

## Crni Srbi and Ron Holsey

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*In this essay, YouTube music videos operate as one of those grey areas between the closely policed borders of the Greater Europe described above: a space where Black and Serbian hip-hop artists collaborate in narratives that suggest a transnational and transracial workingman's solidarity, against contemporary Serbian assumptions of ethnic primacy and assertions of European 'whiteness'. For the past quarter century, Eastern Europe has been seen in terms of Edward Said's Orientalism, with its imaginative geography and nesting alteritisms; Baker invites us to look through the lens of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic and to see instead lived geopolitical experience and peripheral solidarities.*

Introduced by sampled 'oriental' strings and hip-hop beats, a Black baker heaving dough inside a sweltering kitchen turns to the viewer and bemoans his downtrodden lot in song, using the language, verse-forms and characteristic ornamented vowels of the newly-composed folk music with which decades of singers from Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and the Dalmatian hinterland have described the hardships of the labour migration that endemic unemployment at home has forced millions of their compatriots to undergo. His lament, that the only momentary pleasure in his life of labour is drinking rakija on a penniless Saturday night, is taken up at once by a slightly younger Black man, working as a painter, rapping to the camera in a few brief seconds of illicit leisure before his older White foreman comes back and argues about the third shift he is supposed to work that day. They, and the White labourer who breaks from hurling debris across the dusty yard outside to rap about working for ten and a half hours without a break for lunch, then (as he drops his heavy wooden plank) about inviting

his friends to the kafana, are characters in the kind of social drama of exploitation and precarity which newly-composed folk music has long offered its listeners, and to which post-Yugoslav hip-hop since the mid-1990s has, at its most socially engaged best, added postsocialist political critique.

The snatched moments of release that Crni Srbi and Ron Holsey's video 'Rintam' ('I'm toiling away'), published on YouTube in 2016, offer the viewer, when they finally come together to toast in the yard and sing outdoors with their rakija bottles in the evening light, are the same affective spaces that popular music in Serbia and the rest of South-east Europe has long invited peripheralised workers, gastarbeiters and disenfranchised postsocialist citizens to look forward to and find solace in. The brotherhood between the three men, two African-Americans and one White Serb, embodies a translocal class-based solidarity marginalised within dominant ethnicised frames of identity. It even allows its viewer to project a critique of neoliberal capitalism that is not confined within the boundaries of 'postsocialist' Europe into the story which the conventions of music video invite them to tell about its scenes.

Both the duo of Crni Srbi (The Black Serbs), otherwise known as David Brkljač from Novi Sad and Jibri Bell ('Jovan Crnović') from South Dakota, and Ron Holsey, an African-American singer from California, who began posting YouTube videos of himself singing classic newly composed folk songs in 2015, have been able to reach audiences and make enough money to produce professionally-edited music videos, as a result of today's grassroots digital economy. Their communication does not depend on, though they are sometimes featured in, a mainstream media where the novelty of Bell and Holsey as Black Americans fluent in Serbian linguistic and cultural codes is still the primary lens through which they are presented to the wider Serbian public:<sup>1</sup> headlines like 'Here's what a guy from Los Angeles who sings folk songs [narodnjaci] has to say about Serbia!', from a *Blic* interview with Holsey published online on 16 December 2015, imply that the boundary between African-American identity and the identity of those with an innate affinity for narodnjaci (supposedly reserved for members of the 'narod' or ethnic nation) is a fixed border of racialised ethnicity that it is remarkable for someone to be able to cross. Instead, they address listeners primarily through digital spaces they curate, where two Black musicians' participation in Serbian linguistic and musical culture appears as everyday sociality rather than exotic sight.

The history of the friendship between Bell and Brkljač, which inspired them to start posting comedy videos online in 2013, itself

emerged from the entanglement of Serbia's postsocialist and post-conflict situation with the racism and social inequalities of South Dakota, where Bell grew up and Brkljač ended up living, after his mother married a US Air Force mechanic she had met in Hungary, in 1999, while the family were temporary refugees, escaping the NATO air strikes over Novi Sad. They became friends as teenagers after Bell started dating Brkljač's sister Luna (having been to a party and heard her sing in Serbian, Bell told a Denver sports news site in 2018), although had first met when Brkljač kicked Bell during a fight between rival schools some years before; the comradeship they forged as fellow outsiders outlasted the breakup of Bell's relationship with Luna and first inspired them to make a series of comedy videos for YouTube, then to turn to collaborations with Black and Latino singers that expressed transnational friendships between the Balkans and racially marginalised diasporas in the USA.<sup>2</sup> Their *Serbia Coming to America* videos (2013–14) had Bell play a stereotypically ultra-patriotic and confrontational Serb, in *šajkača* and *opanke*, puzzling Americans by speaking Serbian and picking fights at burger bars, basketball courts and other typical spaces of intercultural encounter. 'Rintam' was their second musical collaboration of 2016: their first, 'Balkan Latino', was filmed in Chicago with Joshua Lazu and mixed lyrics in Serbian and Puerto Rican Spanish, rap, reggaeton rhythms, and trumpets which could equally accentuate a Serbian or Latin pop song to celebrate Latino and Balkan friendship – the same musical flexibility with which, in mainstream pop, the Serbian singer Saša Kovačević has recorded reggaeton-inspired summer hits like 'Temperatura' (with a video filmed in Havana, featuring a dreadlocked Black rapper unnamed in the credits) that fit effortlessly on to the region's radio stations alongside global Latino hits like 'Despacito', which 'Temperatura' and 'Balkan Latino' both anticipated by a year.<sup>3</sup>

The everyday experiences of transnational migration and interracial sociality that Brkljač, Bell and Holsey translate into the *mis en scène* of 'Rintam' not only evoke present-day labour politics of working-class masculine precarity, but seem to reinterpret and rework a phrase that remains commonplace in the former Serbo-Croatian languages: 'raditi kao crnac', 'to work like a Black'. Their caption underneath the 'Rintam' video reads 'Priča mog života!!! Radim kao crnac a mala mi je plata' (the story of my life!!! I work like a Black and my wages are low). During one of the *Serbia Coming to America* skits (when the duo run into a street film crew and start negotiating payments with a hapless researcher from MTV), Bell, in character, similarly remarks, 'Radim kao crnac a plaće me kao Srbina!' (I work like a Black and I get paid like a Serb!). The phrase

has embedded the history of the Atlantic slave trade in many European languages,<sup>4</sup> and testifies to the fact that imaginations of 'race' in the region certainly date back much further than postsocialist identifications with the whiteness of a 'Europe' fortifying itself against the Global South.

The continued currency of 'raditi kao crnac' often surprises Anglophone learners whose public culture at home performs the fiction that we have moved on from racism, so that the language of overt racial stereotyping ought to have been left behind (in fact, as White Anglophones like myself should be especially aware while comparing formations of race between regions, the language may have been left behind but the structural racism remains). In an article on regional, ethnic and racial slurs in Croatian, the linguist Gordana Čupković argues that 'crnac', when alluding to hard physical work, should be taken as an expression of 'empathy for the oppressed and the exploited', indeed an identification with the oppression that enslaved Africans underwent at White overseers' hands, and not as a slur, in contrast to its implied opposite, 'raditi kao Cigan' ('to work like a Gypsy').<sup>5</sup> The simile cannot be distanced from racism like this when the hegemonic gazes of popular culture in the region still project colonial fantasies on to Black bodies. In Bell's use, however, the linkage of blackness, exploitation, tiring manual labour and low pay seems to hint at a horizontal solidarity between Blacks and Serbs that might be closer to socialist internationalism than to postsocialist aspirations for unconditional access to the symbolic whiteness of the centre of Europe (or indeed openly racist arguments that east European nations are part of that symbolic White core and ought to be preserved as such).

Crni Srbi's productions might, indeed, be comparable to how the Belgrade hip-hop collective Bombe Devedesetih (Bombs of the Nineties) have used their own online videos rather than mainstream media and recording-industry channels to construct a 'left populism' which distances itself both from the Serbian cultural elite and from the presupposition that the ethnic nation ought to be the first focus of solidarity: African footballers and Black Power activists are all among the 'heroes' and 'brothers' in their lyrics, and the rapper Mimi Mercedez named the last song on her 2015 mix-tape after the footballer Diafra Sakho, linking the 'global problem – the Balkans and West Africa' ('svetska problematika – Balkan i Zapadna Afrika').<sup>6</sup> Holsey, a musician who has gone on to make solo videos and perform with mainstream Serbian stars (including an intimate duet of 'Jovano, Jovanke' with the Belgrade-based Macedonian singer Tijana Dapčević), meanwhile hints at affinities between the blackness of the African diaspora and the localised blackness of Roma

that have already been imagined from the Romani side when he appears on a US metro system in the last section of the video, wearing a tuxedo and playing an accordion, while a young White boy presses a banknote to Holsey's forehead as guests would to a Romani musician at a traditional Serbian wedding (and elsewhere in South-east Europe where it is customary to hire Romani wedding bands).

The routes through which a Serb from Novi Sad moves to South Dakota, a young Black man from Rapid City discovers Serbia, and another African-American from California becomes a digital celebrity by mastering the conventions of Serbian folk song – until the sound and style of hip-hop offer all three a medium for commenting on young working-class men's precarity – are part of a 'Black Atlantic'<sup>7</sup> created by the historical legacies of colonialism and enslavement, and by transnational networks of resistance, critique and creativity, which extends well beyond Europe's Atlantic rim into its interior, even though few sociologists of race until recently have traced it so far. The solidarities that Brkljač, Bell and Holsey personify in 'Rintam' are subaltern ones which neither the identity myths of Euro-Atlanticism, nor those of chauvinistic ethnocentrism, would accommodate, but which stem not just from imagined transnational identification but also embodied geopolitical experience.

#### Note

This text was prepared in December 2018. The Bibliography also contains works by Sunnie Rucker-Chang and Samantha Farmer published more recently that advance discussions of their topics beyond what I articulated in this text.

#### Appendix

At the time of writing, all the videos mentioned in this entry were available on YouTube, including:

'Rintam' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUcBWqzwN1k>.

'Serbia Coming to America' part 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkvektlQo6A>.

'Serbia Coming to America' part 2 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YA\\_Ivo1CKns](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YA_Ivo1CKns). 'Balkan Latino' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWEnRnPDIV0>.

## Notes

- 1 See Rucker-Chang, 2024.
- 2 Wild, 2018.
- 3 See Farmer, 2019.
- 4 Giovannetti, 2006, 5.
- 5 Čupković, 2015, 223–4.
- 6 Papović and Pejović, 2016, 118.
- 7 Gilroy, 1993.

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