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## Brothers after arms - Balkan rappers as public intellectuals

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The rappers Edo Maajka and Frenkie (top left and right) are well-known musicians in Bosnia. Serbian rapper Marčelo (above) in Mostar 2015, when he participated in the program Perspektiva.

# BROTHERS AFTER ARMS

## BALKAN RAPPERS AS POST-WAR PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

by Dragana Cvetanović

The patterns for studying the wars and societies of the Balkans have been developed mainly from the institutional perspective. However, when examining social changes in the region, discussing identity questions, or analyzing political situations, we have to examine the grassroots level –the people and their power to incite social change. This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of the action that emerges organically from the population itself, a subject that, thus far, has primarily been studied from the perspective of social movement and civil society studies, but has received far less attention in the fields of linguistics and cultural studies. This article analyzes how rap artists contribute to societal, political, and cultural healing and find ways of understanding everyday life in transitional society.

Fans and the growing number of hip-hop scholars define hip-hop as a diverse cultural field with its own ideologies, community activism, and consumerism expressed through both lyrics and artistic engagement. Even when hip-hop entered the public sphere of worldwide cultural discourses, one of its main features, live practice, seen in “face-to-face dynamics”,<sup>1</sup> remained alive through modes of rap activism in communities. This article sets out to analyze these modes of *rap activism through live practices and performances*. Jacqueline Urla<sup>2</sup> sees rappers as retaining strong ties to their communities in maintaining their identity as both entertainers and community spokespersons. Jeffrey Decker<sup>3</sup> argues that “nation-conscious rappers” constitute a form of organic intellectualism. I would go one step fur-

ther and argue that Balkan rappers who are socially and politically engaged have the potential to make a genuine sociopolitical impact because of the emancipatory interest reflected in their music and lyrics, as well as in videos, public speeches, films, books, and video discussion programs. All these actions shape the civil society by confronting the unwillingness to deal with postwar sentiments and the intensifying nationalism among the postwar generation and the younger generation now succeeding it. In cultures where political and social communication is still colored by nationalism and taboos, rap speaks up.<sup>4</sup>

THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUALISM of the three Balkan rappers portrayed in this article is displayed, first, in the lyrical message of three songs that make up the *Crème de la crème* trilogy, and second, in three separate narratives on the rappers’ activism outside music. The lyrical and artistic orientation of the three rappers has been directed from the start of their careers towards engaged, transnational rap music, which is largely appreciated,

but also criticized when audiences understand it as patronizing. To map out the various forms of the three rappers’ public engagement, I will examine texts from the interviews I have conducted, as well as from interviews in mainstream and social media, and the artists’ videos and films, both self-made and professionally produced.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the relevant literature on public intellectualism and engaged music, which is contextualized in the second section with regard to

### abstract

This paper analyzes how the Serbian rapper Marčelo and the Bosnian rappers Edo Maajka and Frenkie have – from their first steps in hip-hop culture – tried to build a common understanding of postwar sentiments and to diagnose newborn societies in the Balkans. I argue that Balkan hip-hop is a form of cultural activism that mobilizes people for social change. Through their transnational projects, lyrics, and participation in the public sphere, these rappers have become postwar public intellectuals who aim to provoke social change and have contributed to how these societies have moved on after violent conflict.

**KEYWORDS:** hip-hop, public intellectualism, former Yugoslavia, discourse studies, identity.

Balkan rap. The third section examines the impact of lyrical and non-musical activism. The conclusion reviews postwar public intellectualism and rappers' activism as a way of answering the rappers' personal calling and filling a generational need.

## Public intellectualism and rap music in the Balkans

Public or organic intellectualism has been attributed to popular music in the academic research on the subject by authors including Abrams, Lipsits, Delgado, and Lusane.<sup>5</sup> In particular, theorists such as Mijatović and Steinberg<sup>6</sup> have shown how popular music becomes a facet of social movements. Dalibor Mišina<sup>7</sup> has discussed various engaged music forms, especially new wave, in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup> Intellectualism found in popular culture is "public" by nature, since musicians and artists are public figures. Antonio Gramsci<sup>9</sup> coined the term "organic intellectuals" in contradistinction to "traditional" intellectuals. While the traditional intellectual legitimizes the current system, the organic one is born spontaneously from a social group in order to raise its self-awareness and to ensure its greater cohesion. Mišina and Mijatović have also suggested that musical engagement and the artist's responsibility to society have their origins in the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of *littérature engagée*.<sup>10</sup> Steinberg<sup>11</sup> argues that rock is a salient vehicle for political expression when politicized popular culture is combined with the development of a distinctive urban rock subculture. In Abrams' research, the rappers of the "hardcore genre insist that their role as artists and poets is inseparable from their role as insightful inquirers into reality and teachers of truth". Abrams finds support in Edward Said's clarification that "today everyone who works in any field connected either with the production or distribution of knowledge is an intellectual in Gramsci's sense".<sup>12</sup> Another concept coined by Lusane<sup>13</sup> is "ghetto revolutionaries". Zygmunt Bauman<sup>14</sup> argues that intellectuals have a contemporary role as "interpreters" in the conversation across discourses rather than as tradition "legislators" who arbitrate on their respective values.<sup>15</sup>

For the Balkan rap artists and activists Edo Maajka, Frenkie, and Marčelo, intellectualism arises in their comprehension that their societies have lost opportunities but retain a huge potential.<sup>16</sup> Through their lyrics and their activities outside of music, these rappers are "involved in the generation and circulation of ideas reflecting the needs of that community".<sup>17</sup> All three, in their thirties, are well-established artists in the region, have fans outside Bosnia and Serbia, and share mutually intelligible languages.<sup>18</sup> They are part of a regional rap generation consisting of rappers making various styles of rap music, including socially engaged styles, but it is their activities outside of music that give them yet another artistic and personal dimension. Most of the rappers who started

their careers in the 1990s were by definition in a position to make socially engaged rhymes, since they were the first generation that was growing up under the extreme conditions of wars, state transitions, and the criminalization of society. Rappers were aware of the risk of becoming enemies of young, authoritarian states. Nineteen-nineties rap music from the region triumphed, however, in capturing the rebellious character of its time and the arising local hip-hop culture. The subsequent phase of postwar rap encompassed the more profound problems of a transnational nature, such as reconciliation, neonationalism and the post-conflict sentiments, that turned out to be even harder to solve than the war itself. With the rap scenes well established by this time, part of the audience was willing to judge the engaged rappers' activism as moralizing and stepping into more intellectual spheres.<sup>19</sup>

A few other artists from the region could be considered to fit the same identification category of public intellectuals, such as the Croatian band Elemental and its female MC, Remi. Rap artist activism is largely a generational phenomenon, since the environment confronted this generation with especially problematic issues. In stating that "I'm unhappy because my generation did nothing to make things better in my country," and "I will continue with rapping until things are changed",<sup>20</sup> Edo Maajka expressed his strong discontent primarily in generational terms. His statement is an explanation of why he writes the lyrics he does and how he sees his own actions behind the lyrics. The notion of public pedagogy, introduced by Alexandra D'Urso,<sup>21</sup> conceptualizes Edo's and his friends' social activism outside rapping, which is aimed at opening a dialogue and striving for more understanding among youth under the strong pressure of turbulent times.

**HIP-HOP FROM** the region of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia has its roots in the still shared Yugoslav context, into which hip-hop culture was introduced from two directions in the early 1980s. New wave, postpunk musicians who recognized the innovative character of rap started incorporating its features into their music,<sup>22</sup> while at the same time party music connoisseurs, disco and funk dancers, and DJs embraced hip-hop simultaneously with the rest of Western Europe. Under the influence of American acts such as Public Enemy, Run DMC, The Beastie Boys and other artists on the Def Jam label, a more articulated local scene (or scenes) began to appear, especially in Croatia and Serbia. During the

1990s, local hip-hop and rap were still an exclusive subculture led by local young enthusiasts, motivated by and cooperating with local radio shows. The program "Geto" on Radio Politika in Belgrade was launched in 1992; "Black-out Project" on Radio 101 in Zagreb started in 1993, and "FM Jam" started in the Bosnian town of Tuzla in 1999.<sup>23</sup> These radio shows had a huge influence on the development of the local rap scenes by playing new demos and encouraging newcomers. Rap fans followed artists across the new borders, although it was

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not easy to get the desired material on cassettes or other media. The first collaboration between Croatian and Serbian MCs took place in 1997, when Phat Phillie from Zagreb and Reksona from Belgrade got together to organize rap gigs in their respective cities.

Yugoslav and later regional (that is, Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian) scenes went through the typical phases of local versions of hip-hop: establishing artistic legitimacies by rapping in English, imitating authentic African American rappers, and “breaking your own language into rap language” while relying on local resources to make local rap.<sup>24</sup> During the 1990s, when most European rap scenes were on the rapidly progressive path of self-identification, so too were the Balkan scenes, although they were affected by the turbulent events. The break-up of Yugoslavia, the economic transition from socialism to capitalism, wars, criminalization, economic sanctions against Serbia, and the country’s isolation created an existential framework in which young rappers building local hip-hop culture could feel themselves closer to the original, ghettoized African-American and other racial minorities in American cities. Rap with a sociopolitical message thus became more the norm than an exception in the Balkan rap of the 1990s. And since hip-hop lyrics are usually rooted in the idea of systematic struggle against racial and social inequality,<sup>25</sup> generational struggles against former-socialists-turned-nationalists in the authoritarian regimes of young Balkan states fit into hip-hop’s ideological mission.<sup>26</sup> Yet Balkan hip-hop was at first a jealously kept secret among privileged kids, accessible thanks to their language proficiency and easier positions, and only later trickled down to lower-class youngsters, whose social positions were more restrictive and thus more similar to those of African-American inner city rappers, but whose musical tastes tended more towards the genre of turbo-folk (especially in Serbia).

## Social activism and engaging music

Yugoslav popular music was largely encouraged by the country’s ideology of socialist humanism and by the authorities, whose approach was “if rock music could not be suppressed, perhaps it could be put to work for socialism”.<sup>27</sup> However, the chief legacy that Yugoslav rock bequeathed to the engaged rap of today was its progressive<sup>28</sup> or committed nature.<sup>29</sup> In particular, rock music of the mid- to late 1970s is considered to be about substance rather than style. Moreover, it was actively engaged with the sociocultural and political realities of Yugoslav society, albeit from a youth-centered point of view.<sup>30</sup> As rock music’s socio-cultural significance has declined, engaged rap has in many respects taken a position that is observant, oppositional, modern, and even prophetic. The voice of rappers matters especially to people between 15 and 30 years old, a group whose voice was lost during the transition from the youth-appreciating socialism of the former Yugoslavia to the confused, youth-neglecting, neo-liberal persuasions of present-day societies.<sup>31</sup>

Activism is often connected to social movements, and its core is often said to be youth, or, as Andreana Clay<sup>32</sup> states in her book *The Hip-Hop Generation Fights Back*, “Social movement representations of youth suggest that young people have always been at the center of political activism and social change.” Accord-

ing to her, adolescents’ identity in social movement activism became most central to racial struggles in the USA since “youth of color organize in light of the ‘burden’ of the sixties.” In other words, she raises the question how the hip-hop generation in the USA participates in processes of social change. The question of activism can also be reformulated as the question of music’s engagement in society, and of ties between popular culture and popular protest. In Eyerman and Jamison’s approach,<sup>33</sup> music is capable of engaging in society in three ways: through organization, legitimization, and performing participation. Organization refers to infrastructural conditions that make the public sphere possible.<sup>34</sup> Legitimation means how musicians become “truth bearers” for the movements they represent, since “cultural forms are not just resources of entertainment, but also of cognition and mobilization.” Finally, performing participation, the freeing of art and culture from preexisting forms of power, is part of the process by which a critical public is produced. Music engages with our system of values, both aesthetic and political. The authors propose a theory of social change in which the cultural and political are merged with the mobilization of tradition, meaning that cultural tradition can be remobilized as a form of collective memory through which groups can construct collective identities and a new type of cognitive praxis. In addition, “the revolutionary quest for liberation ... remains the core meaning of rock music.”<sup>35</sup> According to Street,<sup>36</sup> understanding music’s place in political participation means asking how it seeks to move those who hear and perform it.

Some of the questions posed in the 1960s appear to be relevant to postwar Balkan rap youth too. A discussion led by Black Power activists on the importance of “street dialect” or “the language of the people” arose in the USA in the late 1960s. As the roots of authenticity and collective identity, *street talk* and urban street life became the ground upon which the Black Power movement advanced. The language provided the fundamental structures of feeling<sup>37</sup> through which black experience, and thus black culture, was said to form. Two decades after the violent conflict in the former Yugoslavia, it appears to be impossible to articulate personal and economical losses and the deep traumas of destruction, war, killings, and rape. In this vacuum, rappers like Edo Maajka, Frenkie, and Marčelo emerged as authoritative figures of the people, voicing their feelings and thoughts about postdemocracy through rap lyrics and correlate with the superficial appearance of democracy. According to Zolo,<sup>38</sup> when the reality is predemocratic, where the citizen is a passive bystander, witnessing politics only as a spectacle, the question is how to give citizens the vestiges of political participation, how to mobilize them? According to Frenkie, “the more people listen to this music, the more they think about these problems. The more they talk about them, the more a critical mass grows. I understand (activism) as an obligation, it doesn’t make sense to write about other stuff at this time.”<sup>39</sup>

In the following section I describe activist rappers’ actions. My data exists in various discursive forms, including interviews conducted by me (excerpts of longer artistic interviews), media interviews, and texts from social media. To analyze the artistic

interviews I conducted, I employ the conceptual apparatus of ethnographic methodology,<sup>40</sup> and for the rest of the data I rely on critical media analysis<sup>41</sup> and on sociolinguistic and discursive methodology.<sup>42</sup>

## Brothers after arms

The title of this article alludes to the phrase “brothers in arms”,<sup>43</sup> which exists in several languages. I see Balkan rappers as friends or brothers<sup>44</sup> who, after a period of separation, find each other in the same historical and generational moment in their new countries. They promote the idea of brotherhood, for example, with a *sample* in the song “Crème de la Crème Begins”.<sup>45</sup> The song narrates in retrospect how the musical friendship and collaboration between the three rappers began. The sample is from the legendary Croatian female singer Josipa Lisac’s song “Prijatelji” [Friends] of 1969. On top of the intro of this classic, the rappers repeat the title of their rap song, “Crème de la Crème Begins”.<sup>46</sup>

Sometime, yes, I remember my two old friends,  
Sometimes a tear reaches the rose,  
I’ve loved them both, they were my friends.  
And then a day came and we went our separate ways  
sadly  
Without a word, we just went.  
I’ve loved them so, they were my friends.

In this rap, the Bosnian artist Frenkie (Adnan Hamidović, born 1982) and with his countrymen Edo Maajka (Edin Osmić, born 1976) and DJ Soul are on their way to Belgrade, Serbia, to “get on the mic” with the Serbian rhymers Marčelo (Marko Šelić, born 1983). This is the first time that Bosnian rappers are about to cross the border after the war. Frenkie raps: “I have to admit, I’m a bit frightened, first time in Belgrade since the war, fuck it, hope I’ll survive, a couple of beers will make it fine.” The song “Crème de la Crème Begins” from Frenkie’s album *Troyanac* (2012) is the last one in a trilogy of rap songs with similar titles: “Crème de la Crème” (2003), “Crème de la Crème 2” (2005), “Crème de la Crème Begins” (2012).<sup>47</sup> After a few introductory lines, it becomes clear that this song is a retrospective of the evolution of the whole trilogy.

The next to take the mic is the Serb, Marčelo, who describes the beginning of this collaboration from his perspective: in the early 2000s, he was going through a relationship crisis. When he got an invitation from the Bosnian recording company FM Jam to do a collaboration with the Bosnians in Tuzla, he was at first reluctant to go, but since he was already numbed by heartache, he decided to erase his sorrows with a risky and unknown venture:

They want me to be the first one  
there after the war, please, give  
me a break, people, you see that

my girl is cheating on me, but since I don’t wanna live  
anyhow, I’d better meet with Jihad than do nothing, I’ll  
go and see for myself.

Through his playful rhymes he also remembers the stories told by his father about life in the former Yugoslavia, and about Bosnians, who were known as “good guys who liked to drink, who were true friends, and who had always a good time”. In the Bosnian city of Tuzla, close to the border with Serbia, he realizes all these stories told by his father were still true. The only difference between his and his father’s experience is the intervening war.

The rap trilogy “Crème de la Crème” started with the song published on Marčelo’s first album, *De facto*, in 2003.<sup>48</sup> The idea of a joint project across the new borders seemed quite daring at the time, both in hip-hop circles and in the broader postconflict and post-Yugoslav cultural region. Even today, these three rappers, together with some Croatian artists, continue their collaboration, both within and outside rap, with the intention of discussing societal perspectives among youth. The choice of the samples introducing the songs is intended to give new life to their shared cultural legacy. The song reestablished their lost communication through rap lyrics. The sample for the first song, by the most symbolic Yugoslav band, the ethnorock band *Bijelo Dugme* [White Button], is “Sve će to, mila moja, prekriti ruzmarin, snjegovi i šaš” [All of that, my dear, will be covered by rosemary, snow and reed] from 1979. This tune, originally a love song, is given a universal, nostalgic function, with the following line used as a sample: “Everything’s in vain, everything’s against us, but it could have been better”. The line needs no deeper interpretation: the conflict and the war are seen as destructive and pointless. Only the second song of the trilogy lacks a sampled introduction.

AS LYRICISTS, Frenkie, Marčelo, and Edo Maajka are often seen as the generationally and culturally distanced alternative voices of the younger generations, pointing at the aching problems of today’s youth. Their actions are an embodiment of one of the oldest definitions of the culture, that given by Jeff Chang,<sup>49</sup> who has said that hip-hop and rap lyrics, as a socially engaged art form, allow many people to take part in the discussion on injustices and inequities in societies. Their lyrics often invoke invigorating reactions in media and social media: Marčelo’s song about youth violence encouraged people to express their opinions; Frenkie’s

tolerance song inspired discussion and filmmaking; and Edo Maajka’s pacifist personal experiences triggered a frightening silence about anti-Semitism.

The broad exposure in the media was probably the reason why Marčelo and Edo Maajka were chosen for a video project on Balkan youth. During 2015 and 2016, the Balkan Service of Radio Free Europe in collaboration with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) filmed and produced reportages

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Covers. Frenkie's *Troyanac*, Marčelo's *De Facto* and Edo Maajka's *Slušaj mater* (Listen to your mother).

on youth in various cities in the region, discussing such issues as nationalities, divided cities, abortion, and women's rights. Each topic is discussed in four episodes from various perspectives. The first segment deals with the invisible division between Mostar's Muslim and Croat sides, with the Serbian rapper and writer Marčelo moderating. In the episode, when he meets all the participants involved making in the film, he explains why he is there, introducing a unique narrative on activism:

**So, why am I here tonight? Since I'm from Serbia, one might think that I'm here because I represent a neutral side. I'm not neutral. Neutrality sounds like you're not interested. As if you don't have anything to do with it, so you are there like some judge who has to say who is wrong and who is right. I am convinced that all of us should be interested in how are our neighborhoods are doing, because it is of concern to all our countries. Once one unpleasant man told me that I don't have a clear picture of what is happening in the Balkans in spite of all my travelling, because people come to the concerts or to literature events to have fun and they are in a good mood and you don't see the real picture. That upset me and made me think even harder about how all these places that I've seen through my concerts and literary events function outside of those situations. That is what brings me to you here tonight: I'm not going to judge who is right or wrong, since the idea is not to discuss, but to let each other be heard, or at least to try to hear how you think. Anyone who wants, and I hope that many will do so, will be able to tell us their opinion.<sup>50</sup>**

A joint lyrical project of Balkan rappers in the postconflict context that started in early 2002 led to various public projects of social engagement. The following section discusses Frenkie's supranational activism through filmmaking and speaking at international conferences, Marčelo's interview activism<sup>51</sup> to raise social awareness, and Edo Maajka's engagement in the form of lived practice<sup>52</sup> or living biographies.<sup>53</sup>

## Local and supranational activism by Frenkie

Frenkie (Adnan Hamidović, born 1982 in Bijeljina) is a Bosnian rapper with a defined sociopolitical interest. He was active in the "Bosnian spring" protests of 2014 in Tuzla where he now lives.<sup>54</sup> Recently he has been known for his work on reconciliation among youth in post-Yugoslav spaces, especially in his native, divided Bosnia, through his influential music. Besides collaborating closely with Edo Maajka and appearing frequently on Marčelo's albums and shows, he is one of the initiators of yet another project, which started with a song called "Pismo Milanu" [A letter to Milan]. In the short film *Pismo* [Letter] by the young female director Ada Sokolović, he tells how the song "Pismo Milanu" provoked strong reactions and led to further projects by two friends. Frenkie's Serbian friend Milan Colić, an experienced peace activist from southern Serbia, asked Frenkie, who is a Bosnian Muslim, to write a song for Orthodox Christian Serbs. The reactions to this song resulted in the production of two short films, including *Granica* [Border], in which Frenkie and Milan discuss nationalism and attitudes toward different nationalities with young Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Bosnian Serbs.

The song "Pismo Milanu" is delicate in its sentiments and personal touches:

**We have all committed crimes, but then what, you did the same thing, stole and burned, during many years we lived next to each other, but we cannot speak to each other. That is why, Milan, I'm writing you this letter, for you to see where we stand and that many people do not think alike. My people will be angry with me, but this is my decision, my intention is peaceful and that makes me feel calm. I would not accept their rules even today, time will tell if I was a fighter or a traitor, I've been waiting long enough, keeping it in me, and now I've decided to shake hands first. Let's stop lying and cheating, I know that you are afraid when you walk through Sarajevo, you see words written in the Arabic alphabet, you hear the ezan from the mosque tower, I'm afraid too when I see Wahhabis.**

**Expressing themselves they give a voice to all fans. They become mediators.**

Every line of the song makes an outsider wonder whether the situation described is true after twenty years of peace. Why is everyone frightened of saying their name in certain places, why are there frightened people on the streets of the neighboring town, why is a lyricist afraid of saying these lines openly? Is the war really over? “You can say I’m sorry to the others, although your people will spit on you, or we can live like this for another twenty years,” Frenkie says; “I am sorry and let’s shake hands.”

AS A RESULT OF these projects, Frenkie has been invited into the international arena, to the Hague Talks conference (“Setting Peace and Justice in Motion”), where he talked in 2014 about his own experiences and about youth and music in Bosnia.<sup>55</sup> He uses his own life as an example of facing the civil war in Bosnia and his experience of living in exile in Germany, but suggests that there are realistic paths to reconciliation in Bosnia. He mentions how a German school excursion to the Dachau concentration camp made some of his classmates, who had started experimenting with far right and neo-Nazi ideas, rethink their political opinions. Besides their opinions, they also changed their shoes and hair styles! Frenkie’s concern is that Bosnian young people are far more radical in their nationalism than their parents’ generation, who actually witnessed or took part in the war. This view is supported by his activist friend Milan. Frenkie concludes that the main problem with his country is that there are no such school excursions, for example, as his trip to Dachau. He suggested that kids from Banja Luka (in the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina) should be taken to Srebrenica, where 8000 Muslims were killed by Serbs in the war, or that kids from Sarajevo, which is mostly populated by Muslims today, should be taken to Kazani, a cave outside Sarajevo where Serb and Croat inhabitants of Sarajevo were killed. In the rapper’s opinion, these themes he raps about in his music are “tough stuff”, but he sees it at his duty to react and to stand up for what is right and to “give a little back”. By “giving back” he means repaying hip-hop music for having taught him critical thinking and activism.

Now I’m in the position where I have a bit of influence, so I try to be constructive and positive with that. One punch line that has been leading my rapping is “Mi smo ti koji su čekali”, “We were the ones waiting.”

Frenkie has openly used his personal experience to initiate discussion. His own family left Eastern Bosnia when the war started. Documentary pictures of the paramilitary troops who show up in Frenkie’s school yard make a striking backdrop to the war story of the then ten-year-old Adnan. This method of transferring personal experiences and tribulations into public knowledge is known as “living biography”.<sup>56</sup> How a personal biography is constructed into the public sphere is an issue not only of self-identification, but also of group identification.

## Marčelo’s engagement for civil society

Marčelo was born Marko Šelić in the Southern Serbian town of Paraćin in 1983. A talented student of languages, he started with rap music because it was yet another textual form through which he could express himself. Now, as an established rapper, novelist, and activist, he explains his engagement in society:

Engaged art is generally about humans, about spotting injustice and setting it under a spotlight. This kind of work against discrimination, violence, and a fight for human rights exists in “organized” societies, and in “unorganized” ones even more. If engaged art is seen as a sort of corrective for the ruling regime, then it can also be considered as an ideological opposition.<sup>57</sup>

How then does Marčelo engage in the public sphere? From the beginning of his musical and writing career, he has had a recognizable voice, though one that was “too intellectual” for some audiences.<sup>58</sup> His single “Pegla” [Iron] from his album published in 2014 made a significant impact by raising a discussion on youth violence, and led to an increase in the rapper’s public activity and a notable number of interviews.<sup>59</sup>

The song “Pegla” [Iron] is about a boy named Darko who is harassed in school but saved by an older boy. Later, when Darko is 17 and joins a gang as part of his newly acquired bully identity, he decides to stab one unknown boy who he thinks looks effeminate. Darko’s character is given the attributes of a Serbian young man who believes in God, Kosovo, and his people. After stabbing and eventually killing this boy, Darko, whose gang nickname is Iron, realizes that he has killed the person who once was ready to stand up for him – the boy that had defended him when they were kids. The song places the listener in a scene with bloody bodies and a confused protagonist. The glorification of the bully and criminal lifestyle has become deeply entrenched in Serbian society since the 1990s. Young people’s sense of reality and human values seems to be blurred. Marčelo’s song started a debate on criminal lifestyles that spread throughout the entire region. This lyrically powerful song has mobilized people of different ages and from different groups in society. The timing was also essential, since many cases of youth violence had taken place shortly before the song was published.

Marčelo describes the problem:

You are considered a traitor to the nation if you say something against someone who is considered to be patriotic. That division into patriots and traitors is one of the main tools of demagoguery left from the Milošević era. It has survived and it is now more acute than ever before. Anybody can be silenced with an accusation of being a traitor. And I would really like to

**“RAP LYRICS AND THE PUBLIC DISCUSSION LED BY RAP ARTISTS MIGHT BE REGARDED AS THE MICRO PUBLIC SPHERE ENCOMPASSING YOUNGER GENERATIONS.”**



meet someone who likes Serbia more than I do. There is a general atmosphere where you are not allowed to say that something is wrong in the society because that is interpreted to mean that some foreign institution is paying you to do so. You can't even raise your voice against a murder either. The song "Iron" is about murder. But the discussion about it tends to go in the wrong direction – we start talking about family values versus gay values. This song is not about that, it is about whether you can murder another human being because you don't happen to like some things about him. And since we are not understanding that point, and because you have to explain that you don't think anything bad about your own country if you stand up for someone's right to live, then I think that we definitely need to build some things from the beginning, even if that sounds like anthropological rewinding of time. Sometimes you just need to do that.<sup>60</sup>

Marčelo is striving for a better society, civil society. He demands that people listen, hear, and understand. And maybe even act. According to Michael Edwards,<sup>61</sup> "the image of civil society as a desirable social order or self-image of modernity is defined in normative terms, such as tolerance, non-discrimination, non-violence, trust and cooperation, freedom and democracy." Edwards notes that social engagement with a focus on the development of civil society is about personal and social transformations: united, these represent a potentially revolutionary force for change in the public sphere, not just in private lives. This type of ideology is also recognizable in the initial ideologies of hip-hop, seen in young people performing their social realities in particular times and spaces.<sup>62</sup>

Marčelo's first album, *De facto* from 2003,<sup>63</sup> was the first to be promoted in the neighboring countries after the wars. Marčelo went to perform in Bosnia and was one of the first artists to cross the new borders. To him, Bosnian people were the heroes from the stories his father told him:

My dad used to travel constantly through the former Yugoslavia and has lots of friends everywhere. Luckily my family was never poisoned by the negative energy during the '90s and I remember that my father often asked how the war was possible. When I travel to Bosnia, between my story and my father's story there is a war. And when I go there, I see everything as in the story from my childhood. My Bosnian friends had the same story when they came here, as did my Croatian friends from the band Elemental. Once we stood behind the messages in our lyrics, with pure hearts and some personal experience, we still believe in that. There are some things we have succeeded in moving forward, and one of them is the amount of joint musical projects we have had since 2003. I have the feeling that people are even travelling more – breaking the boundaries is the best thing. It is the way the story breathes. Diplomatic meetings may or may not

be happening; it is nice to see people shaking hands, but they have been shaking hands even after the war. That does not mean anything if people themselves do not start moving across borders and feel free.<sup>64</sup>

By understanding how youth are socially located in the present, and by informing his own social and political ideas, Marčelo aims to mobilize young people who did not have such strong cultural idols as rock musicians were in Yugoslavia. Popular culture has been recognized to have a significant role in youth activism, influencing the way young people organize themselves, what tools they use, and the role models with which they identify. According to Stuart Hall,<sup>65</sup> youth activism provides a site for youth to engage with and utilize images of urban youth, previous social movements, and discourses of activism in order to understand and construct their own experiences.

### Edo Maajka's pacifist engagement

Edo Maajka (Edin Osmić, born 1978) left his eastern Bosnian home town of Brčko when the war broke out and moved to Croatia, where he remained Bosnian to the locals even after becoming one of the most celebrated artists in Croatia. With his first album, *Slušaj mater* [Listen to your mother] from 2002, his verbal talent was soon recognized all over the Balkans. He is known for his witty, funny, and intelligent lyrics that bring his message to life through fast-flowing text. His public persona is ruled by typical Bosnian humor and self-deprecating irony, and he is often described as the biggest rap star in the region. The intensity of his lyrics is brought about by the juxtaposition of humoristic and ultrarealistic lines. Probably the most incisive description of Edo Maajka as an artist would be that he is persistent in his various forms of public pedagogy, trying to open dialogue and achieve understanding among his generation, and even more so among the younger generation, on the importance of reconciliation. He has often stated that he needed to overcome the complex feelings of his early adolescence as a refugee. The example of Edo's activism that I will examine here deviates from the previous cases, since I want to analyze discourses in which Edo's private life and writings were both the object of and trigger for his action.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2014, Edo Maajka was involved in an unexpected public discussion which exposed personal life and his pacifist ideas beyond his rapping. When the conflict in Gaza started once again in 2014, somebody remembered Edo Maajka and his jocular exclamation before his marriage to an Israeli-born woman in 2011 that he could change his religion (i.e., convert to Judaism) for love. Edo Maajka now lives in Tel Aviv with his Jewish wife Lillah and their infant daughter. A great deal of hatred exploded onto Edo's Facebook page after he posted a status update inviting "his Palestinian and Israeli friends to throw away hatred and accept peace". The authors of the verbal attacks saw the rap artist as a traitor, not because he married a woman of the wrong religion, but because as a Bosniak he did not support the sufferings of the mostly Muslim Palestinian people. After one month

of silence in the face of these negative utterances, Edo Maajka decided to send a message to all his “Facebook friends” saying that the insults towards him and his family are due to the fact that he is married to a Jew. The magnitude of the anti-Semitism, however, surprised him.

Surprisingly, Edo’s message, which “deserved to be published on the main pages of the all main dailies in Bosnia and Herzegovina”,<sup>66</sup> was given no attention whatsoever by the media. Only two portals reported directly on the artist’s post, but the socio-cultural discussion was obscured. Here is what Edo Maajka, a citizen both of Bosnia and Herzegovina and of Croatia, wanted to say to his haters:

**While I was married to a Croatian woman, there was some dissing, but this now is pure hatred and complete exaggeration. People who generally hate Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks, Jews, Palestinians, or any other ethnic, religious or racial group, are not my friends, and to me they are closer to fascism. There are people like this everywhere, but I thought this was rare among Bosniaks. All of these comments after the articles related to me at my portal speak a very heavy truth to all of us. I have been literally disowned as a son who has done something wrong, because I’ve married a woman of another religion and nation, and Jews have been declared a shame and they’ve been dehumanized in every sentence. I am proud of being a Bosnian, proud of having both a Croatian and a Bosnian passport, and I love my family, in spite of you hating it. I love all people, and I do not see them according to their nation or religion. The majority of people thought they thought this way too, but they do not. Yours, Edo Maajka.**

Although a couple of columnists and bloggers wrote about the artist’s social media post, too many voices that would normally have defended a multicultural and liberal Bosnia were silent, and thus no larger discussion on tolerance or anti-Semitism ensued. This silence spoke the language of the society Edo Maajka tried to improve throughout his artistic career. Moreover, this episode brought one of his songs from the past to the spotlight. The song “On je mladji” [He is the younger one] is about a young Croat, Ivan Marušić, whose Serb girlfriend Milana is expecting his child. When Ivan decides to present Milana to his parents, a tragedy unfolds. His father, a veteran of the Croatian homeland war, is devastated when he realizes his grandchild will be, to him, half enemy. Before his father blows himself up with a Serbian-made bomb, Ivan declares that he loves his girlfriend more than his father loved Croatian generals, president, country, war acts, and the court in the Hague. When the young couple leaves, the bomb explodes. “He is younger, he does not understand why he should hate Serbs, how should he explain that he loved her, Milan’s daughter, Serb girl?”

Even if the discourse of rap activism sometimes appears naïve, especially to those not familiar with the local realities, it is important to acknowledge that the issues of nationalism, hate,

violence, and fear are all part of Balkan reality. And when all institutional solutions for a better future have been tried, people eventually turn to themselves for ways to make a change. Living biography and the public pedagogy of a famous rap artist may have a strong influence on young people, helping them to articulate their own opinions.

## Conclusion

The existence of the discursive public sphere, as discussed by Habermas,<sup>67</sup> should enable citizens to talk about common concerns in conditions of freedom, equality, and nonviolent interaction. Through microscopic public spheres one can open a discussion and take part in public conversation, possibly reaching a consensus by the force of rational argument. Hoping and acting in favor of social change, Balkan rappers are rapping, writing novels, drama, and columns, and widely discussing their thoughts in public events. “Major social change can only come about when sufficient public debate has sorted through the issues and a community emerges to support it”, according to Edwards.<sup>68</sup> Even if such major social change is not achieved by the Balkan rappers’ public intellectualism or pedagogy discussed in this article, someone needs to start and lead the discussion. Rappers in their thirties, at the halfway mark of their lives, can appear to the young people as an example of the voices supporting more tolerant, intellectual, and human approaches to postconflict realities. Frenkie’s search for the critical mass corresponds to Edwards’ metaphor: “Like rocks in the stream, the sharpness of different perspectives can be softened over time as they knock against each other.”

Rap lyrics and the public discussion led by rap artists might be regarded as the micro public sphere encompassing younger generations: rappers are turning their attention to young people, who are balancing between the experiences and sentiments of the war generations and present societies, encountering cultural and economic transition and a disrupted system of social values. The division of society into “patriots” and “traitors” marks the difference between the public sphere and totalitarianism. In the public sphere, all ideas and opinions are valid until proven otherwise.<sup>69</sup> In totalitarianism, debate is replaced by an inquiry into the motives of the individuals involved, the same tactic used in contemporary societies to silence new manifestations of dissent.

As seen in the lyrics of “Iron”, a cruel and persistent reality continues to inform and motivate the struggle for change. Through personified textual and social engagement, Frenkie, Edo, and Marčelo are expected to continue to rap towards the ideals of civil society, pointing out the problems of people halfway through their expected lifetimes. Rap lyrics and rap activism may take on the role of the public sphere where civil society becomes an arena for debate and deliberation, or as Edwards<sup>70</sup> puts it, a place where societal differences, social problems, public policy, government action, and matters of community and cultural identity are developed and debated. And where intellectualism in general is given another chance. ✖

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## references

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- 8 Some Yugoslav new wave musicians who showed interest in rhythm music were the most eager to introduce hip-hop elements into their music and to encourage others to start “reciting” music. See Goran Musić and Predrag Vukčević, “Diesel Power: Serbian Hip-hop from the Pleasure of the Privileged to Mass Youth Culture” in *Hip-hop at Europe’s Edge: Music, Agency, and Social Change*, ed. Milosz Miszczyński and Adriana Hebig (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017 [forthcoming]).
- 9 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 5–7.
- 10 Yugoslav rock was inspired at the time by the British punk ethos. Moreover, Sartre’s idea of engaged literature is related to the engaged Yugoslav music of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Mišina notes that engaged rap musicians in the Balkans are considered to be continuing the “communicative arena” work of rock musicians of the 1970s and 1980s in Yugoslavia.
- 11 Steinberg, “When Politics Go Pop”, 3–4.
- 12 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 7.
- 13 Lusane, “Rhapsodic Aspirations”, 37.
- 14 Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-modernity and Intellectuals* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).
- 15 Foucault points out that “the intellectual’s role is no longer to place himself somewhat ahead and to the side in order to express the stifled truth of collectivity. He will therefore work in alignment with others in specific, local, institutional struggles”. Michel Foucault, “Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* by Michel Foucault, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 206–208.
- 16 Social constructivism focuses on the ways activist and social movement organizations produce, disseminate and transform collective cognitions (Steinberg, “When Politics Goes Pop”).
- 17 Lipsitz, *Time Passages*.
- 18 BCMS is an acronym used for the successor languages of Serbo-Croatian (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian). The concept of “our language” (naš jezik, naški) used for BCMS, especially in Bosnia, indicates how mutually intelligible these languages are.
- 19 This raises important question of authenticity in Balkan transnational rap, since the criteria of authenticity (McLeod) are that authentic hip-hop must involve: staying true to yourself, being black, being underground, being hard, being from the streets not suburbs, being “old-school”, not mainstream. Kembrew McLeod, “Authenticity within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation”, *Journal of Communications* 49, no. 4 (1999): 26.
- 20 Personal interview in Malmö, Sweden, November 23, 2013.
- 21 Alexandra D’Urso, *Life Stories and Sociological Imagination: Music, Private Lives and Public Identity in France and Sweden* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).
- 22 After being attracted by the “hard beats and guitar samples of early Def Jam recordings and rap’s subversive image” (Musić and Vukčević 2017 [forthcoming]), avant-garde musicians of the 1980s propagated hip-hop. In what appears to be the first Yugoslav rap lyrics, “Hop Ap Du Ap” (1983), Dejan Kostić of the Belgrade-based band Du Du Ap raps: “In every republic, in every city, in Belgrade, Zagreb and Novi Sad, people say hop, people say up, people say dir li dir li up.” Musić and Vukčević, “Diesel Power”.
- 23 As early as the 1980s, a few radio shows, such as Elektrofunk on Radio 101 in Zagreb, hosted by DJ Slavin Balen, and Ritam Srca on Studio B in Belgrade, hosted by Sloba Konjović, were influential in bringing new musical trends, mostly from London.
- 24 Rap is originally an African-American form since its creation is tied to African-American culture; Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Mickey Hess, “Hip-hop Realness and the White Performer,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22:5 (2005): 372–389, accessed September 9, 2016, doi: 10.1080/07393180500342878. However, many writers want to emphasize culture’s hybridity; J. Flores, “Puerto rocks: New York Ricans stake their claim” in *Droppin’ science: Critical essays on rap music and hip-hop culture*, ed. W. E. Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 105; N. Guevara (1996). “Women writin’ rappin’ breakin’” in *Droppin’ science: Critical essays on rap music and hip-hop culture*. The authenticity negotiation in white American hip-hop occurs over three phases: immersion, imitation, and inversion (Hess, “Hip-hop Realness”, 375). Although European hip-hop follows these three phases, the inversion phase presupposes different actions depending on a certain sociopolitical location. Whiteness in Balkan hip-hop and rap is a subject rarely negotiated, if ever. I agree here with Richard Dyer, who writes that white identity gets erased in white discourse as it becomes the default racial position. Although Balkan rappers need to negotiate their whiteness in relation to the blackness of the authentic culture, they need not to revise their own position as white rappers, since their audience and consumers are white; Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 25 Hess, “Hip-hop Realness”.

- 26 The question of authenticity remains important in mundane hip-hop research. To rephrase Musić and Vukčević's question: "Who is the local equivalent of the 'young black male' that Chuck D or Ice Cube rapped about? What should the rap community stand for and against whom should it fight?"
- 27 Sabrina Ramet, "Rock: The Music of Revolution (and Conformity)," in *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. Sabrina Ramet (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994).
- 28 Ante Perković, *Sedma republika: Pop kultura u YU raspadu* (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2011).
- 29 Mišina, "What's So Funny".
- 30 Mišina, "What's So Funny", 306.
- 31 When the first rap acts appeared, they were directly compared with new wave artists of the 1970s and 80s, according to MC Remi in the 2015 documentary film *Stani na put*.
- 32 Andreaa Clay, *The Hip-hop Generation Fights Back: Youth, Activism, and Post-Civil Rights Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 3–4.
- 33 Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 34 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).
- 35 Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 141.
- 36 John Street, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 74.
- 37 Raymond Williams uses the term "structure of feeling" to designate the emotional bonding generated by values and practices shared by a specific group, class, or culture. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1984 [1961]).
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- 41 Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 32–35.
- 42 Steven Clayman and John Heritage, *The News Interview: Journalists and Public Figures On the Air*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); David Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction* (London: Sage, 2006).
- 43 In music, the phrase was popularized by the 1985 song and the album *Brothers in Arms* by Dire Straits. A similar idea of brotherhood is also introduced in the 2010 sports documentary film by Michael Tolajian, *Once Brothers*, about two Yugoslav NBA basketball players, Vlade Divac and Dražen Petrović, whose friendship was divided by the war and its ideologies.
- 44 In the chorus of the joint song "Suze" [Tears] from 2003 by Marčelo and Edo Maajka, the metaphor of brotherhood is used: "niko neće znati što je na brata pucao brat" ("no one will know why brother was shooting at brother").
- 45 Samples are snippets of previously recorded songs that are incorporated into new sounds and contexts. Andreaa Clay argues that youth activism is similar to the process of sampling, since the activists draw upon earlier social movement tools, images and texts, geographic landscapes, popular constructions of urban youth, hip-hop culture, and their own personal experiences in a bricolage approach to mobilizing other young people (Andreaa Clay, *The Hip-hop Generation Fights Back*, 187).
- 46 "Crème de la Crème", published on Marčelo's album *De facto* (2003); "Crème de la Crème 2", published on Frenkie's album *Odličan* CD, Menart Records, Croatia, (2005); "Crème da la Crème Begins", published on Frenkie's album *Troyanac* (2012); Frenkie, *Odličan* CD, 2005.
- 47 Frenkie, Trojanac, FM Jam Records, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Menart Records, Croatia, 2012.
- 48 As it might appear from the song "Crème de la Crème Begins", the trilogy started while Marčelo was working with Edo Maajka on the song "Suze" [Tears], which can be considered the first real trans-national rap collaboration. Both "Suze" and "Crème de la Crème" were published on Marčelo's debut album *De facto* (2003).
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- 51 Interview activism is defined as the act of engaging in interviews with the goal of furthering awareness about particular causes or issues; D'Urso, *Life Stories*, 79.
- 52 Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity*.
- 53 D'Urso, *Life Stories*.
- 54 In February 2014, a series of demonstrations followed by riots spread from the Bosnian town of Tuzla (where Frenkie lives) to other cities in Bosnia, expressing social discontent and the hope of overthrowing the government. Some media gave these events the name "Bosnian Spring". Frenkie was active in writing on the events and giving interviews, and his songs "Gori" [It's burning] and "Hajmo ih rušit" [Let's put them down] became anthems of the protest.
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- 59 Iva Martinović, "Još nas dele na patriote i izdajnike," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, November 17, 2013, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/marcelo-jos-nas-dele-na-patriote-i-izdajnike/25170571.html>.
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- 61 Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity*.
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- 64 Stuart Hall, "What is Black in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1–2 (1993): 104–15.
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- 67 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*.
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- 70 Edwards, *Civil Society*, 64.