hip-hop. Initially conceived as the new administrative and symbolical capital of socialist Yugoslavia, New Belgrade reflected all the political and economic transformations of the country (Backović 2010, Blagojević 2007), becoming in the late-socialist period “notorious” mostly for its “boredom.” Built upon a marshy wasteland between the Danube and Sava Rivers, with scarce public landmarks and largely lacking in content other than apartment blocks and spacious parks, New Belgrade was perceived from both within and without as a “collective dorm.” The 1990s saw a general decline in the quality of life in New Belgrade (as indeed everywhere else in Serbia): along with the general crisis in society and the new (proto)capitalist economy, privatization of housing brought unresolved issues concerning the maintenance of buildings, facades, elevators, plumbing, and so forth. The ageing modern buildings of the “proud new Belgrade” began to be perceived as the “heart of darkness” of the isolated and criminalized Serbia. And it is precisely here where hip-hop entered the picture with the first graffiti art from Blok 45 (Radošević 2009).

Nevertheless, after the political ousting of Slobodan Milošević in October 2000, New Belgrade entered a new era of post-socialist development. Foreign investors from the banking, telecommunications, real estate, energy, retail, and wholesale trade sectors found the area particularly attractive for a number of reasons (proximity to the city center across the Sava River; good transportation and communal infrastructure; plenty of vacant land for development; resolved property and ownership issues; and a well-kept real estate registry, unlike in most of Belgrade’s municipalities, where the ownership registry is rather chaotic as a result of communist nationalization and land speculation in the 1990s). The socialist “collective dorm” / post-socialist “ghetto” has been transformed into the new business and trade center of the city and the country; this part of Belgrade has experienced the most striking changes. Due to the rapid development of New Belgrade, real estate prices here are considerably higher than the Belgrade average (Backović 2010: 145), and with new residential areas affordable only to members of the political, business, and entertainment elite, New Belgrade has been transformed from a “neighborhood as a community”

into a “neighborhood as a commodity” (Petrović 2007: 3; see also Szelenyi 1996). Finally, the question “Is Blok 70 really a ghetto?” was answered by Stevan Vuković in the following terms: “No, it isn’t, except for those whose ghettocentric imagination is running wild” (Vuković 2009: 220).

Just like France’s HLMs (*habitation à loyer modéré*, the form of housing dominating suburban working-class neighborhoods with moderate rents) were transposed in socialist Yugoslavia into urban projects of leveling for the socialist middle class, genre patterns and narratives of French ghettocentric films were adopted by post-Yugoslav filmmakers and, consequently, music video directors. The depiction of Serbia as a closed society, the country’s isolation (rightful or not) from the world, and life in a ghetto are themes that have dominated Serbian cinema since the early 1990s (see Daković 2010a, 2010b). Mathieu Kassovitz’s 1995 “ghetto film” *La Haine* was a major influence. New Belgrade eventually found a place on international movie screens as a “French-style ghetto” in Luc Besson’s productions *Banlieue 13* (2004) and *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum* (2009) featuring David Belle, the founder of parkour.

New Belgrade’s “notorious” tower blocks became a favorite home for overlapping ghetto and “gangsta” film narratives, and with the overall sinking of Belgraders down the social ladder its ugly concrete blocks transformed on screen into realms of crime and anxiety. This imaginary ghetto, however, did not reside solely in the concrete blocks of New Belgrade: “When necessary, it moved downtown or almost anywhere around Belgrade: ‘the ghetto’ was and still is a mobile metaphor for a ‘camp’ for the victims of transition – those who failed to find a proper place in the post-socialist economy” (Šentevska 2017a: 250).

The Serbian version of hip-hop shares with the 1990s’ “subcultures of warriors’ chic” (*potkulture ratničkog šika*; see Marić 1998) a fascination with the mythical *sponzoruše* (sugar babes, or gold diggers) – central characters in “ghetto fabulous” (or “boughetto” or “hood rich”) narratives on living the high life in one’s humble surroundings, adopted from low-income urban America and adjusted to local conditions. This label applies to people who enjoy the “bling-bling lifestyle” based on ostensible glamor without actually possessing anything valuable in material terms. This obsession with material goods and status symbols – money, gold, cars, clothes (or “uptown couture” in general) – gained momentum owing to lifestyle-conscious mainstream hip-hop performers such as Sean Combs, Pharrell Williams, and Jay-Z, not to mention the fashion industry epitomized by brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton. The economic resources for maintaining a ghetto fabulous lifestyle normally include

social welfare, family assistance, and various illegal activities. In 1990s Serbia this lifestyle was largely associated with the post-socialist gray economy, war profiteering, and economic reliance on relatives who had emigrated.

Non-Western hip-hop scenes often adopt formal elements from America in a straightforward, “literal” manner. The same applies to hip-hop’s main thematic concerns – the critical reflection of the social reality and representations of cultural identity (i.e., of the ghetto). Typically, we do not “discover music of such violence in places of great misery like Ethiopia or the Congo – unless it’s imported American hip-hop” (McWhorter 2003). The conventional imagery of hip-hop videos supports the major themes of belonging (to the “hood”) and struggle (strategies of survival in a violent local environment). According to Tricia Rose, nothing is more important for a hip-hop video’s narrative than situating a rapper in his (or her) milieu, among one’s crew or gang. Hip-hop videos are typically set in subway trains, buses, abandoned buildings – almost exclusively in African-American neighborhoods – with lavish use of shots depicting favorite street corners, intersections, parking lots, basketball courts, school yards, rooftops, and the familiar faces of local “homies.” Rappers’ insistence on depicting their “homies” and their “hoods” turned the spotlight on the black American ghetto (Rose 1994: 10–11). However, “where the ghetto has been culturally shackled to a negative symbolic configuration of images and ideas, the ’hood offers a new terminology and discursive frame that can simultaneously address conditions in all ’hoods everywhere” (Forman 2002b: 65). These genre conventions are widely adopted in Serbian hip-hop videos addressing “hood” subjects. The “hood” as a “floating signifier” of universality generally stands for themes of deprivation and struggle in harsh and often violent (criminal) circumstances. On the other hand, the “hood” as a marker of locality translates into visual tropes of belonging, loyalty, and patriotism. For example, Serbian hip-hop’s affinity for the epic poetry tradition and asymmetric decasyllabic verse occasionally translates into sagas of underworld heroes following the “code of the street”⁴ in the footsteps of epic Balkan figures. See, for example, Škabo’s video for the song “Mare, batice.” Its main protagonist is a contemporary street version of Marko Mrnjavčević, a fourteenth-century Serbian ruler venerated in Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, and Bulgarian epic poetry who acquired supernatural powers under his “heroic” name of Kraljević Marko.

⁴ The “set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence” (Anderson 1999: 33; see also Kubrin 2005 and Keyes 2002).

In urban hip-hop videos, certain visual elements function as anchors that resolve the discrepancies between the metaphorical and the real, the local and the universal. They include

- 1) Cars – symbols of wealth, empowerment, and (even more importantly) social and spatial mobility. Cars are the most effective vehicles for crossing lines and getting out of the ghetto, or wherever else one should get out from. They provide a safe spot where one can observe and reflect on one's natural habitat. Cars are also instrumental in impressing the opposite sex.
- 2) Basketball courts – the supreme symbol of the universality of the local. Where there is realness, authenticity, and community to be expressed, someone must be playing street basketball.
- 3) Rooftops – the ghetto observed from a rooftop somehow loses its borders. The sense of restraint is also diminished (Šentevska 2014: 272).

What qualifies as a ghetto in hip-hop culture is best defined in visual terms. Serbia's version of the ultimate ghetto – the blocks of New Belgrade – provides the most familiar imagery – members of the hip-hop community, local grocers, elderly neighbors, kids, dogs, cars, motorcycles, apartment buildings, skate parks, graffiti-clad walls, and, of course, basketball courts.⁵

As already noted, the imaginary ghetto does not reside solely in the remote suburbs of Belgrade: for example, in the video “Kraj” MC Lud describes the tough life in the very heart of Belgrade, particularly in the neighborhood of Dorćol. Belgrade can also be conceived of as “one big hood”: rapper and music video director Đolo and his friends send a message of pride and attachment to their hometown in the video “Moj Beograd,” which features many of the city's historical landmarks. In another example, Ding Dong's video “Živela razlika” focuses on the local community members in the Serbian city of Niš (including waiters, dentists, and Chinese shopkeepers): they all perform an impromptu dance based on the track's main topic (sex). Niš has produced some of the Serbian hip-hop scene's wittiest raps (often delivered in the local dialect), in addition to one of the rare Serbian socially conscious rap videos, “Centrifuga.” In it, the rappers argue for decentralizing political power in the country and claim that the authorities in Belgrade bear the responsibility for parceling Serbia into ghettos of underdevelopment. A variation on the theme “the whole country is (still) a ghetto” is developed by rappers who address the major question of

⁵ For examples, see Šentevska 2017: 257.

their generation: “Should I stay or should I go?” that is, leave “the ghetto” (Serbia) as an unwilling economic migrant.⁶

In Serbian hip-hop videos with more pronounced “gangsta” themes, even dull and “cozy” neighborhoods may transform into wild zones of (street) crime and the thug lifestyle (Quinn 2005; Watts 1997). (In reality, crime operates on completely different levels.) In the video “Never Walk Alone” by Monogamija and Mikri Maus, Belgrade in its entirety transforms into a nasty “gangsta ghetto”: “Live fast but pray to the Mother of God, *never walk alone* so you don’t end up in a hospital” is the moral of their story. “Gangsta” narratives of survival on the violent streets are often backed with images of urban decay generated by abandoned construction sites or industrial facilities made obsolete in the post-socialist economy. In Škola’s video “Stari grad” we encounter a Los Angeles–style ghetto in the heart of Priboj, a small industrial town on the remote Serbian border with Montenegro. Serbian hip-hop’s enchantment with the mythical figure of the outlaw, as well as contempt for those who “serve, protect, and break a nigga’s neck” (in the words of Ice Cube), often translates into prison and police imagery. The police’s ambivalent role in society (as an object of both fascination and aversion) translates into hip-hop videos where rappers play “bad cop” characters, for example, MC Škabo in the PKS video “Murija.”

The Peasant Ghetto: Serbian Hip-Hop Goes Rural

As we have seen, in the Serbian hip-hop discourse, the “hood” and the “ghetto” are one and the same – metaphorical expressions of life in a closed society with metaphorically elastic geographical borders. These terms can refer to neighborhoods in Belgrade or in any other Serbian town, or the whole city is conceived (and depicted) as a “ghetto-hood”; sometimes the whole country is the ghetto in question. In some cases, though, these labels are applied to non-urban environments, specifically when Serbian hip-hop “revisits” the countryside. Thus, rural environments may equally (and rightfully) qualify as ghettos.

The video “Pozorištance”⁷ by rap duo D-Fence from Niš (consisting of MCs Marconiero and Joker) might be considered a paradigmatic representation of the cultural dichotomy between the city and the countryside with its use of

⁶ See, e.g., “Ne znam dokle” by Jach ft. LMR.

⁷ Track seven from their album *Urbanizam i renesansa* (2003).

appropriated genre conventions associated with hip-hop as a distinctly urban culture. Dressed in his urban hip-hop outfit, Marconiero represents his “hood,” an unglamorous area of Niš, a city elsewhere described by members of the same hip-hop scene as a ghetto of underdevelopment and a junkyard (I Bee ft. Joker, “Dubretara”). Joker, on the other hand, impersonates an “authentic” peasant and stands for an equally unglamorous rural community, describing the daily routines and hardships of an elderly peasant who, among the other inconveniences of rural life, rarely takes a bath (*retko idem na kupanje*). Although Marconiero admits that he comes from a long line of Serbian peasants, both rappers, each in the dialect of the community they represent, rhyme a list of grievances, complaints about life in post-socialist society, which is equally difficult on both sides of the urban-rural divide – except for those who enjoy its privileges. In keeping with hip-hop’s genre conventions and its emphasis on “realness” (Forman 2002a) and “authenticity” (Judy 2004), the village is rendered here as a “peasant ghetto,” inhabited mostly by poor, dirty, and deprived old people.

This depiction is far removed from the “ethno aesthetics” discussed in depth by Serbian ethnologist Ivan Čolović. According to this author, since the mid-1990s “ethno music” in Serbia has been marketed as a new genre of popular music with folk roots that fortuitously evades the negative connotations of turbo-folk, the overwhelming contemporary folk genre notoriously lacking in artistic value and spoiled by foreign influences. Ethno music is perceived as “national in spirit and modern in form” and even “politically correct from the standpoint of democratic standards, as it partakes in the process of intercultural dialogs” (Čolović 2006: 5–6). Visually, such music is customarily accompanied by idealized rural images of bucolic beauty and environmental harmony (Šentevska 2015: 91–94). As the video “Pozorištanca” (though not altogether immune to ethno-nationalist exclusivity) testifies, hip-hop’s insistence on realness may challenge the ethno-nationalist discourse embodied in the visual imagery of the “ethno village.”

It is not surprising that criticism (to be precise, parody) of ethno aesthetics would come from the hip-hop inspired turbo-folk camp. For example, in his popular satirical song “Cijelo selo šmrče bijelo” (2006), turbo-folk performer DJ Krmak sings about cocaine addiction in a rural setting. Hip-hop inspired turbo-folk performers were not alone in introducing the hip-hop theme of narcotics abuse in a rural environment. Rock band Atheist Rap from Novi Sad exploited the “gangsta” theme of narco-agriculture in their animated video “Dve žetve

godišnje,” which discusses the economic advantages (and legal disadvantages) of cultivating *Cannabis indica* in the fertile flatlands of Vojvodina. The theme has also been adopted by satirical hip-hop acts, such as the collaborative effort between Voodoo Popeye, Big Sale, and Tattoo Locko and their “Distributer vutre” video. In a rural setting, these robust, heavily tattooed Serbian rappers describe quotidian scenes of the gangsta lifestyle centered around farming (and distributing) narcotic crops. Such scenes include shooting a chicken with a M57-TT pistol (a copy of the Russian Tokarev TT-33 semi-automatic pistol) to be grilled for lunch in a vernacular solid fuel cooker. In the song “Indo grasa” Ajs Nigrutin describes the advantages of the small-scale farming of cannabis (on his balcony) in “South Central Kotež” (a remote northern neighborhood of Belgrade), whereas the minimalist video takes him and his “homies” to an authentic Serbian cornfield. In his characteristic easygoing manner Ajs Nigrutin elaborates the theme of the peasant ghetto in his song “Njiva (Seljački geto).” The ghetto in question is a place where one gets up at six o’clock in the morning and spends the rest of the day occupied with hard manual labor and shoplifting from the local grocery shop:

Mučenja ovakvog nema nigde na svetu.

Takav je, brate, život u seljačkom getu.

There’s no such torture anywhere in the world.

Such is life, bro, in the peasant ghetto.

When Serbian rappers revisit the countryside they usually assume the position of sympathetic outsiders who come from urban ghettos and encounter in the villages familiar situations of hardship and underprivilege (see, for example, Voodoo Popeye’s “Preklane na raspustu”). Nonetheless, rare exceptions do exist, such as Joker’s contribution to “Pozorištance” or Ajs Nigrutin’s insider account of the peasant ghetto in “Njiva.” However, rappers usually maintain a superior position as urban visitors “only passing through,” which is communicated through parody and a humorous approach to village life. This also means that they (e.g., Ajs Nigrutin) rap in the urban dialects of their own “hoods.”

However, the approach adopted by MC Cache (Milan Koprivica Čače) and his singing companion Nemanja Đorđević Đavo from the small Serbian town of Kuršumlija is distinctly different. Although Cache also employs explosive humor in his lyrics, he assumes an insider position as a rapping peasant who describes

the daily routines in the peasant ghetto, delivering his verses in a distinctly rural local dialect; thus he parodies the clash of civilizations between backward rural life in transitional Serbia and everything that hip-hop stands for. As he elaborates: “So far we had only these raps where everyone was (exceptions excluded) singing about the same things... ‘me, brother; ghetto, brother; cars, brother; dope, brother; bitches, brother, and so on. I think that rap can offer much more, because there are lots of subjects which are interesting, but nobody bothers to deal with them” (Cache in Rogović, 2016). Combining the hip-hop traditions of rapping about local ghetto themes and sampling familiar music, Cache and Đavo deal with typical situations in rural Serbia, incorporating popular musical motifs drawn from Serbian turbo-folk hits, hip-hop classics, and international pop tunes into their tracks. In his raps Cache describes a visit to the local marketplace (“Pijačni četvrtak” sampling Coolio’s “Gangster’s Paradise”) and a local village fair (“Na putu za Lukovo” sampling Mile Ignjatović’s “Na putu za ludilo”); the process of making local plum brandy (“Kakvu sam rakiju pek’o” sampling Medeni Mesec’s “Nikad nikom nisam reko”); a flamboyant village party (“Ispratnica” sampling Sinan Sakić’s “Sudbina me na put šalje”); and otherwise not-so-funny topics such as the disappearance of old village schools (“Stara škola” sampling Ana Bekuta’s “Kralj ponoći”) or heating problems during freezing-cold winters (“Dizduvava” sampling DJ Bobo’s “Chihuahua”).

In his use of rural dialect Cache thus departs from the “rapping visitor” approach to the Serbian countryside and Serbian mainstream hip-hop’s treatment of village themes. It may be claimed that he is following a completely different tradition of musically parodying (modern) village life, namely, that of the Yugoslav band Rokeri s Moravu. It should be noted that Rokeri s Moravu were also radically different throughout their long career (1977–2008), becoming a unique phenomenon in the Yugoslav popular music and entertainment industry. Their music represented a radical shift from the then-dominant style of newly composed folk music (NCFM; the historical precedent of turbo-folk), which in its earlier phases constructed an ideal, nostalgic, and romantic picture of the Serbian village and its pastoral world. Village life, which has been significantly changed by modernization, mostly stayed outside that picture. Likewise, the linguistic variety of rural dialects and idioms mostly remained outside the realm of NCFM. Lyricists typically used the standard, neutral Serbian language to describe (almost imaginary) rural life. According to Tanja Petrović, Rokeri s Moravu’s radical intervention took place on two levels: the thematic and the linguistic. They were “rockers” who intruded into the pastoral, rustic world of

the Serbian village in the Morava River Valley. And they consistently performed their songs in the local dialect (the Kosovo-Resava dialect of central Serbia). She notes that “such a linguistic strategy was a major and unprecedented innovation in the musical landscape of the time. They were the first Yugoslav band to consistently use this dialect, and the first to sing about the world of the Serbian peasant using his own idiom” (Petrović 2017: 103). Rokeri challenged idyllic, pastoral images of the Serbian village by bringing in elements of and references to global popular culture (from John Travolta’s disco-dancing to Jane Fonda’s workouts)⁸ and singing about the hybrid reality of the modern village, using parody and unlikely fashion choices as their most distinct trademarks.

As for Serbian rappers, whether they assume the position of outsiders or insiders in the peasant ghetto, they all tend to portray the rural speakers of southern dialects as “pre-modern, ignorant, funny, bizarre people” (Petrović 2015: 123).⁹ According to Stef Jansen, in the Serbian context specifically, the relative social consensus on the backward character of the rural never resulted in a definite agreement as to where one should draw the dividing line between urbanity and rurality: “It was precisely the absence of such a certainty that was constructed as a symptom of underdevelopment” (Jansen 2005b: 162). Hence, following the logic of Bourdieu’s distinction, few people can safely assert their distance from “village mud.” This clash between “mud” and “asphalt” is the central dichotomy of Serbian culture. Asphalt connotes urbanity by birth and ancestry, entailing a generational distance from agricultural occupations. According to Serbian sociologist Ivana Spasić, asphalt does not connote a simple eulogy to the city and the devaluation of the country: “it is rather advocating the necessity of keeping the two apart” (Spasić 2006: 221). Namely, “in internal cultural hierarchies of contemporary Serbia, ‘urbanity’ is a most broadly applicable identity/discursive resource to build strategies of asserting one’s own superiority against ‘others’” (Spasić 2006: 225). Again, *urbocentric exclusivity*, a term borrowed from Jensen (2005a: 267), generates social divisions and low-intensity conflicts whose battleground is, in effect, a mythical city. That is to say that it is neither clear, nor particularly important, whether this city of sophisticated and well-mannered urban dwellers exists or had ever existed in the first place.

⁸ Although hip-hop did not claim a significant place in their arsenal of global cultural references, Rokeri s Moravu did flirt with rapping throughout their long career (e.g., in the songs “Kvarne stoperke,” “Proja,” “SMS,” and “Venčavam se draga popodne u sredu”).

⁹ On the use of southern dialects in Serbian hip-hop, see Petrović 2015: 53–60.

This play with imaginary borderlines manifests itself particularly well in the realms of popular music and entertainment (Šentevska 2017b: 172–177) – in this case, in the mutual affinities and feedback loop between hip-hop and turbo-folk. To begin with, according to the conventions of the hip-hop genre, Serbian rappers flaunt their success mostly at parties featuring a swimming pool (or, alternatively, a river boat or a barbecue) and lots of scantily clad, “ghetto fabulous hos.” In accordance with Tricia Rose’s observation, their “tales of sexual domination falsely relieve [males’] lack of self-worth and limited access to economic and social markers for heterosexual masculine power” (Rose 1994: 15) and reflect the deep-seated sexism that pervades the Serbian music business and society in general. In the evolution of Serbian hip-hop we might trace the transformation of party imagery from innocent teenage gatherings to decadent VIP or gangsta-style parties occasionally featuring celebrity “hos” from the turbo-folk camp (see, e.g., “Pridi mi polako” by Juice ft. Mina Kostić).¹⁰ This celebration of luxury addresses those who are denied traditional paths to a positive self-image, as it seems that self- and social esteem can only be achieved through leading an expensive lifestyle as a coping strategy. As Jeffries notes: “Mainstream hip-hop in this context becomes a form of escapism, as commercially successful rappers invite their audience to identify with a ridiculous and largely staged life of luxury that ordinary people will never experience” (2011: 71).

In their pursuit of wealth and success Serbian rappers have become involved in many “ethnic crossover” projects – working together with world music performers¹¹ and turbo-folk acts,¹² for example. These mutual fascinations and exchanges are well expressed in Juice’s video “Farma drama,” which celebrates his participation in the reality television show *Farma*. Here we can see the notable Serbian rapper in the company of a number of turbo-folk celebrities (including the veteran hip-hop dancer Funky G) amidst tractors and farm animals, and occasionally wearing the traditional peasant costume together with his hip-hop entourage. Turbo-folk receives influences from hip-hop with particular enthusiasm: hip-hop imagery pervades turbo-folk videos in all kinds of imaginative combinations.¹³ Turbo-folk (or turbo-pop) stars and

¹⁰ An interesting cross-cultural collaboration is the song “Ole Ole” by Snoop Dogg ft. Ljupka Stević.

¹¹ See, e.g., “Đipaj” by Cvija with Sanja Ilić & Balkanika.

¹² See, e.g., “Harmonika” by MlaDJa & Big Time ft. Jovan Perišić & Aca Olujić.

¹³ See, e.g., “Ciao amore” by Dara Bubamara ft. Big Ali; “Nema više cile-mile” by Đogani ft. Mile Kitić; “Kraljevi grada” by MC Stojan ft. Aca Lukas; “Muške price” by DJ Shone ft. Emina Jahović & Teča Gambino; and “Gadure” by Milan Stanković ft. Mile Kitić & Mimi Mercedes.

starlets eagerly assume the roles of black ghetto “bitches”¹⁴ or tough thugs, often flirting with mild pornography (see Miller-Young 2008; Shelton 1997). In a recent example, turbo-folk veteran Mile Kitić released a cover of French rap group Sexion d’assaut’s song “Désolé” (from their 2010 album *L’école des points vitaux*). His version, “Paklene godine,” thus launched the newly invented “gangsta folk” genre, which is comparable to other unlikely matches between hip-hop and local music idioms with (more or less remote) folk roots. These Serbian examples, alongside the Albanian song “Katunari Gangsta” (peasant gangsta) by Gjini (actor Bes Kallaku; Tochka 2017: 172–174), Turkish arabesk rappers (Işik and Basaran 2017), and Sakha (Yakutian) rapper Gaudeamus and his ironic descriptions of a Siberian village (Ventsel and Peers 2017: 235), mark the emergence of a new hip-hop “Internationale” that pushes the imaginary and real boundaries of the urban-rural divide and redefines the notion of the ghetto based on local circumstances.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, hip-hop in Serbia has been powered by two driving forces centered on the notion of the ghetto. One can be termed *centripetal* force (reflections on the desolate life within its confines) and the other *centrifugal* (strategies of escape from the ghetto, either through crime, politics, or show business). The former gives hip-hop a sense of self-containment and pride in representing the local – “hood,” city, country – all perceived as a ghetto. The latter has led to innumerable crossover collaborations, setting the stage for rapping in any conceivable situation, from “hip hoperas” and reality TV shows to “minstrel” hip-hop versions of the greatest turbo-folk hits.

However, as French sociologist Loïc Wacquant and other scholars argue, outside of the context of the black American ghetto (the original home of hip-hop), the “ghetto” may be conceived only as a metaphorical social statement and a metaphorical expression of (collective) deprivation. The history and urban transformations of New Belgrade are discussed in this paper as a paradigmatic instance of the “ghettocentric imagination running wild,” where the social reality of an urban area most strikingly departs from its representations in fictional narratives and, especially, in hip-hop culture. The imaginary ghetto,

¹⁴ Some examples include “E pa neću” by Sandra Afrika; “Mili, mili” by Dragana Mirković, and “U tvojim kolima” by Funky G ft. Juice.

a space with elastic and elusive borders, thus becomes a metaphor; it is a camp for the victims of transition, for those who have failed to find a proper place in the post-socialist economy. What qualifies as a ghetto in hip-hop culture is best described in visual terms; therefore, music videos have been chosen in this study to showcase the different modes of representation and the different ideological positions underlying these representations.

In the Serbian hip-hop discourse rural environments may equally (and rightfully) qualify as ghettos. Elaborated on the fringes of the mainstream hip-hop scene in Serbia, the concept of the *peasant ghetto* (*seljački geto*) is a form of social commentary on the present state of rural communities in the country. At the same time, the peasant ghetto is a metaphorical description of Serbia as a basically closed society with a dark legacy of international isolation during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which occupies a peripheral and deprived position in the modern global world order.

The peasant ghetto nevertheless reflects a fundamental dichotomy in Serbian society, namely, the assumed deep cleavage between urban and rural cultures. In this paper, the notion of the *ghetto* is identified in this particular context as the point of convergence of the two sides of this cleavage. Serbian rappers, whether they assume the position of outsiders or insiders of the peasant ghetto, tend to portray “modern peasants” as poor, ignorant, funny, or bizarre folk, resorting to parody as seemingly the only adequate (and attractive) way to address the deprivations of the country’s rural communities and peripheral (semi-rural) towns. In a cultural context where urbanity is the most broadly applicable resource for asserting one’s superiority, rappers seem to address rural themes from a superior urban (or semi-urban) standpoint.

The substantial interactions and mutual influences between the Serbian hip-hop and turbo-folk scenes emphasized in this paper are seen as an indication of the problematic distinction between the urban and the rural in the Serbian cultural context, at least in the realm of entertainment and popular music. This interaction becomes even more interesting if hip-hop is observed as a distinct cultural foreign import with an indisputable urban background and turbo-folk is understood as the sole home-grown form of popular music in Serbia with now remote rural origins. The hybrid “hip-hop meets turbo-folk” genre contributes to the new hip-hop “Internationale” that challenges the imaginary and real borders of the urban-rural divide based on local circumstances.

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