

“What Moves the World, Moves My Ass as Well”: Mimi Mercedez as an Anti-heroine of Postsocialist Serbia

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Abstract: Milena Janković, better known as Mimi Mercedez, is a Serbian rapper, who achieved great popularity during the past decade. Working in the domain of trap/hip hop music, and adapting various key features of the genre – keeping it real, promoting a “badass” attitude, dealing with issues of street life, sex, crime, violence, drugs – she constructs Mimi Mercedez as figure of an empowered, strong, “say-it-like-it-is” woman. This chapter focuses on how such an empowered femininity is performed within the context of contemporary Serbia’s music market, and how it intersects with various positions that resonate with the idea of leadership. Namely, in her interviews and public appearances, as well as her music, she emphasizes her role as the “leader of her generation”, someone teenagers and young adults (should) look up to, and has, particularly in the past two years, been active in “educating” her fans about various social issues, attitudes they should adopt, very often sharing her life views and attempting to help people “find their way through life”. She adopts/adapts the roles of a “hero” and/or “anti-hero”, “idol”, a representative of both good and bad aspects of contemporary Serbian youth etc., and in doing so, continuously de/re/constructs the trope of female empowerment, which currently dominates the music industry.

Keywords: Mimi Mercedez, trap, leadership, empowerment, postsocialism.

My goal in this chapter is to analyze the ways in which the notion of female leadership is (re/de)constructed and intertwined with various other strategies of the contemporary music industry in Serbia, focusing on certain aspects of the music and public persona of a famous hip hop/trap artist, Mimi Mercedez. I place emphasis on the notion of female empowerment, as a token of feminism which became omnipresent in the popular culture and media over the past three decades. Seeing how the construction of a figure of an empowered woman is today a commonplace within the music industry, my goal is to understand how such a persona is imagined through different leadership roles in the case of Mimi Mercedez and within the context of postsocialist Serbian music market. Given that she works predominantly within the genre of trap/hip hop, Mimi Mercedez readily uses different tropes of the global hip hop culture, attempting to voice the experience of women working in a predominantly male genre, as well as women living in “disaster cap-

italism” (Atanasoski and McElroy 2018: 273)¹ that flourishes in ex-Yugoslav and Eastern European countries. The work of this particular trap artist was chosen primarily because she has been drawing the attention of the public for the past decade as the “controversial (female) rapper” who doesn’t shy away from discussing, in songs as well as public appearances, gender roles, sex, female sexuality, politics, etc., and who built her reputation as someone to whom younger generations look up to. As a woman who speaks her mind and does her own thing, Mimi Mercedez openly insists on the fact that she should be something of a role model for young people of the region. My goal is to analyze different strategies that she employs in the process of constructing herself as such a role model and to understand how she constructed her persona to be an (anti)heroine of contemporary society. In the case of Mimi Mercedez, I speak about leadership in a variety of ways, given that her public persona is constructed through tropes of being the best among rappers (mostly through dissing other rappers in her songs), an idol who can teach younger generations how to think for themselves and be strong, and even a kind of life coach, filming videos about her chosen lifestyle. With that in mind, my focus in this chapter is on her constructions of the figure of an antiheroine of our time, which in a way underpins, or rounds up her various leadership agendas.

Mimi Mercedez

“That artistic ‘last name’ sounds to me like an extravagant Black or Latin female name and also [...] the porn star Nina Mercedez is my ‘mother’ and because the German quality is the Serbian mentality” (Svet&Scandal 2015). This is how Milena Janković (1992),² one of the prominent hip hop artists from Serbia, described the choice of her stage name, mapping some of the most important features of her music and work: the relationship

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- 1 The quoted authors use the term to refer to truly disastrous consequences that the introduction of capitalism into socialist systems had on the countries’ economies, as well as on lives of ordinary people, some of which I analyze in this chapter. Disaster capitalism is used to refer to various contradictions of the Euro-American liberalism, as well as to denote a situation specific for post-socialist countries, in which the disastrous features of capitalism are clearly revealed through the process of transition away from socialism (Atanasoski and McElroy 2018: 273). In addition, Naomi Klein uses the expression as well, when writing about “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities”. (Klein 2007: 4). In other words, I employ the term to denote capitalism’s tendency to make a profit out of everything, which has become something of a motto of corporations and political elites in postsocialist countries over the last three decades.
 - 2 According to another interview, she chose this nickname because a Mercedes hit her when she was a little girl, which is an information that could easily be made up. The Mercedes nevertheless has an important symbolic place, as it references the love for the German car brands among Serbian citizens and especially the members of the large Balkan diaspora in Germany and Austria, among whom the Mercedes is considered something of a status symbol, a token of success and wealth. In the early stages of her career, she used other aliases as well, like Guda iz Huda (a free translation to English could be Pig from the hood), Sestra Drugarica (sister-female friend), Kabasti Koblenc and Jovanka Oroz (a wordplay alluding to Jovanka Broz, wife of the Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito, and the Serbian word for a trigger on a gun). In a Facebook status from 2015, she mentioned that the other aliases help her “artificially boost Serbia’s quota of female rappers”.

with the music of the people of color in the US via hip hop, exploration of women's sexuality and life experiences in her texts and music videos and wish be the voice of the young generations living in postsocialist Serbia.

She belongs to the younger generation of rappers who primarily perform trap music and whose popularity and influence substantially grew during the last decade. One of the main features of the work of these trappers is the wish to differentiate themselves from older generations of rappers, who saw the genre mainly as an alternative to the dominant culture. Over the course of around forty years, local hip hop scenes developed through multiple processes of renegotiation of elements of global hip hop culture, with their most important feature being the belonging to the underground music scene. Artists mostly performed reality rap (Nenić 2006: 160), speaking about various social issues and the reality of living in postsocialist Serbia, adapting/adopting signifiers of hip hop like rapping about the ghetto (Ajduk and Pišev 2018; Nenić 2006; Šentevska 2017), sampling various signifiers of the local culture (Cvetanović 2019; Nenić 2019) and so on. Such a scene was changed with the generation of rappers following role-models such as Ivan Ivanović Đus (Juice),³ a rapper who was among the first ones to promote the idea that hip hop should be mainstream and a means for obtaining wealth and luxury.⁴ Of course, despite the immense popularity of trap in the Balkans, there are still musicians, as well as local music scenes, that nurture the underground character of hip hop.

Within such a context, Mimi carefully built a reputation for being fond of controversies and drawing attention with videos or lyrics often labeled as explicit, which is very important for my analysis, as it is the result of her well-thought-out play with expectations and labels, and a careful navigation through the various matrixes of the music industry. In an interview from 2020, Milena Janković explained who is Mimi: "she is a personality that was created in relation to my life and the lives of people who surround me. Everything [about her] is overstated, and only those things that are supposed to represent something are pulled out".⁵

In the last few years (roughly speaking, since her last album, issued in 2019), the fans of Mimi Mercedes have witnessed a kind of maturing or growing up of Mimi Mercedes, which is a change that she herself often emphasizes (differentiating between the old and new Mimi), as most of her public appearances and interviews from the past couple of years have been a kind of reflection on the past, as well as an explanation of the changes she went through.⁶ The trapper started her career around 2010 in Belgrade, as a member

3 Đus began his hip hop career during the 1990s and is mainly famous for his inclination towards mixing genres of hip hop, dance and pop-folk in his songs. He was among the first rappers whose music obtained great commercial success and who began affirming the subjects and attitude that was adopted later by Bombs of the nineties and other (t)rappers – emphasizing the love of money and luxury, rapping about getting easy money quickly, often producing controversies etc.

4 One possible outlook on this development is offered in Musić and Vukčević 2017.

5 Netkulturno 2020. "Mimi Mercedes: Folk i Rep su Muzika Naroda!" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTOvO3QQQFY> (accessed 9 June 2022).

6 See, for example: Nešto Drugačije 2020: "Nešto Drugačije 111: Mimi Mercedes" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pHAtFhySZA> (accessed 15 February 2022) and Realna Priča 2021: "Mimi Mercedes: Iza Mog Garda se Kriju Ekstremne Emocije!" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqEXRN5OnkM&t=2s> (accessed 15 February 2022).

of the hip hop group Bombs of the nineties (Bombe devedesetih), who have been strongly influenced by the work and attitude of Đus.⁷ So far, she published four albums: *The Only Thing I Know* (*Jedino Što Znam*, Universal Music Group, 2013), *I Put on Makeup and Wreak Chaos* (*Našminkam Se i Pravim Haos*, Bombe Devedesetih, 2015), *Godmother* (*Kuma*, Universal Music Group, 2018), *Hatred* (*Mržnja*, Geto Gerila, 2019). Additionally, her discography is rich with compilations, EPs, singles and collaborations with other prominent rappers, like Juice, as well as stars of the locally immensely popular pop folk music, like Mile Kitić or Stoja.

A number of Mimi's songs were realized in collaboration with Zartical (Žarko Krstić) and JanZoo (Jan Magdevski), in charge of production, mixing, etc., while most of her latest songs and albums/EPs were published through her own label, *Ghetto Guerilla* (Geto Gerila). With the exception of the latest singles, which introduce various Latin, reggaeton and dance beats as well as various collaborations with local stars of pop/pop folk music, Mimi's songs mainly stay in the domain of trap, with her latest album (*Hatred*) often defined as belonging to "hard" rap (Dašić 2020), with elements of gangsta rap. The matrix for most of Mimi's songs is comprised of different layers of repeating samples – a low bass, a few melodic samples, the unavoidable high-hat, the trademark of trap music – and envisioned so that the vocals are always dominant. Performing songs that musically pertain to what could be labeled as "classic" trap/hip hop, especially in the early stages of her career, was most likely meant as a strategy employed so that she could establish herself as an equal within the local trap/hip hop scene, as a woman who could rap equally well as any man.

In addition, as is the case with other members of the Bomb of the Nineties group, Mimi uses various elements and signifiers of pop-folk in order to "mark" her belonging to a particular generation of rappers, and to provoke reactions from the public by making positive references to a decade that is considered "dark" by many citizens of Serbia. The elements of the genre are also used by Mimi Mercedes, as well as other rappers, as a signal of their wishes to move hip hop into the mainstream music scene, and be seen as making music "for the people", for wide audiences, the working class, people in rural areas, etc.

As one of the few women in Serbian hip hop/trap,⁸ she chose to emphasize her difference in the music scene, not wanting to hide her gender, but rather stressing that being a woman is what makes her unique and better than others. Despite the fact that certain subjects, like sex, sex work, gender roles, crime, drugs, guns, love of luxury, etc., persist in her music since she began appearing publicly, it is noticeable that her strategy for achieving popularity, which initially relied on shocking the audiences, was somewhat toned

7 Their relationship with Đus is explored in more detail, for example, by Dragan Đorđević (Đorđević 2019: 198–223). The members of the group also openly discuss the impact Đus had on their music and aesthetics, for instance, in an interview for the web portal Before After (Beforeafter 2015).

8 During the past two decades, there were only a handful of women who managed to build careers within this scene. Sajsi MC (Ivana Rašić) has been active since the early 2000s; in the period 2003–2006, an all-female rap group called Bitcharke na travi (Bitches on Grass) was active, although never as popular as Sajsi MC or Mimi Mercedes; in recent years, with the commercialization of the trap scene, more and more women are gaining popularity – like Milica Miladinović, Indodjija, Zoi, etc.

down as time went by.⁹ Most of the examples I chose to present in this paper are from the earlier stages of her career, given that this is the period in which most of the trademarks of her music were formulated and that the basic premise behind them was never abandoned. During 2019 and 2020, she created a number of YouTube videos in which she explained her earlier songs and the agenda behind them,¹⁰ videos in which she answers her fans' questions by talking about a wide variety of topics (spanning from issues of dating, sex, self-esteem and discrimination, to marriage and family, to 5G network). Then, mostly during the Covid lockdown, she hosted a number of live Instagram videos consisting of tips on how to change your lifestyle, and get yourself on a daily schedule, which books to read, makeup tutorials, how to deal with overeating (with cooking tips),¹¹ and so on. In other words, she focused more on developing her position as a kind of role model for her fans, wanting to empower them to grow, change and do better.

Since the very beginning of her career, Mimi Mercedez stressed that she wanted to make people think with her lyrics, because rap can enable a person to grow and learn: "I always said that everyone should work in rap", she stated in an interview from 2018, "because this is a great way for people to concretely define themselves as persons, get to know themselves better, and love themselves through what rap represents" (Vijesti 2018). She also didn't shy away from openly saying that girls should be more like her. In the song 'Porno', for example, she coined the line that was then often quoted on the internet and in the media: "Chicks, copy me, and the world will be a better place" ("Ribe kopirajte me, i svet će biti bolje mesto"). Picking up on such an attitude, the online portal Mondo filmed a video with the trapper, titled *Mimi Mercedez's school for girls: Pay for your own drinks* (*Škola za devojke Mimi Mercedez: Plaćajte svoje piće*, Mondo 2016), in which she gives tips to girls about how to act around boys, how to be independent and suggests that girls should adopt her strong attitude towards important life issues. When she was, on a different occasion, asked if she thought that she is a good role model for younger women (which is something "many say"), she replied:

Of course. I wish I had such a role model when I was a kid. Even though many will say that I'm ruining the youth, I represent the strata of girls who are more ready to boldly step out and show their true colors. They are not burdened by moral barriers and the judgement of others, they just do their own thing. On the other hand, a

9 One example of the mentioned change is visible in her approach towards women's subjects. Earlier songs on the subject, like 'Cleopatra' ('Kleopatra'), 'True Lady' ('Prava dama'), 'Tips' ('Bakšiš') from the first album, or 'Money, Money, Money' ('Parice, parice, pare') from the *Godmother* album, speak about female pleasure, sex, striptease, using crude language, a lot of swear words, with accompanying videos showing close-ups of women's breasts and bottoms, strippers and various forms of nudity. A more recent song that deals with the matter, 'Evil Chick' ('Zla riba', 2020) is directed at women's experiences in relationships and women learning to say no, choosing themselves over a man. The video is much more "polished", with no explicit nudity, or open attempts at similar provocations. In other words, topics persist, her music remains in the domain of trap/hip hop, with the same producers creating the matrixes, but the need to provoke and offend her audience, as well as the general public is much less explicit.

10 The videos are a part of the "Auto portrait" series.

11 All videos are available on her Instagram profile: <https://www.instagram.com/mimimercedez/channel/?hl=en>

girl who listens to my music relates to my songs with good reason, I don't impose my lifestyle on anyone. (Svet&Skandal 2015)

Throughout her career, thus, Milena Janković carefully constructed the figure of Mimi Mercedez to perform a kind of “power femininity” (Lazar 2006)¹² which she carefully constructs in order to emphasize her personal strengths as a successful, creative and emancipated woman, but also because she aims to help others achieve the same. I further elaborate this aspect of the trapper's career – which can be viewed through the prism of leadership – in the coming sections, but before diving deeper into that aspect, I briefly address the notion of empowerment in the context of capitalism, given that it is important for understanding how the figure of a leader (or idol, a hero, etc.) is constructed and renegotiated in the specific case of Mimi Mercedez.

Empowerment

Since the 1990s, within the popular culture and the media, empowerment became one of the main frameworks within which femininities are imagined and constructed. It has, at that time, taken on numerous faces – as a trait that adorns contemporary women, or a goal that we should strive to as a feminist ideal par excellence, or a kind of proxy for feminism (as many women will acknowledge their power, but will refuse to be labeled as feminists), a legacy left to younger generations of women, or a political strategy that focuses on women as well as nations “to be empowered” (Dosekun 2015; McLaughlin 2016; Sardenberg 2008). Wanting to paint a picture of how important empowerment is, Rosalind Gill (2008: 36) quoted an article published in 2003 by the satirical program *The Onion*, titled “Women Now Empowered by Everything a Woman Does” (The Onion 2003). In an attempt to emphasize how much the entertainment and advertising industries, as well as public discourses, rely on the notion of empowerment, the authors at *The Onion* decided to publish the findings of an imaginary study, which found that “women – once empowered primarily via the assertion of reproductive rights or workplace equality with men – are now empowered by virtually everything the typical woman does”. (The Onion 2003). Such a state of affairs also prompted Jennifer Keishin Armstrong¹³ to (not satirically) note that feminism (and its different tokens, like empowerment), has become something of a “job requirement for female pop stars” (Billboard 2017). In other words, we could say that “empowerment” – as a word, token of feminism, hashtag, political stance, etc. – means many different things to many different subjects, and as such, it can, but does not need

12 The term is borrowed from Michelle Lazar who defines it “in terms of women's exercise of self-determination and agency, which constitute an important goal for feminists and postfeminists alike, albeit envisaged differently. Whereas for feminists, women's ability to take charge and act upon life choices is construed as a collective struggle, for postfeminists this is conceived more in individualistic terms”. (Lazar 2008: 510). It is used here to refer to various ways in which women's strength is (re)presented, but also to shed light on the fact that it is mainly equated with individual power and success and should be understood as being an important aspect of how femininities are constructed within the music market.

13 <https://jenniferkarmstrong.com/> (accessed 15 February 2022).

to be, related to any particular feminist movement in any particular time or geographical area. It has become a central term of various neoliberal agendas and as such, it circulates in the pop cultural and media space of postsocialist Serbia as well.

A body of articles and publications produced in the domain of media and popular studies over the past three decades looks precisely at how, and with what consequences, has empowerment (understood primarily as a signifier of the feminist movement in liberal contexts) been employed and renegotiated/reconstructed in advertising, television shows, movies, magazines and other artifacts of popular and media cultures.¹⁴ Several authors (see fn. 11) mainly agree that constructions and representations of empowered femininity have an important place within the current market economy and that they are employed in a plethora of ways in order to produce, promote and offer various products for consumption to women across the globe. They mainly examine how femininities are constructed within the climate of what Rosalind Gill (2007) called “postfeminist sensibility”, in order to explain the current state of affairs, where certain signifiers of (second-wave liberal) feminism, like sexual liberation, empowerment, freedom of choice, etc., entered the mainstream discourses of popular culture and the media, and have become a kind of common sense when it comes to how (desirable) femininities are envisioned (Gill 2017: 609–610). Tisha Dejmancee noted that we are witnessing a “reduction of post feminism to empowerment as an empty signifier applicable to whatever issue, product or behaviors need to be sold to women, as dictated by social, cultural and economic conditions” (Dejmancee 2016: 120; emphasis by the author). By placing empowerment in the center of the processes of construction of femininities today, as well as seeing it as a kind of proxy for achievements of the second-wave feminist movement in the liberal West, the author also drew attention to the definition of empowerment through highly individualistic terms. And, given the fact that empowerment has been saturated with numerous meanings during the past fifty years, especially in relation to the fight for women’s liberation, any of these meanings can be called upon, re-envisioned, renegotiated or removed, depending on the context and the goal towards which it is employed.

The empowered figure that Mimi Mercedez constructs is primarily based on her individual qualities and strengths, emphasizing the importance of having an *attitude* rather than an opinion. As she proclaims in one of her more “explicit” songs ‘Cleopatra’, she is like the Egyptian queen, “half woman, half fire”, who “manipulates her pussy” in order to “tighten her power” (“da učvrstim moć, manipulišem pičkom”). Most of her lyrics are written in the first person and she rarely misses an opportunity to express her uniqueness and an uncompromising attitude, which she usually describes using the slang word

14 Kasey Windels and the group of authors (Windels et al. 2019) have, for example, explored different instances of “femvertising” (female empowerment advertising), which gained momentum as “marketers have recognized that femvertising sells, as it improves a brand’s reputation and promotes a positive message for women” (Windels et al. 2019: 1). Michelle Lazar explores different aspects of what she calls “power femininity” (Lazar 2006), while other authors focus on magazines (Majstorović 2016), films and television shows (Dejmancee 2016; McRobbie 2009), reality TV programs (Harvey and Gill 2011), etc.

“kurčenje”.¹⁵ In the song ‘What (kurčenje again)’,¹⁶ she raps: “I don’t want an opinion, but rather an attitude, enough dithering, I’m sick of weighing, sick of whining” (Neću mišljenje već STAV, dosta je dvoumljenja/ Dosta mi je vaganja, dosta prenemaganja); the song ‘Kurčenje is a must’ (‘Kurčiti se mora’), nails down such an attitude by proclaiming that the “First rule of hardcore is that kurčenje is a must, why be a good girl, when that’s boring as hell” (Prvo pravilo hardkora je da kurčiti se mora/ šta ti vredi što si dobra kada nema većeg smora).¹⁷ The empowered woman that we see is someone who possesses certain traditionally masculine traits, refusing to adapt to gender stereotypes, but who uses social expectations of women to advance her own agenda and obtain material wealth. In a number of songs from the early stages of her career, she addresses the perceived stupidity of men who are ready to pay for sex or to watch a woman undress. As she raps, “A true woman isn’t happy with the minimum wage/ This is why we suck money out of mama’s boys/ They think they are buying us, but they are treating our friends/ It’s a tested tactic, from Serbia to Arctic/ We fuck the rich boys, we take what’s ours” (Prava žena nije zadovoljena minimalnom platom/ Zato maminim sinovima izvlačimo pare/ Oni misle da nas kupuju, al’ časte nam drugare/ To je oprobana taktika od Srbije do Arktika/ Jebemo bogataše, uzimamo što je naše). The construction of such an empowered figure enables Mimi to turn the conceptions of femininity which have traditionally been seen as objectifying towards female bodies (and thus hurting their social image) into a source of strength and pride. In other words, she embraces the negative stereotypes about women, and turns them into positive traits and signs of empowerment.¹⁸ This persona is, additionally, built up into a leader (or a representative) of a generation of young people and an idol for girls (and boys) trying to find their way through the disaster capitalism that took its roots in postsocialist Serbia.

15 The word is a vulgar term for an attitude of showing off and boasting about one’s power, money, intellect or other desirable traits. The root of the word is a swear-word for penis, turned into a verb, so it can also be understood as referring to men boasting their sexual prowess. However, it is used to describe the behavior of both men and women. Mimi Mercedes refers to it explicitly in two of her songs: ‘Šta (opet neko kurčenje)’ and ‘Kurčiti se mora’, but also her other songs and public appearances resonate with the attitude described in these songs.

16 This is a loose translation of the original, ‘Šta (opet neko kurčenje)’.

17 “Hardcore” is a term often used by Mimi Mercedes, as well as other artists from this circle. It mainly refers to a lifestyle in which everything one does is pushed to the extreme: constant partying, doing a lot of drugs and having a lot of sex, being rude and obnoxious, not letting anyone dictate your life, etc.

18 This mechanism is not something typical only for Mimi Mercedes, but a strategy often used by different subcultures or identity groups, where a word, label or a concept with negative connotation is appropriated and renegotiated, infused with different meaning. It is a strategy analyzed in great detail by many authors, including Judith Butler and José Esteban Muñoz, who used the term disidentification to explain it. Given its complexity, I chose not to dive deeper into the analysis of the phenomenon.

(Anti) Heroine

In this chapter, I use the terms like "leader" or "leadership" to refer to various different things and attitudes. However, they are all related to the figure of an empowered woman who is, as it is common in neoliberal contexts, working towards empowering others through "leading by example", to use a common idiom. In the case of Mimi Mercedez's songs, her position of strength within the hip hop/trap scene depends on the fact that she is a woman among men. In the song 'True Lady' ('Prava dama', 2016), she mentions "a bunch of rappers in diapers", noting that she is "a young mother", who has no issues in "raising them all by myself" [Brda repera u pelenama ja sam mlada mama/ Cimam se bez blama da ih sve odgajim sama]. In "Porno", she raps that everyone is hot for the girl, because the girl kicks ass ("Sad svi lože se na klinku jer klinka kida"), and continues remarking that everyone thinks that she works in the "oldest trade" (referring to prostitution) when she says that she isn't happy with minimum wage, alluding to various waves of moral panic from the public that followed her appearances, deemed as being sexually explicit, and therefore problematic.¹⁹

What makes such an empowered attitude specific, is the local, postsocialist context in which it is formulated, with the woman presenting herself as the leader/representative of a generation, also representing an antiheroine, a symptom of a failed society ruined by postsocialist transition. Specificities of that context have been discussed by a large number of authors since the fall of the Berlin wall, with most of them focusing on "the disastrous consequences of the introduction of neoliberal capitalism and the deep socioeconomic transformation this entailed, resulting in drastic inequalities between a tiny layer of the newly rich, diminishing middle class and the increasingly populous poor strata" (Horvat and Štikis 2015: 23). In other words, the generation that Mimi Mercedez represents (as she said in the interview quoted earlier), is a generation that grew up in a society which saw the steady privatization of all public resources, healthcare and education, a generation that witnessed their parents losing their jobs because the once state-owned companies were ruined and sold to foreign investors, and whose future lies (generally speaking) in finding a way to earn a lot of money quickly, in being a source of cheap, yet well-educated labor, or emigrating. In addition, in such postsocialist societies, success – equated mainly with material prosperity – is attributed solely to one's individual strengths and qualities, or as Mimi raps in the song 'I Have No Strength' ('Nemam Snage', 2016): "I want to be in control, I want to be the boss, and this is why I want to be rich and famous". Postsocialism is, thus, the context that is criticized by Mimi Mercedez, by constructing herself as a representative of its failures, a young woman living in the capitalist semi-periphery faced with terrible working conditions and the lack of any kind of opportunity. The public persona of Mimi Mercedez is largely dependent on different approaches towards and uses of negative stereotypes and roles – crime, prostitution, etc. – attempting to infuse them with positive meaning and give them a kind of legitimacy,

19 The original lyrics are: "Ja samo kažem nisam zadovoljna minimalnom platom. Oni zaključe da bavim se najstarijim zanatom". Or, in English: "I only say that I'm unhappy with minimum wage. They conclude that I'm working in the oldest trade".

not because they are by themselves positive, but because they represent a reality of living in contemporary Serbia, at least the way she, and many of her fans, see it.

One example of such a strategy is her frequent dealing with striptease and prostitution in the songs she writes, and later expanding on those topics in the interviews. She frequently emphasizes that she worked as a stripper, which is an experience she also describes in her songs (as in, for example, 'Bakšiš' ('Tips') and 'Parice, parice, pare' ('Money, money, money')). In an interview she gave in 2016, titled "Rap enabled me to not bust my ass as a stripper", she summed up the path she took from striptease to rap: "Neither love, nor hunger pushed me towards striptease, it was a rational calculation. I was sick of not having money to buy certain things I wanted, I thought long and hard about which job I could do without having connections, that paid more than 20.000 [a bit less than 200 euros today, at the time of the interview, it was considered the minimum wage], so I went to Mulin Rouge [a strip club in Belgrade] and asked about conditions of employment. I left it [striptease], because I don't want to work like a slave, and this is what rap enables me" (Ekspress.net 2016). A few aspects of the quote are especially important: the affirmation of a profession understood usually as morally problematic, with the emphasis that this was a *rational calculation*; the mention of the perpetual struggle of most people in Serbia and the Balkan region to obtain money and a further push towards affirming an opinion of younger generations which is often considered wrong or even dangerous by the older generations and (intellectual) elites – getting a lot of money with as little work as possible; finally, the importance of having connections in order to fulfill some basic needs, like getting adequate healthcare or finding a job.²⁰ In Mimi's perspective, hence, one's achievements, or any form of success in life, are attributed mainly to personal skills and qualities, as any form of systemic support has been destroyed during the transition to neoliberalism, with individuals needing to develop what is commonly known as an entrepreneurial mindset in order to achieve any life goal.²¹ By putting striptease in focus in her songs and public appearances, she attempts to testify to the perceived reality of life in Serbia, and conditions in which young generations – mostly high school and university students – grew up and matured. Given that she speaks/raps about striptease as an empowering form of labor, ridiculing the men who spend a lot of money just to watch a (semi-)naked woman dance, she infuses it with meanings intended to be opposite to those adopted by the public, which would be inclined to take the moral high ground.

The song 'MMM' can be viewed as another manifest song, this time relating to a kind of "play" with labels – being a role model for some, and simultaneously a symbol of (moral) deterioration for others, a heroine and an antiheroine. The song begins with a statement, "times are hard, but I'm a tough woman", a woman who "sleeps all day and works all night", makes her own money so that she can live the way she wants. Mimi puts money in the center of everything in the refrain by saying "what moves the world, moves my ass as well" ("šta pokreće svet, pokreće i moje dupe"). Lyrics construct Mimi as

20 This final feature of the contemporary societies of the region is understood as an epigone of post-socialism by Čarna Brković (2017) in her book *Managing Ambiguity. How Clientelism, Citizenship, and Power Shape Personhood in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

21 For more details on this mindset and its place within the music industry, see Ahl and Marlow 2021.

someone who uses the terrible living and working conditions to her advantage, because of an individual strength to persevere against the odds. In ‘MMM’, she also coined a kind of “chicken-or-egg” phrase that is often quoted in the media as well: “Is our country ruined because of people like me, or does a ruined country create people like me” (“Da li zbog takvih kao ja naša zemlja propada, ili zemlja propala stvara takve kao ja”). The line is often quoted in online interviews with Mimi (for instance: *Vijesti* 2018), and was even used by Nenad Čanak, a local politician to describe the lack of accountability for the devastation of contemporary Serbian society (LSV 2015).

Final Remarks

The role of Mimi Mercedez as an antiheroine and a representative of a generation was carefully constructed throughout her career as a woman working within the male-dominated genre of hip hop/trap. As the genre and its surrounding culture offer ample strategies for formulating social criticism and speaking about different policies/politics and ideologies, she used a number of them – like the practice of dissing other rappers, or presenting sexually explicit content – to formulate a public figure that is loved by those who can relate to her music, but that can simultaneously be understood as a representative of a society in deep crisis, devastated by disaster capitalism. Through constructions of empowered femininity, understood primarily through an individualistic lens, the rapper built her leadership position by navigating the intricate matrixes of the music industry, expectations, failed expectations and labels. By addressing subjects like female sexuality and pleasure, striptease or making money quickly, she speaks to other members of her generation that grew up in a transitional society, offering them a kind of role model, but also a way to become empowered and successful as well. In that sense, the notion of leadership, understood often in a positive light, is deconstructed and used to construct a figure that represents opinions, attitudes and behaviors not necessarily desirable in a society. Employing both the figure of an empowered woman and of a role model, Mimi Mercedez in fact embodies a kind of antiheroine that also provokes critical thinking about concepts like empowerment and leadership.

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