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***HOOD ELITISM*: STYLISTIC TRANSGRESSION OF DOMINANT CULTURAL MEANINGS IN THE MUSIC OF THE SERBIAN ARTIST MIMI MERCEDEZ**

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DECLARATION

I declare that I have written this thesis myself and on my own. I have duly referenced and quoted all the sources and literature that I used in it. I have not yet submitted this work to obtain another degree. I will sign this declaration and consent by handwritten signature.

In Belgrade, July 11, 2022

Signature:

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the phenomenon of Serbian *trepfolk* and its part in the local, youth-cultural resistance to the elitist discursive tendencies which rely on the definition of one, 'proper' personhood expression and contribute to the continuation of the existing socioeconomic relations in Serbia. Drawing from the imaginary presented in the music-making (music, lyrics, performances) of the Serbian rapper Mimi Mercedez, including the audience participation and attitudes towards it, the ethnographic analysis focuses on understanding the dynamic process of the lower-class youth-cultural negotiation of their national belonging through the invention of an 'authentic' mode of personhood expression, whose traits are either unavailable or vilified in the dominant, Euro-centric discourse produced by the local, cultural elites. By juxtaposing the cultural value systems of the precarious youth living in Belgrade, on one hand, and that of urban, neoliberal, and left-liberal elites (mainly the intelligentsia), on the other, I aim to demonstrate how differences in class location in Serbia yield contrasting, yet harmonious perspectives on the relationship between economic inequality and cultural distinction. Following Pierre Bourdieu's idea of class as relational and of class struggle as 'struggle about meaning' (1984, 479), Beverly Skeggs' conceptualization of 'personhood' as 'sociality or relationality' that is materially conditioned and 'comes into effect through regimes of value' (2011, 488-92), and Wendy Brown's 'culturalization of political struggles' (2006, 16), this paper explores the Serbian youth-cultural resistance as a kind of 'bottom-up' emancipation and revalorization of the Serbian lower-class sociality in general; while the elitist discourse, disseminated by the local intelligentsia, is understood as 'auto-racist' (Krasovec 2015), or 'auto-colonial' (Cirjakovic 2006) narrative, a mode of expression resulting from European/Western political, economic and cultural domination in the region.

Keywords: auto-colonialism, youth cultural bricolage, Mimi Mercedez, trepfolk, cultural hybridity, authenticity

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It seemed fictitious and extraordinary, but still, it was true: they could do with their youth as they wished, in a world where the laws of collective and personal morality were, all the way to the edge of criminality, in those years of the full-blooming crisis, freely interpreted, acknowledged or rejected on behalf of every social milieu and each individual; they could think the way they wanted, judge everything according to their person, independently and without boundary; they spoke as they wished, and for many of them, the words they spoke were taken as deeds, because their words alone satisfied their atavistic needs for heroism and glory, force and destruction, but without impelling them to act or show any meaningful sign of responsibility for their words. Life stood before them as an object, as a battlefield for their untethered senses, for their intellectual inquisitiveness, and emotional valiance, that knew no borders"

Ivo Andric, *The Bridge on the Drina*, 1945, 275.

Introduction

> *That layer [of society] that exists outside of our storyline, you have to be a little harsher with them. Civilians are those that hold on to authority, to what they learned, whatever it is. A civilian is someone who is, you know, too conditioned by whatever is the official way of thinking. You know, if they are a journalist, for example, then they are professionally conditioned, but I'm also talking about personally being a civilian. They never break out of it, and it's not because things are so great for them the way they were taught, but because you don't dare trust yourself when you can rely on some standard criteria. The point is to do stuff authentically, out of your own desire. Tough heads have to experiment in order to live, I don't know. You hit the wall at one point, and you have to grow up immediately, your head becomes tougher, in a way. It has to do with class, but it's not just that. There are civilians everywhere. To live life authentically means […] to experiment and be creative […] let go of expectations and deal with your reality head-on. Get an attitude, don't just pussy around with mild opinions about life. If you're gonna copy some trend, do it under your own terms. [Being a civilian is all] about that rock'n'roll attitude "I don't give a fuck what you think", that's bullshit. Everything we do is to get a reaction from other people, that's how we are as humans, and I want to get my beliefs out there [and] help people overcome debilitating fear and shame by trusting their own, authentic desires and needs as guidance.*
>
> (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022)

This essay seeks to investigate how precarious, Serbian youths use popular music to strategically negotiate their national and communal belonging by constructing an "authentic" mode of personhood expression. More specifically, I will analyze how the local youths resist the elitist discursive tendencies toward defining one, 'proper' personhood expression and tailor their own cultural world, using the phenomenon of Serbian *trepfolk (trap-folk)* as a vehicle for marrying the contradictions that permeate the Serbian public discourse. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term 'neo-Diesel' to refer to the unofficial, youth discourse. To properly understand the process of the neo-Diesel, youth-cultural construction of authenticity ("civilian" versus "tough head"), it is necessary to first consider the characteristics

of and interaction between different ideological leanings which constitute the Serbian official discourse, and their respective readings of the Diesel ("Dizel") subculture of the 1990s,[1] as well as their attitudes toward turbo-folk and *trepfolk*. Secondly, by juxtaposing cultural value and meaning systems of, on one hand, the conservative cultural discourse of liberal and national elites, and, on the other, those of the neo-Diesel discourse, I will examine how differences in class location yield contrasting perspectives on the relationship between economic inequality and cultural distinction. In other words, this essay argues that the conceptualization of the (causal) relationship between economic inequality and cultural distinction is central to the idea of authenticity in both the elitist and the neo-Diesel discourses. The focus of my textual, discursive, and ethnographic analysis is the neo-Diesel imaginary presented in the music-making (music, lyrics, performance) of the Serbian rapper Mimi Mercedez, as well as the audience's responses to it. By treating the production and consumption of the rapper's music as a neo-Diesel, youth-cultural practice, this paper addresses the issue of class as a cultural identity and the competing notions of 'authentic' personhood expression as a symbolic struggle over cultural capital.

Furthermore, before I return to Mimi Mercedez and her relationship to the youth-cultural formation of an 'authentic' mode of personhood expression, it is beneficial to briefly elaborate on the most dominant discursive tendencies present in the contemporary, Serbian, public discourse, and their respective conceptualizations of authenticity. The official cultural discourse, disseminated by the contemporary Serbian cultural elites (the intelligentsia, academic artists, NGOs, etc.), is dominated by two, conservative (liberal), ideological narratives: the neoliberal and national (Komnenović and Unverdorben 2019, Cirjaković 2020). Despite their mutual disagreements, these intertwined cultural systems, neo-liberal and national (or neo-conservative), are unified in their demand for the Serbian national culture to be recognized as a particular tradition rightfully belonging to the European cultural conglomerate, persistent lamentation over the deterioration of *true values*, the anti-communist sentiments described by 'The two totalitarianisms' theory, as well as the Islamophobic and Orientalist worldview (Marković 2001, Bogdanović 2016, Kovačević 2018). All these traits are conjointly expressed in, what can be termed as, the *wrong enculturation* accusation. This

[1] The name of the Diesel subculture is inspired by then-popular Diesel jeans.

concept refers to the Serbian, cultural elites' proposition that individual economic impoverishment, but also the broader decline of the living standard in Serbia, are the results of the failure of the majority of the local population to adapt to the challenges of the liberal democracy and market economy, as well as to the European cultural norms, in general (Krašovec 2014, Dimirijević 2015, Ćirjaković 2020). More precisely, in the neo-liberal perspective, economic disparity in Serbia, at the moment one of the highest in Europe[2], is understood as the consequence of "the "backward mentality" of the broad masses of Serbian people, who are "blinded by egalitarianism, collectivism, and attachment to the East, always hostile to rational, liberal and pro-European reformers" (Bogdanović 2016, 75). That is, the economic gap between the country's upper and lower classes is viewed as the product of a cultural model of the *toothless* ("krezube") and *genocidal* ("genocidne") Serbian mass that treats "its progressive elites as traitors" (Perović 2015).[3] On the other hand, the discourse of national (neo-conservative) elites, insists on the necessity for purification of the Serbian national culture, which is seen as endangered both by the "godless western globalists" (Bozić 2021), threatening the uniqueness of Serbian tradition, and the Ottoman cultural legacy, that alienates the nation's identity from "[its] European family" (Rajić 2014). Evidently, both narratives are highly contradictory in their demands, which is exactly what reveals the self-serving nature of the liberal-elitist discourses. By embracing the Euro-centric, Orientalist ("attachment to the East"), and anti-communist ("blinded by collectivism") worldview, Serbian cultural elites declare themselves as culturally exceptional, civilizational forces (Krašovec 2014, Komnenić and Unverdorben 2019); thus, unlike the rest of the Serbian rabble, the liberal elites' cultural model (an authentic personhood expression) is presented as unaffected by both the 500-year-long Ottoman cultural supremacy in the Balkan region, as well as Serbia's socialist past, but is simply European ("accidental Serbs", Ćirjaković 2020). To further understand the cultural mechanism operating behind the *wrong enculturation* accusation in the conservative discourses of the neo-liberal and national elites, this essay will concentrate on the elitist attitudes toward the 1990s *Diesel* subculture and the mass-consumed musical genre, turbo-folk, as well as its heir- *trepfolk.* At this point, I will only provide brief

[2] https://www.a11initiative.org/en/serbia-is-among-the-countries-with-the-highest-inequality-in-europe-while-the-burden-of-the-crisis-is-paid-by-the-poorest/ Accessed in February, 2020.
[3] "Krezubi" and "genocidni" are commonly used terms in the liberal-elitist discourse.

definitions of the above-mentioned cultural phenomena, focusing on their shared characteristics. Firstly, all three are inextricable from the cultural model of the broad masses of the working-class people in Serbia, incorporating the meanings, values, and speech patterns (turbo-folk and *trepfolk*) associated with this social stratum (Archer 2012, Kovačević 2018, Musić-Vukčević 2019, Nikačević 2019, Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, Maksimović 2020). Secondly, all these phenomena are cultural hybrids that combine a wide variety of local and global trends (Djordjević-Kisačanin 2019, Vladimirova 2020), and, thirdly, each of them was, at their inception, regarded by the cultural elites as a cultural expression of the "disoriented" youth (Delić 2011a). Accordingly, in the neo-liberal cultural discourse, the music of the Serbian mass, turbo-folk, is seen as the phenomenon that "cancels all cultural values, brings all that is a non-cultural value on the surface, and builds upon it a strong structure of kitsch and *schund*" (Marković 2010), and which "even the people who listen to it, don't understand, because they are uneducated and easily manipulated"(Atanasijević 2010); while the *Diesel* subculture is viewed as "a cynical pseudo-culture […] corrupting the youth with criminality and other forms of social disease" (Trebješanin 2011) , its revival and accompanying *trepfolk*, are understood as "absolutely commercially oriented, aiming at obtaining large profits" (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 5). Moreover, in the discourse of neo-conservative elites in Serbia, both turbo-folk and *Diesel* are treated as a move against *healthy*, national tradition and as forms of *social disease*, analogous to *Stanley* Cohen's *folk devils* (1972), whereas *trepfolk* and the *Diesel* revival are simply characterized as "inauthentic youth subculture" (Žolt 2021). Conversely, in the neo-Diesel discourse, as one of Mercedez' fans (an 18-year-old, working-class boy) explains, turbo-folk and the 1990s *Diesel* subculture are understood, as "the nineties working-class youth's avenues of freedom and fulfillment" (a fan, personal communication, October 2021), and a kind of bottom-up, unofficial youth emancipation, or in Mercedez' words, "a communication of a strong desire for freedom […] and [are] very much about the fight against censure and authority as a given" (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022). As described by Darko Delić, the founder of *Bombs of the Nineties* rap collective, of which Mercedez was a member, as well as the leading proponent of the neo-Diesel discourse, the *dizelaši* ("Diesels"=Diesel-youth) of the 1990s were:

> *Well, 70% of* dizelaši *had no relationship to crime, that were the people who wre either football club supporters, or petty delinquents, or both […] classic city boys who imitated the phenomena they saw on TV or in the hood and made effort not to whine but 'keep their heads above the water'. They listened to all genres at once, even rock music-at least to the instances where rock communicated with their attitudes and experiences if there even were any such rock songs. Still, the emphasis was on that one Trinity: South Wind*[4]*-Eurodance-some hip-hop. Later, various electronic genres enter that mixture, mainly techno and trance, and Prodigy, was a must. (*Delić, personal communication, March 4, 2022)

The "keeping their heads above the water" attitude and the omnivorous pop-cultural consumption echo also in Mercedez' poetics and the way the rapper fuses different, mass-consumed musical genres, mainly turbo-folk, boom-bap, trap, dancehall, and reggaeton, fitting them all under the now-established, umbrella genre, *trepfolk.* The main difference between the contemporary *dizelaši,* or *gaseri* ("gassers"=derived from the verb "to gas up"=lit. to put fuel/ *Diesel* in the vehicle; fig. to motivate, lift one's spirits), as those youths who subscribe to the neo-Diesel value system refer to themselves, is the variety of class backgrounds among them.[5] In the simplest terms, most responsible for the diversity of Mercedez' audience is the fact of the decades-long, downward economic spiraling of the local middle-classes (Urošević 2017), the process which I will explore further in the following chapter, and which led to the pressures of precarious existence being experienced by the vast majority of people living under contemporary capitalism, especially those transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. As the issues of precarity (material insecurity) and its effects on one's personhood have become widespread among Serbian youth, so has the possibility for youths of different class locations to identify with Mercedez' poetic rendition of the neo-Diesel notion of authenticity, and its subversion of the liberal-elitist view of the relationship between class inequality and

[4] *South Wind ("Juzni Vetar")* was one of the most popular Yugoslavian, newly-composed-folk groups. In the following chapter on the pop-cultural censure in Yugoslavia, I will discuss the newly-composed folk music in more detail.

[5] My ethnographic research (interviews, participant observation, nethnography) showed that Mercedez' audience includes working-class, middle-class and even a small number of upper-class youth (15-30), both University students and those already employed, a variety of sexual orientations, gender identities (heterosexual, homosexual and transexual), but also age groups (30-45) and Balkan nationalities.

cultural distinction. As some of her audiences admit, Mercedez' is able to articulate common, hurtful topics, "raise half of [their] generation" (female fan, personal communication, October 21, 2021) because her lyrics are "very instructive about life in general […] about life, money, boys, friendships" (female fan, personal communication, October 21, 2021). Moreover, according to a 19-year-old, working-class fan from Belgrade's peripheral neighborhood, Mercedez' music not only "gasses you up" ("izgasirati"=gas one up, lift one's spirits, motivate), but also provides the audience with "that air-bag moment when the reality floors you" (male fan, personal communication, October 21, 2021). Thus, according to the audience accounts of the rapper's music-making, Mercedez strategically illuminates the workings of the societal power dynamics ("life, money, boys, friendships"), in a manner not only meaningful ("air bag moment") but also entertaining and comforting ("gass you up") to the precarious youth. In this regard, through my analysis of Mimi Mercedez' music-making (music, lyrics, performance) and the audience's relationship to it, I will examine how the post-socialist youths of the European periphery reconcile contradictory, confusing, and often exclusionary official narratives of the local cultural elites, employing the revival of the 1990s *Diesel* subculture (style, worldview, speech, music taste pattern) and *trepfolk* music genre as mediums for cultural mixing and the establishment of an authenticity that acknowledges plurality of possible knowledge, or multiple ways of thinking about *reality*.

In his study (1966) on knowledge and power, Michel Foucault claims the following: "In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice." (168). What Foucault suggests in the above quote is that, by defining one, 'proper' personhood, or cultural expression, the liberal-elitist discourses in Serbia do not demonstrate their transparency (access to objective conditions of reality), but reveal themselves as efforts toward controlling and classifying personhood expressions, thus ascribing cultural capital to the elites. In this sense, the neo-Diesel discourse and its construction of an alternative, 'authentic' mode of personhood expression, represents a resistance to the elitist discursive self-empowerment. Moreover, the neo-Diesel discourse circumvents the elitist definition of proper personhood expression by rejecting to acknowledge the primacy of this elitist 'episteme' (e.g., the *Diesel* subculture revival). In relation to this, the sphere of contemporary,

popular music in Serbia (turbo-folk and various *trepfolk* fusions) continually proves to be an effective avenue and a ripe ground for versatile construction of social identities, systems of values, and meanings (knowledge); with a lingering promise of the potential accrual of both symbolic and economic power, which is especially relevant to the working-class youths interested in popular music-making (Papović and Pejović 2016, Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020). With the introduction of widespread Internet access in Serbia in the late 2000s, *Youtube* provided Serbian youths, mostly 'babies of the nineties'[6], interested in music-making with an option of self-publishing. This was especially true for those experimenting with rap music since the only equipment they needed was "a computer and a microphone" (Igor, personal communication, December 2020). One of those "certifiable lunatics who just discovered music"[7] was the rapper Milena Janković aka Mimi Mercedez, born in the working-class neighborhood of Konjarnik in Belgrade in 1992. The rapper accomplished both promises offered by the popular music-making: to use music for personal and communal representation, and the possibility of securing financial independence from it. Moreover, Mercedez started her rap career in 2011. with the single "Puffed-up Piggies" ("Napucane Svinjice"), after working as a waitress in a betting shop and as a striptease dancer in one of the Belgrade downtown clubs, she was able to "earn enough independence and money to rent studio time" (Mercedez 2016). As the rapper explained in our interview, her work experience influenced a lot of her music and lyrical content, which in turn helped her "understand [her] position better", and realize that "what she needs [to live] is owed to her" (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022) and, eventually, enabled her to quit the precarious job market and open her own studio *Geto Gerila* in 2019. Additionally, Mercedez famously explained that "doing striptease didn't happen because I was starving or because I loved it, it was a result of rational calculation. I was sick of not having things I want, and I was sick of working for 20 thousand [dinars, i.e., 200 euros] a month" (Mercedez 2016).[8] The rapper's rise to popularity, first as a

[6] It is a term coined by Mimi Mercedez, both as an emphasis on the 1990s heritage as an influential period in Serbian history, which she critically embraces, and as an emphasis on the material conditionality of the way one experiences the world.

[7] According to Mimi Mercedez (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022), from the perspective of old-school rappers of the 1990s, the new generation of rappers had a less dogmatic and more experimental approach to rap music, which is illustrated in their fusion of turbo-folk and contemporary rap (*trepfolk)*.

[8] 20,000 Serbian dinars translates to less than 200 euros, two times less than the official minimum wage set by the government (400 euros a month). Mercedez is referring to the 2008-2012 period, but the actual minimum

solo artist, then as the only female member of the rap collective *Bombs of Nineties*, coincided with the period colloquially known as "the amphetamine fever", due to the low cost and high availability of this synthetic drug, as well as the period of "the sedated era of turbo-folk" of the late 2000s and early 2010s.[9] As Mercedez explains, what inspired her to start making music was a general, cultural atmosphere reminiscent of "walking through a land-mine" (personal communication, January 23, 2022), and a need to "represent our way of life" and help her "friends" (ibid.) relinquish "the feeling of shame, the biggest problem of the Balkans" (Mercedez 2016). This "feeling of shame" could be viewed as rooted in the person's sense of failure to live in accordance with the exclusionary, elitist definition of 'proper' personhood. Moreover, according to the rapper, "young people live in the state of real schizophrenia [..] some kind of abstract fear of the future, of some external, Higher Judge" (Mercedez 2020), whereby they feel conditioned to "hide the things they do and who they are, hate the things that make them feel good about life, worried that some potential, future authority figure will reject them" (ibid.). That is, in addition to feeling powerless due to poor socioeconomic status, the precarious, young person fears (as if "walking through a land-mine") that their authentic personhood (desires, needs, tastes) is somehow inferior or condemnable (*wrongly encultured*), and, thus, the very reason they are unable to exit precarity. In other words, the source of these feelings (fear and shame) could be seen as located in the liberal-elitist conceptualization of class inequality as springing from cultural differences (entertainment habits, tastes, manner of speech, etc.), not vice versa. Following this, Mercedez approaches her music-making by drawing from her own experience and knowledge (work, relationships, mental and emotional states), as well as that of her friends, with an aim to make public (legitimize) a discourse that epitomizes the bottom-up, youth "episteme" (Foucault 1966, 168), and deflect the effects that the exclusionary, elitist discourse have on precarious, youth personhood. In other words, this paper examines the rapper's music-making, as the neo-Diesel youth-cultural practice, that

wage has not significantly increased since, even though the officials claim that presently the average minimum wage is somewhere between 5000 and 600 euros. Source: http://www.praksa.rs/index.php

[9] The beginning of 2000s is generally considered by fans as 'the golden era of turbo-folk', "decent folk songs that started multiplying, ruled for a while [...] nothing powerful or different." (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022), after which there was a short period known as "the sedated era of 'turbo-folk'"which lasted until the de-monopolization of the pop-music industry, the process enabled by the popularization of YouTube from 2010 onwards (Maksimović 2020).

employs various *poetic strategies* in order to undermine the primacy of the liberal-elitist discourses by reversing the causal relationship between economic inequality and cultural distinction in a dialectical materialist manner.

While the main component of my thesis is the process of the precarious Serbian youth's formation of the 'authentic' personhood expression through pop-cultural consumption, I frame Mercedez' pop-cultural production and the Serbian youth's interactive consumption of it as a process of subaltern cultural innovation and self-representation. By studying attitudes of semi-peripheral, post-socialist youth toward Mimi Mercedez and her music-making, I will shed a light on how third-national youths navigate the multiplicity of official narratives about authentic personhood produced by the decades-spanning, European cultural and political domination in the country where Ottoman cultural legacy constitutes "a great part of [Serbian] identity, the way we dress, clothe, cook, interact and sing" (Dimitrijević 2010). Before moving to the analytical part of my thesis, I provide theoretical and methodological considerations informing my research.

Theoretical considerations

The recent research on the Serbian pop-folk genres and on the related controversies has mostly been focused on moving away from the *Balkanist* (Todorova 1997) readings of turbo-folk as an instrument of nationalist propaganda (Gordy 1999), "war subculture" and an "unmixable mix of rural and urban" (Dragićević-Šešić 1994, 150-180, Kronja 2001). Instead, the contemporary research on the Serbian pop-folk styles focuses on the reconstruction of the post-Yugoslav cultural landscape in a more culturally relativist manner (Archer 2012, Sentevska 2015, 2020), whereby Balkanist attitudes present in earlier works are critically examined and substituted by a more ethnographic analysis that considers the audiences' perspectives, and the role of popular music (turbo-folk) in the promotion of alternative routes to personal empowerment. Additionally, some papers reject the claim of the emancipatory potential of popular music (turbo-folk) in Serbia, claiming that despite being marketed as empowering, this music embodies a disempowering discourse (Volčić and Erjavec 2010). Similarly, the latest research on *trepfolk* investigates the genre's ability to disseminate *left*

populism among youth consumers with nationalistic historical knowledge, yet without investigating the youth members' readings of nationalist ideology (Papović and Pejović 2016). What the abovementioned studies disregard is the dynamic process of the youth's active cultural consumption through appropriation, or what Willis' termed "grounded aesthetics" (Bennett 2000, 26), to suggest that creativity and innovativeness are inseparable from pop-cultural consumption as the "stories commodities tell are completed by consumers" (ibid.). Thus, this paper draws from Stuart Hall's proposition that popular cultural forms are neither "wholly corrupt or authentic [but] play on contradictions"(2005, 68) and examines the "genuine popularity" (1981, 239) of Mercede music, viewing its alternative value formation as "the double movement of containment and resistance" ibid., 228). That is, Mercedez' pop-cultural production is investigated as embodying a dialectic relationship between popular music as a bottom-up cultural practice and as a commercial product whose cultural content is created by the cultural industry with the goal of inciting mass consumption. However, unlike Pejović and Papović (2016), who rely on the liberal-elitist understanding of youth-cultural discourse as a consequence of nationalist indoctrination (Stojanović 2010), I base my study of the neo-Diesel, youth discourse on the analysis of the precarious Serbian youth entertainment habits, of meanings they ascribe to Mercedez' music, commodities they incorporate into their style and of how the precarious youths themselves articulate the demands for social belonging. In the effort to produce an ethnographic study on Serbian *trepfolk* that prioritizes the perspectives of youth producers' (Mercedez) and consumers' perspectives (her fans), as well as to explore the accompanying process of youth-cultural tailoring of an 'authentic' mode of expression in the context of broader, social power-dynamics in Serbia, I will borrow from the class-related terminology available in the Bourdieu-inspired theories, mainly that of Beverly Skeggs' (2011), Imogen Taylor (2015) and Julie Bettie (2000). Specifically, I will use Skeggs' treatment of "personhood" as a "sociality or relationality" that is "embedded in historical and material circumstances" (497), which will allow me to treat differences in value and meaning systems of the elite and precarious youth discourses, as well as in their contrasting aesthetic preferences in pop-cultural consumption, as materially conditioned differences arising from different class locations. Additionally, Skeggs' expansion of Bourdieu's notion of *class as struggle*, that is, the author's proposition that "the value production is necessary to the

personhood performance" (498), joined by Bettie's notion of "class-specific performance" (19), will enable a discussion on how one's class location influences personal identification and intimate relationships with others, as well as on the possibility of *bottom-up* value production and youth-cultural emancipation. Particularly, this essay will assess how pop-cultural representation of the neo-Diesel value and meanings system helps marginalized youth recover trust in the validity of their sociality or relationality, by analyzing the ways Serbian youths themselves define cultural empowerment as opposed to how the liberal-elitist narratives do it (conflicting notions of authenticity). In connection to that, I will deal with the effects of and resistance to symbolic violence of the liberal-elitist, discursive "class-othering" (Tyler 2015, 501), which is accomplished via the definition of single, 'proper' personhood expression (the elitist notion of authenticity), a process understood as the central, liberal-elitist cultural practice aimed at "class stigmatization"(495) .

Regarding the analysis of the elitist discursive tendencies that permeate the official Serbian discourse and enable the continuation of the existing power dynamics in the country, especially the Eurocentric imaginary of the left-liberal elites, I will consult Primož Krašovec'"auto-racism" (2014) and Zoran Cirjaković' "auto-colonialism/chauvinism" (2006, 2020a) propositions which describe forms of non-economic, social domination under capitalism. What the authors propose is that *auto-colonial/chauvinistic* or *auto-racist* discourses are designed and utilized more consciously than "economic ideologies that spring from economic illusions" (Krašovec, 2014). Namely, according to the authors, the liberal-elitist narratives give ideological explanations for both state repression of the marginalized groups and the privileged status of the elites (Ćirjaković 2020a) and, as such, correspond to Foucault's (2004, 1-19) conceptualization of the relationship between knowledge and power. In other words, Serbian *auto-colonial* discourse is "racism without race" (Ćirjaković 2020a), which rests on the definition of Europe as "the subject of all national histories, their exclusive author", and whose network includes "not only *natophilic,* 'independent' media, pseudo-scientific institutes, and numerous NGOs for cultural decontamination, but also the fundamental state institutions" (2020b). In other words, I will investigate how the liberal-elitist, discursive class-stigmatizing practices employs the auto-racist notion of *wrong enculturation* ('improper' personhood) to justify their role of "auto-colonial actors"

(Ćirjaković 2017). Having said that, this paper will consider institutionalized discourses which organize and legitimize discriminatory state practices, leaving aside classic racist ideology and focusing on "a special form of racist ideology primarily important for (semi-) peripheral, post-socialist European countries"(Krašovec 2014); the effects of which involve "internal racialization" whereby lower social classes, as segments of "national body", become "something similar to other race […] perceived as inferior subspecies and as second class citizens" (ibid.). In relation to this, as Ćirjaković (2017) posits, "colonialism should be viewed as *colonialism of the mind*", and that struggle against it is "always *internal* in non-Western societies", and necessitates "permanent confrontation with auto-colonial actors" (130). Thus, in a way, the neo-Diesel youth-cultural notion of 'authenticity' (personhood expression), could be understood as the embodiment of Ćirjaković's "permanent confrontation", a perpetual negotiation of and resistance to the auto-racist concept of *wrong enculturation* ('improper personhood'). Using Krašovec' and Ćirjaković' conceptual framework as a tool for analyzing the contradictions within the Serbian public discourse, this essay will investigate how Mercedez' music-making, as a neo-Diesel youth-cultural practice, circumvents the effects of 'internal racialization' by strategically rearranging the elements from the official discourse in Serbia with the aim of legitimizing an alternative notion of 'authentic' personhood expression.

One of the crucial concepts related to the study of the (semi-)peripheral, precarious youth's social identity construction and negotiation of national belonging via performative cultural practices, such as popular music production and consumption, is Nilan and Feixa's "hybridity [as] cultural creativity, the making of something new through the combination of existing things and patterns" (2006, 1). Nilan and Feixa posit a two-fold nature of the "hybridization" (2) process, the one concerned with power relationships and related interactions between different cultural discourses-"the local and global, the hegemonic and subaltern, the center and the periphery"(ibid., 2)-and the other, which concerns the cultural communication between the West ("global cultures") and the Third World. Accordginly, Mercedez' music-making and *trepfolk* in general, could be viewed as inheriting turbo-folk's mixing of local and global musical trends, but also the ability of rap music style to integrate both hegemonic and subaltern meanings and values into one cultural form, focusing on topics relevant for the precarious youth (the *Diesel* heritage, drug abuse, promiscuity and gender roles, precarious job

market, police violence). My employment of the authors' *hybridization* concept permits the framing of the neo-Diesel employment of *trepfolk* as an "emancipatory use of culture" (ibid.), and an effort toward the configuration of youth subjectivity (Bettie 2000) in the context of cultural globalization, and of multiple and conflicted, hegemonic meaning-systems in Serbia. Noting that *trepfolk* production and consumption incorporates both the appropriation of hegemonic and representation of subaltern meanings and values, as well as musical elements belonging to both local (Ottoman/Balkan) and Western musical traditions, it becomes evident that the genre's emancipatory potential lies in its refusal of the liberal-elitist demand for, on one hand, pure cultural form (void of Ottoman melodies and Western consumerism), and on the other, clear separation of hegemonic and subaltern discourses. That is, the pop-cultural production of the neo-Diesel discourse, as it occurs in Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary and the audience's attitudes towards it, will be assessed as a part of the global, continuing process of the youth personhood reinvention and as an expression of the need for the establishment of a heterogeneous cultural model that allows for plurality of 'authentic' modes of expression. Throughout the analytical part of my thesis, I will expand on the concepts mentioned so far and connect them to the analysis of Mercedez' *poetic strategies* that are integral for the understanding of the neo-Diesel discourse employed by the Serbian youths in their response to the liberal-elitist, exclusionary discourses.

Methodology

Having provided the contextual basis and a general aim of my study, as well as an overview of the theoretical and conceptual framework I will employ in my analysis, I proceed with a brief discussion of the methodological considerations of my qualitative research.

Considering the task of this paper is to demonstrate how Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary, as a neo-Diesel youth-cultural practice, represents a manner of strategic, youth-cultural negotiation of communal and national belonging through tailoring of an 'authentic' mode of expression, it was necessary to conduct ethnographic research that is personal in nature and focused on material reality (Creswell 2008, Glaeser 2006), inductive and sensitive to the contradictions

present both in the youth *sociality* and the Serbian public discourse, in general. To conduct research that produced enough data for triangulation and help me avoid reductionist interpretations of binary oppositional discourses, I used the procedure of purposeful sampling in my ethnographic research whereby I employed my native knowledge of ideological orientations of different social actors, groups, and 'scenes' to investigate the relationship between seemingly contrasting cultural narratives, the one popular among the precarious youth and the one promoted by the cultural elites. Namely, in order to probe into the liberal-elitist narrative I conducted a discursive analysis of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative media outlets (*Danas, Peščanik, N1, Vreme, Radio Free Europe, Srpska politička misao,* etc.) and academic writings (see Bibliography), as well as tabloid media articles (*Telegraf, Blic, Informer, etc.)* as they have the largest readership in Serbia. As for the neo-Diesel, unofficial youth discourse, beside Mimi Mercedez, I conducted a variety of semi-structured, individual interviews, as well as focus groups interviews with young people and adults (between the ages of 17 and 40, both working and middle class), the ones that identify as Mercedez' fans (10) and those that do not (5), the ones that produce their own music (*trepfolk:* the rapper Sprite and Daki BD; and post-rock/punk: the members of the bands *Gazorpazorp* and *Sveta Pseta*), and those that only listen to *trepfolk (*all of which are also Mercedez' fans), which helped me to pinpoint and illustrate some of the conflicts between and complexities within the cultural narratives I study. In the interviews, I focused on the questions which helped me elicit the value and meaning systems of my interlocuters, their understanding of the *trepfolk* phenomena, and their attitudes towards specific elements of the elitist discourses, which are relevant in the discussion on the relationship between class inequality and cultural distinction, such as turbo-folk, Yugoslavian and *Diesel* heritage, drug abuse, promiscuity and gender roles, precarious job market, state violence, the regulation of emotions such as fear and shame and, of course, Mimi Mercedez. Especially fruitful was the extended, around two and a half years long, participant observation which enabled me to explore "the constant flux of social relations and causalities between actors and contexts" (Glaeser 2006), for example, I witnessed changes in some members' attitudes towards Mercedez as their own social circles transformed. This means I sought to repeat the same conversations with the members I already interviewed. For instance, as a consequence of this effort, I noticed how *alternative* youths (two members of the

band *Gazorpazorp*), changed their views on *trepfolk* in the span of two years (2019-2021) from negative ("not even music") to positive evaluation ("soulful"), which led me to a conclusion that the hybrid nature of *trepfolk* and Mercedez' poetics may have provoked the fusing of the alternative (rock genres) and mainstream (*trepfolk)* audiences, which was not the case with earlier pop-folk styles in Serbia (Archer 2012, Šentevska 2020). Instead of fearing incoherencies in my research and insisting on clean-cut codes and themes, I learned to focus on "lived practice and experience as unfolding and opening up for multiplicity of sensory and cognitive processes which permit all kinds of agency and effects" (Kapferer 2015, 25) that enabled both "thick description" and subsequent "diagnosis" (Geertz 1973, 27). Moreover, besides the members' interviews, the data I gathered was sourced both from the observation of "routine, everyday lives" (Angorsino 2007, 15) and differences in *relationalities* of my compatriots, and from other, more organized data collection procedures which involved pre-planned participant observation (Mercedez' concerts held in *Drugstore* night club in 2020/21, a private house party the rapper organized, the two *Belgrade Rave Squad* events held also in *Drugstore*, youth cafés, house parties, other raves, a funeral afterparty, a mural painting), the ethnographic analysis of audio and visual material (Mercedez complete discography, two local music documentaries: "All That Folk" from 2010 and "Ghetto" from 1995, political and other talk-shows hosting the members of the cultural elites, radio shows, panels held by politically engaged liberal elites) and nethnography (Mercedez' social media, Western media outlets such as *N1*, Facebooks groups, comment sections on Facebook, Instagram, left-liberal/neo-conservative media interviews, *Gym theory* and *Dematerialization of Arts* blog). For the entirety of my participant observation (2019-2022), I wrote notes in my mobile phone diary, which I then selectively transcribed to Word documents on my computer, coding and organizing the data according to cultural themes (e.g., code: *anti-wellness as self-care*-cultural theme: *defiant entertainment*). As for the narrative analysis of Mercedez' lyrical content, I had separate word files for each album, at first, later, I reorganized the content of files (songs) according to cultural themes. In addition to this, I also translated most of the songs. I was under the impression that it was necessary to incorporate as many songs as possible, which I later found would require a couple of hundred pages, thus I decided to focus on two, or three songs in each chapter, accordingly to cultural themes. As my research progressed, I began to

realize that the described cultural themes correspond to, what I now term, Mercedez' *poetic strategies (sub-techniques),* but are also discursive points of conflict between the unofficial youth discourse and the dominant, liberal-elitist discourses. In other words, the discursive (poetic) strategies of the studied discourses overlap, which points to the neo-Diesel youth culture's "subordinate [and] relatively autonomous character" (Jansen 2006, 273). The responsive form of the neo-Diesel discourse is reflected in what is central to Mercedez' rendition of the neo-Diesel, discursive, youth-cultural process of the formation of 'authentic', or, "Pendulum Technique" (emic term), which is the main strategy toward legitimization of the precarious youth sociality/relationality ('authentic' expression)- positive evaluation of precarious, youth personhood; as opposed to the liberal-elitist negative evaluation/ vilification and delegitimizing via, what I term, "Wrong enculturation" strategy. Since this analysis prioritizes the perspective of the neo-Diesel discourse (as a counterbalance to the official Foucault's *order of things*, by implication), I employed (the youth's) emic terms in the naming of cultural themes, that is, Mercedez' poetic strategies. Namely, the strategies include *defiant entertainment, the power of the attitude,* and *desire-demand-need-as-guidance (DDNG),* each of which contains a cluster of cultural codes, and will be analyzed throughout the analytical part of my paper. I applied the same approach in my discourse analysis of the liberal-elitists texts. To detect the contradictions and overlapping's within and between different discourses, and organized them into codes and, later, into cultural themes, I utilized the methods of content analysis, narrative, and discourse analysis, as well as the grounded theory method. Considering that the greatest part of my narrative analysis dealt with Mercedez's lyrical content, the rapper's concomitant use of slang and folk phrases, as well as her experimental and double-entendre linguistic constructions (e.g., purposefully sounding crude and unrefined, the interchangeable use of male/female morphological forms, non-translatable metaphorical expressions) characteristic of both rap and local pop-folk styles (Vidić-Rasmussen 1995), made it impossible for me to provide both a comprehensive and concise analysis in the English language. I consider this language barrier a drawback, since the neo-Diesel discourse relies strongly on violating of the literary (Serbian) language form in an innovative and *irregular,* or inconstant, manner. Moreover, in the following and last section of the

introduction, I will provide information regarding my own positionality and ethical concerns of my research.

Positionality and ethical concerns

As a *baby of the nineties* myself (born in 1997), growing up in Serbia during 2000s meant that, in terms of pop-cultural tastes, I felt I had a choice of either being 'cool' and 'alternative' (Western cultural products, e.g., Green Day and David Finch' films, as well as public condemnation of turbo-folk culture; or non-Western cultural products present in the Western culture: such as anime, Rastafarianism, Buddhism, etc.), or being 'basic' and embracing the local entertainment patterns (turbo-folk, Latin-American soap operas, or, even "basic" Western culture shown on TV such as rom-com dramas and Britney Spears etc.). The former choice implied that I was interested in cultural elevation and mature, which, I imagine, seemed very attractive to me at the time. However, I remember that from a very early age, the latter choice somehow meant *giving in* (to the cheapness of Serbian popular culture or Western base-culture), thus proving my inability to get accustomed to high-cultural forms (at the time, this probably meant *standing out)*. In a way, Western-oriented, pop-cultural taste, at that period in Serbia, was a form of cultural capital across a wide spectrum of age, while favoring of domestic cultural products, in general, translated into the lack of intellectual ability. I purposely avoid first-person language here, because this was a general social atmosphere, not only my perspective, as I thought at the time. For instance, at the age of four, my mother forbade me from watching *Pink* television (broadcasting mainly turbo-folk), the move I resented for a long time. Today, I hardly consider that woman an elitist (though I questioned this a lot during the writing of this paper), which leads me to consider that the social atmosphere of the early 2000s in Serbia was more tense in the sense of cultural divisions I discuss in my paper.

Namely, from an elitist perspective, I was a kid who had cultural capital in the form of the taste for Western cultural products, but, among my peers, I felt isolated not knowing any of the popular songs once I realized that turbo-folk was more than music taste- it helped connect

people in my class (i.e., singing turbo-folk hits during recess, at parties, gossiping about turbo-folk stars' love life, and even sending love notes with the choruses of turbo-folk love-hits written in them, etc.). In addition to this, I grew up in a very small town called Lazarevac, in close proximity to Belgrade, and while most of my schoolmates came from working-class families (many of them had parents who immigrated to Serbia few years prior to their birth, as a result of the 1990s ethnic conflicts in Croatia), I was aware that I had it easier somehow, not entirely realizing that was due to my family's better social standing (at the time, my father was employed in Phillip Morris tobacco company which opened in the 2000s wave of privatization of national industry, in this case, Tobacco Industry Niš, providing our family with the lower-middle class income). Choosing the former, *alternative* taste pattern, meant not only relinquishing the sense of shame associated with listening to turbo-folk, but also, somehow, helped me avoid feeling guilty about having access to a better lifestyle than my best friend (whose parents not only worked 10-hour shifts but as immigrants, they spoke a different dialect and, because of it, were regarded as a minority in Lazarevac). That is, I could justify the fact of *having it easier.* Fast-forward to my teenage years, I only flirted with the idea of *giving in* to turbo-folk, while regularly attending rave parties. In the early 2014, I was introduced to, what I termed, the neo-Diesel youth-culture and the idea of (cultural) reconciliation of domestic and Western cultural frameworks. That year, I went to a rave in a club called KPTM, located across the street from a police station. The rave was organized by a group of people close to the *Bombs of the Nineties,* and it was the first time I heard someone rapping in the rave space, over psytrance beats that were remixed with turbo-folk samples. I spent the entire night in a state of absolute bewilderment at the corner of the club until I was approached by the persons who will soon become my closest friends, Jovan and Rastko. We spent months in fascination with that event, and its combination of rave atmosphere with a resolutely political stance characteristic of rap music (i.e., a vulgar expression of anti-police sentiments 20 meters away from the actual policemen and other, explicit social commentary, such as mention of low wages, the psychological effects of this, a divided Serbia, drug-abuse), but also its reinterpretation of turbo-folk culture. Symbolically, the three of us had drastically different class backgrounds. Rastko was central-urban-lower-middle class, a child of a single-parent, a senior woman working as a lawyer, but was ostracized from a young age due to his

unusual looks, to put it mildly (by Rastko's choice, this is not an insult). On the other hand, Jovan came from a strictly upper-class family, prideful of their five generations-spanning academic pedigree, with a mother who was, at the time, a successful right-wing politician. I, on the other hand, grew up in a semi-rural environment (which, in Serbian case, is even *worse* than coming from a village), and my parents have not graduated from university, thus my family was classified as *nouveau-riche* with a tendency toward downward economic spiraling. For the first time in all our lives, none of this mattered even though it was spoken of, as the three of us were determined to understand and overcome all the pre-conceived notions of class and culture, which we felt were problematic. While the two of them explored the theory of Louis Althusser, together with Darko Delić, the frontman of *Bomb of the Nineties,* I immersed myself into the world of turbo-folk. Maybe due to my surroundings at the time, I could not help but notice the genre's political aspect. Not the one suggested by the liberal elites (as nationalistic), but its quality to instill pride in what is considered shameful in the Serbian cultural context. This is the point where I realized that what is considered "shameful" is everything that surrounded me in my childhood: rurality (especially rurality striving towards urbanization), the crudeness of expression (language and manners), the tackiness of style (excessive ornamentation), prioritizing of entertainment (indulgence) over cultural elevation, general animosity towards Western Europe yet fascination with its luxury goods, etc. All these traits were undoubtedly associated with the Serbian working class, the people I grew up with. Even though I was too shy to meet Mimi Mercedez until the January of 2022, maybe due to the fact that I was, at the time, surrounded by boys who *talked smart,* I found comfort in the rapper's crude, yet feminine persona. And unlike any of the Western artists I liked, Mercedez' music spoke of things that were somehow local and familiar and offered, on an instinctive level, both solace and a sense of meaningfulness on a very personal level. This was not because we had the same habits and lifestyle (I was never *wild* as the rapper*),* on the contrary, I realized the shame and fear I felt had nothing to do with my lifestyle per se, but with the class as lived identity, and, more precisely, with the notion that class location affects all aspects of life, including the spontaneous activities such as entertainment. Somewhere in 2017, our lives changed drastically. Rastko's mother was arrested for fraud and sentenced to ten years imprisonment, and Jovan left his family, moving in with Rastko. In the meantime,

my friendship with Jovan and Rastko grew in various directions, including the development of a romantic relationship between Jovan and myself. However, as it happens, concurrently yet unrelatedly with the break of *Bombs of the Nineties*, and my migration to the Czech Republic, these relationships changed even more, and we were much less inclined to idealize our realities. Yet each of us, as many other Serbian youths, remained sure of the idea behind the neo-Diesel culture and the *Bombs of the Nineties* project. According to Darko Delić (personal communication, March 4, 2022), this prolonged life of their ideology was not an accident, as:

> [they] consciously spread radical political ideas of unity and anti-state [narratives] in the form of popular music that is attractive to young people […] the next step was a grass-root political organizing, but only once we gathered the people from all across the Balkans, as many ages and origins as possible.

I omit this fact from my analysis because, unlike Delić', Mercedez' lyrical content is less ideologically charged than that of the rest of *Bombs of the Nineties'* members, and more spontaneous and poetic, closer in sociality to turbo-folk than rap (but still rap). Lastly, even though I experienced many difficulties during the process of writing this paper, and sensed that my choice of topic was wrong, together with the idea behind the neo-Diesel culture, the event of Jovan's recent suicide changed that. Additionally, the refusal of his family to acknowledge the systemic factor in Jovan's suffering and depression (easy access to hard drugs and his personal inability to reconcile his family's background and politics with his beliefs), has greatly invigorated my interest in how young individuals of different class backgrounds in Serbia attach value to their own personhood and establish lasting, stable relationships in the era of rapid sociopolitical shifting and transformation.

Since a study like this requires more technical preparation, experience, and a higher level of systematization and time-planning than I was able to perform, as well as the ability to establish contact with a versatile body of members, I expect many shortcomings to surface in the following pages. At times, I had a tiring sense of the impossibility to 'withdraw from the site' (Creswell, 2008), which sometimes made it difficult to clearly separate the processes of data gathering from my leisure time, but also to narrow the scope of the data I will implement in

my research. Moreover, due to the nature of my topic, which required probing into personal and intimate spheres of member's lives, most of which are my peers, with the aim of showing what meanings they ascribe to different social phenomena "demonstrate about the society […] and social life as such" (Geertz 1973, 27), I began to question even the most basic cultural knowledge I possess as a native, and I felt isolated as my own sense of social belonging and what I know of my surroundings seemed impaired. Simultaneously, there were many instances where I found myself incredibly motivated by an encounter or a single comment made by an unassuming, middle-aged lady, only to realize weeks after that I hurried to the conclusion; while reverse situations would sometimes stun me to the point of being unable to continue my work for days, or weeks, or even motivate a complete redirection of my research question, which would always necessitate a new research design. As many of the members were my friends or acquaintances, it was often challenging to position myself as a researcher and someone who can systematically describe *our* sociality and how *we* deal with the exclusionary elitist discourses. My motivation for choosing this topic, which was to better understand the contemporary cultural atmosphere in Serbia and situate my personal relationships within it, was simultaneously what produced feelings of anxiety and inadequacy.

Finally, the most useful recommendations I have for anyone on a similar endeavor is co-authoring, if possible, with a non-native researcher, and a clear separation of leisure time and the data collection process. Studying "society's forms" as "culture's substance" (Geertz 1973, 29), especially in the case of "halfie anthropologist" whose "self and other are somewhat entangled" (Abu-Lughod 1996, 469), the registering of 'emic' strategies and meanings as 'working material' demands, of course, the ability to challenge one's belief system, but also a certain amount of ideological stronghold and an ability to justifiably hold one's position and not fall victim to ambivalence. I found this process to be only slightly alleviated by contemporary anthropology's admittance to unavoidable partiality. The persons I interviewed all consented to their accounts and real names being included in this paper and inevitably interpreted according to the goals of my study, especially because the questions I asked were of personal nature and required them to speak of their illegal activities, as well as to probe into what they consider an everyday occurrence or a hurtful topic.

Chapter One: Bottom-up cultural emancipation in Serbia

> Having fun *is not a naïve thing, but a complex network of practices and customs which* The Public *considers harmful, undesirable, and deviant, and that's where rap [element in trepfolk] has a real, political dimension, its place in the society's organism. So, rap doesn't accomplish its political dimension when some dude spits some* radically underground *lines, no- it realizes this dimension in the place where the way the youth* has fun *is, on behalf of* The Public, *interpreted as harmful and dangerous. What I mean, it's not about some* deep-rooted, unspoken truths *that some real, bad-ass and lyrically skilled MCs is supposed to SPIT before us and before the [cultural] establishment and blows our minds with his incredibly deep-thinking abilities and conclusions, it's not about that at all. It's the matter of talking, in a FUN way, about the things and phenomena which are right here, every day, right beside us, and exist and grow right by us, like poverty, sexual impoverishment (social isolation), desire for self-validation, peer pressure, environmental pressures, desire for economic independence, aggression, desire for dominance, etc.* (Delić 2011c, not my emphasis)

The above quote was taken from the blog article written by the frontman of *Bombs of the Nineties,* Darko Delić. Considering that this essay examines the ways Mercedez' music-making, as the neo-Diesel youth-cultural practice, employs various *poetic strategies* in order to diminish the effects of the liberal elite's hierarchization of cultural expressions, on the precarious, Serbian youth's formation of 'authentic' personhood expression, it is important to address the role of entertainment in the neo-Diesel notion of 'authenticity'. In his blog article, the author and rapper, Darko Delić, describes the neo-Diesel understanding of "having fun" (entertainment) as "a complex network of practices and customs", emphasizing the presence of the public, discursive (but also institutional, which will be discussed in the second chapter) condemnation of the precarious, youth's ways to having fun. In Delić' view, "the ways the youths have fun", or the youths' entertainment patterns, arise from their precarious sociality, that is, the sociality affected by precarious life-conditions, such as "poverty, social isolation, desire for self-validation, social pressure", etc.), which are also all better negotiated (or accomplished) through "having fun". In other words, rap's alleviating effect or "healing power" (Crook and Travis, 2017), accomplished through the genre's ability to "talk [in a fun] way" about the conditions of precarity and its effects on the youth personhood, is an important element of the neo-Diesel *defiant entertainment* strategy. By prioritizing entertainment, the precarious youths refuse the cultural elite's imperative for high- cultural consumption as a way toward 'proper' personhood, and, instead, struggles to validate their own 'authentic' personhood through "a network of [cultural] practice and customs", which are directed in accordance with one's own values, taste, needs, and desires ('authentic', precarious youth sociality).

In the following subchapter, I will provide a brief, ethnographic insight into Mimi Mercedez' employment of poetic strategies and, particularly, one of her strategies, *defiant entertainment,* which, I argue, could be viewed as a response to the topic of the second and third subchapters, the concept of pop- cultural censorship. Namely, in the second and third, I will explore the historical context of the Yugoslav cultural policy of censorship, the liberal-elitist discursive treatment of the pop-folk music genres, as well as the effects this historical context on the further development of popular culture (pop- folk music) in Serbia, and, later, the rise of the 'auto-colonial' discourse in Serbia. In the final subchapter, I will provide the

analysis of Mercedez employment of *trepfolk* poetics, the neo-Diesel notion of bottom-up emancipation and the related concept of 'authenticity'.

I will analyze the Yugoslav historical context of cultural censorship, as well as Mercedez' strategic employment of the neo-Diesel, *defiant entertainment* strategy according to the following theoretical assertions that explain the youth-cultural process of the configuration of youth subjectivities: relationality/personhood as materially conditioned (Skeggs 2011), class-specific performance and taste as classed category (Bettie 2000), Balkanism, auto-racism and auto-colonialism (Todorova 1997, Krašovec 2014, Ćirjakovic 2020), class stigmatization and class-othering (Tyler 2015), politics of recognition and creativity as socially situated (Jansen 2005, Bullen and Kenway 2015), and the notions of plural worlds, cultural hybridization and hybridity vs. class struggle (Feixa and Nilan 2006, Shahabi 2006, Neumović and Unverdorben, 2019), recuperative energies of the rhetoric (Watts 1997). While employing the above concepts, I will explore how Serbian class relations, as well as global power dynamics, influence the attitudes toward popular music (NCFM, turbo- folk), and how, consequentially, the field of contemporary, Serbian popular music (*trepfolk)* becomes the arena for the construction of youth-cultural 'authenticity' and resistance.

Serbian auto-racism and the Neo-diesel discourse: The 'defiant entertainment' strategy

> *Why are you emptying the bottles? Turbo-folk made me do it!/ Why are you breaking the glasses? Turbo-folk made me do it!/ Crying over a lost love? Turbo-folk made me do it!/*
> *Folk made me do it, folk made me do it!/ Why d'you get mad over a trifle? Turbo-folk made me do it!/ Why enter fights like it's nothing? Turbo-folk made me do it!/*
> *Why you bussin' your heater[10]? Turbo-folk made me do it!/ Folk made me do it, folk made me do it!/ Why you have no money? I spent it all in kafana/ I lose all control when the gypsies start playing!/ That's when my hips go crazy, just like the friends around me/The perfect harmony of violence and love/ When I heard Shemsa sing, I met God/ He said: Forget the rave, this is more than that/ Kids, cut your dreads, and put the golden chains around your necks / Quit rolling heads, start rolling banknotes into sniffs/* Say, Chare, brother of mine, why you sing like that?/ How d'you not know?

[10] "*Tetejac*" is a slang term for a pocket-size, Yugoslavian-made gun. The gun's official name is *Zastava M57.*

> Turbo-folk made me do it!/ We sold rap, yeah, we'll give you have the dough/ You don't hate me for yourself, you hate me 'cause of your friends/ We swallow candy, and jelly rabbits/ Clubs know us, as do the discotheques/ I bust in there with this crazy head of mine/ Flexing, bitching, where's my drink?/ Hey, haven't you heard, bro, turbo-folk rules!/When I enter the club, the owner bows down / We sit casually, look, our booth is getting higher/ Both stuff to sniff, and stuff to lick!/ Why you entertainin' those whores? Turbo-folk made us do it!/ Why you bussing those heaters? Turbo-folk made us do it!/ Why you feeling better? Turbo-folk made us do it!/ Folk made us do it!/ Folk made us do it!

("Turbo-folk made me do it", *Trepfolk*, Polo Care and Mimi Mercedez, 2015)

The above lyrics are from a song that was done as an homage to Ice Cube's "Gangsta Rap Made Me Do It" from 2008 and was one of the hits that secured Mercedez' mass popularity in the Balkans. Nowadays, the song is generally regarded as a "manifesto" (Sprite, personal communication, May 2020) of what I termed the neo- Diesel, youth discourse, as well as of the *trepfolk* genre in general. The reason I chose to use this particular song as an epitaph for the first chapter is the fact that in "Turbo-folk made me do it", Mercedez and her colleague problematize the two key points of divergence in the Serbian public discourse related to the discussion of the relationship between class inequality and cultural distinction: that is, the conflicting attitudes that the official (culturally elitist) and unofficial (youth) discourses in Serbia have towards turbo-folk and the 1990s Serbian *Diesel* subculture. This is illustrated in the very title, whereby "turbo-folk", as the cultural phenomenon most immediately associated with the lower social stratum (as proof of the mass's *wrong enculturation)*, is personified in the words "made me do it". This way, the rappers parody the liberal-elitist claim that economic inequality springs from the cultural inferiority of the marginalized social groups. The video for the song "Turbo-folk made me do it" includes the scenes portraying Mercedez' hijacking of the stage from a middle-aged *kafana* singer, who then joins her in the rapping, the explicit use of, not only the customary *rakia*, but also amphetamine lines in the semi-public, *kafana* setting. Additionally, the video shows the

amicable relationship between the old-school *dizelaši* (played by the mid-aged men) and contemporary *gaseri (*played by young boys). As the former group enters the *kafana*, bald-headed and wearing black-leather jackets, with gold chains hanging around their necks, the group of young boys, who are already seated, wearing ordinary clothes, notices the older generation and either leave (non-*gassers*) or join them (newly initiated *gassers*), which then *magically* changes their (gassers') clothes into Diesel- wear. In addition to the *Diesel* subculture reference, the song "Turbofolk made me do it" includes the sampling of the Macedonian turbo-folk song "Ministerka" (Sonja Činčeva 2013) and uses the song's brass instrumental as a background beat. Through the dramatization of social boundary-breaking presented in the video, Mercedez and Polo Čare symbolically *claim* the *kafana*[11] as a space for free, uncensored self-expression and "having fun" (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022), declaring the *Diesel* subculture and turbo-folk as their cultural heritage (the hijacking of the *kafana* stage, and singing turbo-folk to a *kafana* full of *dizelaši* and *gaseri)*. In other words, the combination of the lyrics, video-dramatization, and the turbo-folk background beat, "Turbo-folk made me do it" metaphorically represents the neo-Diesel's reinterpretation of the previous, working-class generations' idea of entertainment (kafana as place for slow-to-mid-paced music, food, and alcoholic beverages), or *what you do in kafana (*'authentic' personhood), as well as the break from the contemporary, Serbian elite's revalorization of *kafana* as a "traditional Serbian social institution" (Djordjević 2012). As already established, the insistent recounting of the things that "turbo-folk made [them] do", the hyperbolized description of impulsive, decadent acts (such as reckless handling of firearms, treating strangers with drinks, or fighting them, drug abuse, promiscuity, etc.), is a tongue-in-cheek response to the elitist *wrong enculturation* accusation, whereby "turbo-folk education" (Tasić 2014) of the post-Yugoslav youths resulted in the deterioration of *true social values* in contemporary Serbia and an "aesthetic and moral disorientation" (ibid.). As Igor, one of the Mercedez' fans, a lower-class, high-school graduate from Belgrade, explained:

[11] *Kafana* is a restaurant that typically has live music (*kafana* music), serves a selection of traditional Serbian meats, *rakia* and beer, as well as other spirits. It is historically associated with the working class-leisure time and entertainment, and a low-life practice, and was negatively evaluated by the Yugoslavian cultural elites, but has been revalorized in the last two decades as the 'traditional' Serbian space for entertainment. Especially after the premiere of the biopic of a famous, Yugoslavian *kafana* singer, Toma Zdravkovic, titled "Toma" (2021).

*[…] kafana was once a defiant sort of entertainment, a place you go to get pissed. Now, fine Belgradians, they love old-school kafana, it's respectable and classy, it's in the movies, you know? And they love to have a tradition, any, it seems. In the films, they toned it [kafana customs] down and censured what they didn't like, including the music. That's why there are so many expensive, modern kafanas all over the city. It's not turbo anymore, but traditional-folk, reminiscent more of French chansons than the real deal. It took them 50 years to embrace kafana, and not even the contemporary kafana, but a washed-down 1970's version of kafana. Maybe in, like, a century, turbo-folk will be approved by the finest among us. (*Igor, personal communication, October 2021)

What Igor meant by 'defiant sort of entertainment' refers to one of the central strategies of the neo-Diesel discourse, and that is the understanding of entertainment, in Mercedez' words, "way[s] of having fun and live our daily life" as a "political attitude" (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022). As suggested in Igor's comment, the incentive behind the neo-Diesel, youth-cultural *defiant entertainment* strategy is the fact that in the Serbian elitist discourse, the working-class entertainment patterns ("breaking the glasses" in the cheap *kafana* setting), pop-cultural consumption (turbo-folk), and ways of spending leisure time are subject to constant, negative critique and are positioned as the main culprits for the societal economic and cultural impoverishment. In other words, due to the liberal-elitist insistent focus on the working-class people's utilization of leisure time, in the neo-Diesel discourse, "ways of having fun" are infused with an ideological stance and understood as a form of resistance to the elitist conceptualization of 'proper' personhood expression.

To further understand the neo-Diesel strategy of *defiant entertainment*, the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the liberal-elitist contention that the entertainment habits of the broad masses of the Serbian population, especially their music tastes, are "organized mental turbo-degeneration" (Pančić 2001) and "total cancellation of aesthetic and moral values" (Tasić 2014), is a form of reinforcement of cultural predispositions for the elite's social dominance via infringing (discursive attacks) on the marginalized social groups' right to self-representation and free expression; or on their need "to be heard and seen", as Mercedez explained in the interview (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022). As Inga Koludrović- Tomić and Mirko Petrić explain, in their study (1974) on class relations in

Yugoslavia, entertainment "was a key source for the expression of resentment towards those with the authority to judge and define" (ibid., 262- 3). Additionally, the youths, especially those of the 'wild nineties' (*Diesel* youths), are viewed as having rejected the "civil code of conduct" (Maric 2021), which refers to respectable behavior, education/self-betterment, marriage, family, and, instead, gave way to hedonism and moral decadence, spending their leisure time by consuming drugs, pop-music, and pornography, as well as committing petty crimes and displaying aggressive behavior (Kronja 2001, 52). The roots of Serbian, elitist moral panic, and the way it is expressed, can be traced to the Yugoslavian cultural policy and its idea of the necessity for the institutional monitoring of the cultural emancipation of the urbanized peasants, which included the censoring (or sanctioning) of the cultural products and expressions that were seen as *harmful* to the Yugoslavian cultural elite's emancipatory goals (Priča 1988, Vidić- Rasmussen 1995, Hofman 2013). Having established the idea of the elitist self-empowerment (cultural entrenchment and boundary-making through discursive degradation of entertainment habits and pop-cultural tastes of the *masses* (through distinction), I will provide in the following section the historical context of the Yugoslavian practice of pop-cultural censorship, and a detailed analysis of its effects on the contemporary Serbian culture, and, later, explain how Mimi Mercedez employs her *poetic strategies* to overturn the contemporary *effects* of this historical practice (on Serbian popular culture) in her effort to represent the neo-Diesel mode of 'authentic' personhood expression.

A brief history of pop-cultural censorship in Yugoslavia: the socio-political roots of Serbian auto-chauvinism

> *Still, I see Dr. Dragutin Gostuški's resignation, as well as his appropriate emancipatory strategies of his, as a result of the same basic delusion: the people in question are not the one Gostuški belongs to, but a different people, entirely distinct. Drawing from my musicological insight, I dare name these people* quasi-Arabian.
>
> (Kalajić 1987)

I will now describe the historical context of the Yugoslav cultural policy of censorship and its effects on the contemporary, Serbian public discourse. More precisely, I will demonstrate how the concept of *artistic value,* which rests on a Eurocentric, hierarchical vision of culture, is central to the elitist idea of the necessary monitoring of the emancipation of the working-class, and the related *wrong acculturation* accusation. I will then proceed to the last section of this chapter, where I will, framing Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary as a neo-Diesel youth-cultural practice, explore the discursive strategies related to the *wrong enculturation* accusation.

In a global sense, the historical processes of industrialization and deindustrialization in the countries of the First World, as well as the accompanying demographic transformations, have prompted great cultural changes, especially in the domain of popular music. In the Yugoslav history, the process of industrialization and modernization (1945-1968) was accompanied by the development of *newly composed folk music* or NCFM[12] ("novokomponovana narodna muzika" or "NNM"), which is the turbo-folk predecessor and will be discussed more in the further text. Following the political separation from the Soviet Union in 1948. and the subsequent establishment of the League of Communists ("Savez komunista Jugoslavije" or "SKJ"), the Non-Aligned Movement (1961), and the politics of workers' self-management, Yugoslav officials embraced *emancipation* (of workers, women, peasants, minorities, etc.) as the fundamental goal underlying their policies (Delić 2011a). This was quite a task considering that, up until the Communist rule, parts of Yugoslavia were considered "a German semi-colony"[13] with the remnants of the feudal order in rural areas (landlordism, land tenure, and some forms of serfdom), the poor industrial development, and, on top of that, it was wrecked by the WWII (Damjanović 1983, Woods 1992, Delić 2011a).

[12] NCFM developed in the mid 1960s as a response to the demands of cultural and political elites, its "modernity is mediated by the selective appropriation of its own local music sources, Western pop (technology of stylistic innovation and imagery) and the Eastern (Mediterranean-Middle-Eastern) music complex" (Vidić-Rasmussen 1995, 253). More specifically, the genre included the regional musical traditions (e.g. "tapan" and "darabuka" drums, heavily-ornamented melodies with trill patters, the lyricism of folk poetry and references to the colloquial, 'people's' lexicon), retaining also the accordion, as it was regarded as the essential folk instrument, and also introduced new instruments, such as keybords, electronic drums and electric guitar and bass (ibid.)

[13] According to Alan Woods (1992), "in the three years before the [Second World] War, 40% of Yugoslavian imports came from Germany and 40% of Yugoslavian exports went there."

Furthermore, the post-WWII period was marked by rapid urbanization, an influx of "revolutionary peasantry" (Vidić- Rasmussen 1995, 240- 44) to the cities, and the development of infrastructure, including the construction of highways and railways which connected the country to European cities, but also to the sphere of the Western economic and cultural influence (Bešlin 2014). In relation to this, the Yugoslav cultural agents (members of cultural elites: the intelligentsia and academic artists, employed in publishing houses, radio-affiliated musicologists, etc.) declared a need for *modernized* modes of cultural consumption, which would enable the break from traditional (and ethnic) folk expression and the development of an appreciation for *artistic values* on behalf of the *working people*, and with an aim to "familiarize the urbanized peasantry with modernity" (Vidić- Rasmussen 1995, 246). Moreover, in the following decades, Yugoslav cultural policy was guided by the conflicting notions related to the prospect of socialist development and the ideology of progress: political and economic decentralization, increased cultural integration with the West, but also the official policy of non-alignment which linked Yugoslavia to the non-Western world (Šentevska 2015). In the cultural sphere, this meant the introduction of Western cultural products to the Yugoslavian population, such as music, comic- books, and films. However, the economy proved to be a deciding factor for social and institutional conciliation of conflicting cultural paradigms (Hofman 2014). This is illustrated in the case of NCFM and the emergence of the state- run but economically relatively independent record companies[14], which were an "early Yugoslav 'free market' enterprise conceived within a societally owned / market-operated mode of production" (Vidić-Rasmussen 2015, 246), resulting from the greater economic and industrial development. As a Yugoslav cultural product, NCFM responded accordingly to the demands of the official cultural policy (ethnic pluralism, the working-class sociability and inclusivity, and the incorporation of Western technological innovations, or modernization musical production) (Hofman 2015, Šentevska 2015, Vidić-Rasmussen 1995, 1996). However, as Ines Prič̆a (1988) warns us, "normative critical thought has always been in an 'official' conflict with the taste of the 'masses.'" (92). Due to the genre's embodiment of

[14] The leading Yugoslav record companies, such as Jugoton, PGP RTB, and Diskoton, were founded by the state, but, unlike the radio and television, received little or no subsidy. These companies were economically self-generating, aimed at both bringing in foreign programs (Western Europe and North America), and the developing of local pop music by gradually expanding their technological capacities. (Vidić- Rasmussen 1995)

the socialist transformation from rural to modern industrial society and its targeting of the chief bearers of these transformations- the urbanized peasants, or "centaurs of Yugoslav economy" (Tenžera 1988, 129)- the main audience of NCFM were the broad masses of working people" (Hofman 2013, 90-93, Čolović 1984, 147). Paradoxically, it was precisely the genre's class-inclusive character, the rural background of the NCFM performers and the genre's "yielding to mass/popular taste" (Priča 1988, 85), that the cultural elites deemed as its capital flaw, condemning the NCFM's expression of "primordial layers of memory of the oppressed mass" (Kalajić 1978). The Yugoslav cultural agents of the late 1960s and 1970s, a social circle composed of the generation who "spent their teenage years in a prosperous urban environment, traveling internationally and consuming mostly Western cultural products" and perceived themselves as a part of the liberal, European elite (Djurković 2011, 24), declared NCFM as "a caricature of mass culture", that is "aesthetically inferior, artistically valueless, and morally corrupt" (Vidić- Rasmussen 1995, Šentevska 2015). In addition to the liberal, elitist reading of NCFM as a low-cultural form, or, even, void of any cultural value whatsoever, the Yugoslav "national intelligentsia" (Komnenić and Unverdorben 2019), demanding cultural *deorientalization* (of Yugoslav popular culture), defined NCFM as an *inauthentic* folk expression or 'fake folklore' (contrary to the idealized image of 'pure, original folk song'), as 'oriental kitsch', and the proof of how "the mass 'unfolked' itself" (Priča 1988, 92). According to Priča, the claims of NCFM's *folk inauthenticity* mean "not only that 'modernity' has no place in 'folk', but that 'folk' has no place in 'modernity'" (84), which further affirms that the perceived fault of NCFM can be located in its celebratory emphasis on the presence of 'rurality' in the urban context. This is because, in the Yugoslav elites' hierarchical vision of culture, the articulation of cultural differences between 'rural' and 'urban' expressions was the most important factor in the legitimization of their social dominance. Put differently, NCFM was critiqued for being a highly visible and profitable self-representation of the *wrongly* urbanized peasants, or "rurban population" (Archer 2012, 191), whose cultural emancipation and representation, in the eyes of the Yugoslav cultural elites, was an exclusive right and responsibility of the official state institutions. A theoretical interjection is necessary at this point; considering Bourdieu's (1990, 137) notion that dominant social layers emphasize the distinction in culture and lifestyle (e.g., the comprehension of

artistic value, or taste) from the lower classes in order to amplify *the power that makes it possible*, such definition (*wrong enculturation)* of 'rurbanity' is probably necessary for urbanity to exist.

The Yugoslav cultural policy of censorship changed many forms and levels of strictness, but the notion of the necessity of top-down monitoring of the working-class emancipation had a life of its own in the discourse of the Yugoslav cultural elites. In her study of censorship practices in Yugoslavia, Ana Hofman (2013) posits that Yugoslavia established the practice of individual and subjective approach to censorship, rather than institutional; for illustration, the author quotes Oskar Davičo's conceptualization of "the self-managing intellectual, who nurtures in himself a policeman", effectively making the police "obsolete" (308). According to Hofman, this type of censorship relies on emotional and personal, 'affective mechanisms', rather than strict, institutional strategies, whereby the practice of censorship becomes "a part of self-subjectification through unconscious adoption of norms relevant for self-representation and self-perception" (ibid, 284). Thus, guided by the *non-policy policy*, the cultural agents were left with the space to *systematically* categorize and control music production, as informed by the general social atmosphere and personal, unspoken, and unwritten norms and practices (Vučetić 2011). This means that NCFM was enclosed in a sort of vacuum of the cultural politics; In spite of it being popular among and representative of 'the broad masses of people', the state distanced itself from NCFM's commercial and non-educational nature by disallowing the promotion of ideological content, understanding the genre's concomitant popularity (among 'the people') and marginality (negative evaluation on behalf of the cultural agents) as a threat to an already weak ideological unity in Yugoslavia (Vidić-Rasmussen 1995, Šentevska 2015). In legal terms, NCFM was tolerated for its marketability[15], though not for long (Hofman 2014). In the early 1970s, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia ("Savez komunista Jugoslavije" or "SKJ") announced the return to Marxist roots and a 'cultural revolution' against all forms of nationalism and cultural 'kitsch' and 'schund'[16], as a form of reaction to the strengthening of liberal reformism among the leadership of the League of

[15] By the mid-80s, NCFM products accounted for 58 per cent of the total output of the Yugoslavian music industry. Additionally, out of the 729 records released in Yugoslavia in 1972, 427 featured NCFM performers (Gavarić, 1973: 155, Šentevska 2015)

Communists of Yugoslavia, on one hand, and on the other, in response to the rising demands for national independence and the growing tensions between ethno-national cultural elites of different states (Bešlin 2014).

Firstly, in 1971 the state enacted what is colloquially known as a *Law Against Schund*, in an attempt to solve the problems of "disorderly" cultural politics and suppress nationalist ideas (Hofman 2014, Šentevska 2015). The law introduced the first-ever administrative measures against "uncultured", "non-educational" and cultural products of "low quality" (Hofman 2013, 295). Even though the law was not presented as "ideological", but as focused "exclusively on the quality" of the artwork, many cultural commodities (e.g., music, comic books or crime novels, i.e. 'schund literature') were rigorously sanctioned in a way not seen since the Second World War (ibid.). For instance, at the Congress of Cultural Action (Kragujevac, 1971), which gathered the prominent members of Yugoslav cultural elite (mainly liberals, prominent conservatives boycotted the event) with a task to form a committee (comprised of literary critics, jazz/pop recording artists, radio-affiliated ethnomusicologists) for monitoring of cultural production, a group of Communist youths organized a "bonfire of kitsch" (Garčević 2021), allegedly with no guidance from the official organizers of the event. Interestingly, the original documents detailing what occurred at the 1971 Congress were destroyed. One of the new measures was the "anti-schund" tax, whereby the government, without first defining what could be considered as 'schund', imposed higher taxes on cultural goods lacking artistic/ educational value (that could go up to 50% of the value), and redirected the profit to 'cultural development' (e.g., the equipping of university libraries) (Hofman 2013, Šentevska 2015). In this way, according to the proponents of the law, 'high-cultural' products were granted a chance to compete with the "commercial and omnipresent" cultural products (ibid.). In the case of NCFM (and some punk music), the efforts of the 'committee against schund' proved very effective, thanks to the already existing censure practices developed in a period of the *non-policy* policy. As the founder of the Croatian publishing house, *Dallas Records,* states:

[16] The official terminology of the Yugoslav cultural policy. No institution ever provided the precise definition, implying that the meaning is self-evident. The general meaning of both words has to do with the principles of the socialist cultural policy: culture as accessible, inspired by the working-class sociality, possessing *artistic value/*modernized/educational. (Hofman 2013)

In the end, everybody was happy with the new law. The state secured the additional profit, elite cultural workers now got an official authorization to define 'high-culture', while the audience was able to continue buying the records of their favorite artists, only for a slightly higher price, as NCFM performers were obligated to turn almost half of their profits to the state.

(Lisovac 2008)

Secondly, in the following year, Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito wrote an open letter to the members of the League of Communists, inviting "liberal reformists to show stronger support for the Communist Party, "democratic centralism", and to work at overcoming social differences by "fiercely suppressing" the phenomena leading to "a division of society into rich and poor" (Bešlin 2014, 336). The letter led to the resignations of the liberal[17] reformists who were in charge of the League of Communists, as well as the main organizers of the Congress for Cultural Action. However, despite this event, and the mid-1980s discontinuation of the 'anti-schund' policy, the attitudes towards the arts and cultural policy promoted at the 1971. Congress not only lingered among Serbia's cultural elite but became codified in the discourse of cultural elites. In his book on the relationship between subjective and objective cultural meanings, *The Logic of Practice* (1990), Bourdieu provides a concise explanation of this kind of process:

The institutionalization of distinction, inscribing it in the hard, durable reality of things or institutions, goes hand in hand with its incorporation, the surest path towards naturalization.

(ibid., 139)

Following Bourdieu's argument, the Yugoslav cultural policy of censorship, primarily regarding the process of the elitist devaluation and censoring of NCFM, paved a *discursive* way (i.e., enabled claims to historicity/legitimacy of cultural products, the establishment of liberal-elitist social networks in forms of NGOs and other organizations, Ćirjaković 2020c) and provided the conceptual framework for "auto-chauvinistic tendencies" (Ćirjaković 2016) that overwhelmed the Serbian official value and meaning system (cultural codes) after the breakup of Yugoslavia; but contemporary Serbian auto-chauvinism (the discursive devaluation

[17] Namely, Latinka Perović, Marko Nikezić and Mirko Tepavac. (Bešlin 2014)

of local cultural elements) itself is a product of the present-day, European economic and cultural domination in ex-Yugoslav and other Balkan regions, such as Bulgaria and Romania (Vladimirova 2020, Levy 2002, Haliliuc 2015). Having established the historical context of Yugoslav cultural censorship, I will now provide a more detailed analysis of the elitist, discursive devaluation of turbo-folk, as well as analyze the influence of Yugoslav cultural politics on the contemporary cultural discourse in Serbia.

The birth of the Serbian 'auto-colonial' discourse: the official, cultural discourse of the 2000s

> *The middle class started crumbling down at one point. Turbo-folk and the whole decade of the 1990s stand to prove that. This was catastrophic, as the middle class is the most significant social layer for [the development of] a nation's culture.*
>
> (Simjanović 2010)

In the above statement, the author Zoran Simjanović, a late Yugoslav film and theatre composer, points to the elitist argument that the popularization of turbo-folk was integral to the local process of the middle-class disintegration, as the members of this class are natural guarantors of *true* and *authentic* cultural values. The contemporary elitist narratives in the Serbian cultural discourse in many ways represent a continuation of Yugoslav economic liberalism and cultural elitism, especially in terms of the contemporary Serbian elite's discursive delegitimization of the music tastes of 'the broad masses of people'. This is most evident in the vocabulary of the local, left-liberal, and neo-conservative elites which shows continuity with the Yugoslav discourse. For instance, as will be evidenced in the further text, the unchanged use of *artistic value* and the idea of *wrong enculturation,* which both are persistently expressed through adjectives such as *non-cultural, true values/wrong values, non-artistic,* and *non-educational*. Notably, turbo-folk, the 1990s heir of NCFM, developed in the context of the growing monopolization of music production, the end of cooperative production with the break of Yugoslav political unity and the rise of ethnic conflicts, but also a bottom-up need for a new folk expression- popular music for the new generations of the working-class youths (born during and after 1970s) (Šentevska 2015, Tucaković 2010). As a "modern continuation of NCFM" (Archer 2012, 181) with no clear boundary delegating these music

styles, the genre is characterized by incorporating global fashion trends, electronic and/or rock instrumentalization, local folk elements (vocals, instruments such as accordion), as well as strategies for stereotype inversion, such as recontextualization and self-exoticization (auto-balkanism) (Archer 2012, Kisačanin- Djordjević 2019). Although turbo-folk is characterized by the equally apolitical lyrical content, “concentration on the unattainable state of emotional fulfillment, [as] social alienation and marginality are transmuted into emotional experience" (Vidić-Rasmussen 1995, 451), but also a “hedonistic and individualist orientation” which “echoes the contradictions of the transition to capitalism” (Komnenovic and Unverdorben 2019, 162) received the same discursive treatment as its predecessor, as the music of ”the hordes from the hills” (Jansen 2005). Even though, as the conservative art historian Branislav Dimitrijević posits, “the iconography presented in the turbo-folk videos (violence, misogyny, money fetishism), is precisely the evidence that the genre is “an indicator that Serbia inclines, more and more, towards the West” (2002, 98). Despite the lack of proper institutional censorship, both neo-liberal and neo-conservative cultural elites in the 1990s evaluated turbo-folk as a cultural contaminant and a form of social illness. This reproduction of the cultural discourse of Yugoslav elites is a result of the enduring *rural/urban* divide (Priča 1988). As we have already established, in the discourse of the Yugoslav cultural agents, this division played an important role in terms of the elites’ “self-subjectification through unconscious adoption of norms relevant for self-representation and self-perception” (Hofman 2013, 284), or, for the articulation of the elite’s cultural superiority, as it enabled the internal division of society into European-oriented, civilized, and progressive, and those that are immune to the elites’ civilizational/ emancipatory efforts, the non-Europeanized *rurban* and rural population. As Komnenović and Unverdorben (2019) explain, the liberal-elitist discursive framing of the *wrongly urbanized* nature of both NCFM and turbo-folk as a threat to their cultural connection with Europe (neo-liberal), or to the purity of national culture(neo-conservative), reveals:

[…] a hierarchically organized vision of national culture [which disallows the mixing of] different cultural genres and codes […], national folklore should remain national folklore, as much as peasants should stay at the places where they belong. (163)

That is, public and institutional recognition of the incommensurability of the *rural* and *urban,* or the *mass* and *elite,* cultural expressions, is integral to the elitist *self- perception* both in the 1990s and today, as it provides a moral and intellectual foundation for their social dominance. In other words, the Yugoslav censorship practice and its cultural experts initiated and legitimized, what is understood as, the inevitable cultural distinction between the dominant and the dominated social classes, effectively translating class- generated cultural differences into "the de-politicized catalogue of identity" (ibid., 166). In relation to this, as we have seen in the previous section, the underlying contradiction of Yugoslav cultural politics is the fact that Yugoslavia situated itself politically and culturally between the West and an imagined East, "yet failed to reconcile the resulting overlap internally" (Vidić- Rasmussen 1996, 116). If this is so, then it is precisely this contradiction that enabled the Yugoslav elitist, discursive tools of *wrong enculturation* and *artistic value* to be used as a conceptual framework in the process of *self-subjectification* of the Serbian contemporary elites. In terms of cultural codes, this means that the *rural is* viewed as backward/ignorant of *artistic value,* while the *urban* is viewed as progressive/appreciative of *artistic value,* and because turbo-folk is viewed as *void of value/non-educational,* the genre is automatically classified as a form of *rural* or *rurban* expression. After providing the liberal-elitist conceptual framework of the *wrong enculturation* proposition, I proceed with a detailed analysis of the Orientalist origin of the *rural*/ *urban* divide and its role in contemporary liberal-elitist discourses.

To further understand the function of the emphasis on cultural antagonisms (low/high, rural/urban, mass/elite) in the contemporary elitist discourse, I will now explore in more detail how contemporary, Serbian cultural elites employ the *rural*/urban divide in their negative evaluation of turbo-folk, as well as analyze the Orientalist origin of this division. After what is considered the democratic revolution of 2000, the long period of privatization of public ownership accelerated (occurred irregularly in the 1990s), introducing neoliberal market reforms, gradual stabilization of political pluralism, and the establishment of "a capitalist order of semi-peripheral type" (Lazić and Pešić 2000). Additionally, accompanying economic and political transformations, was the equally intensified dominant value-production, serving to legitimize the reproduction of the existing social order, not only in the political ('legitimate power'), but also economic and cultural sphere (ibid.). The neoliberal values of the sanctity of

private property, universal civil rights, and individualism, had a great impact on the Serbian public discourse, leading to a general imperative of "competition over resources in every area of social life" (Tyler 2015, 498) and the individualist "class decomposition" (ibid.) through "class disidentification" (Shildrich and Macdonald 2013, 287). In the neo-liberal discourse of contemporary cultural elites, the 1990s period in Yugoslavia, marked by the second- highest rate of hyperinflation[18], ethnic wars, and forced migration of thousands of people, represents the triumph of *rurbanity*, a time when "the village came to the city, occupied the big chairs and created a cultural program that suits their tastes" (Janjatović 2010), while turbo-folk is used as "a catchword in disclosing the nature of [the state's] nationalism as something Oriental, non-European and rural" (Neumović 2019, 260) and interpreted as state-sponsored propaganda for militant nationalism, xenophobia, and war (Kronja 2001), or 'war schick' (Dragićevic-Šešić 1994). The association of turbo-folk with war- mongering nationalism is a result of the 1990s heavy media exposure of the genre, which led to many accusations of turbo-folk being a "camouflage of the harsh reality in Serbia", and a soundtrack of the blood-thirsty regime (Šentevska 2015, 160) (ethnic wars, forced migration, and economic immobility). Analogous to the NCFM's 'inauthentic' folk character, in the view of the neoliberal and neoconservative intelligentsia, turbo-folk represents "Teheranization through music" (Radivojević 2010) and "horrible Islamization of Serbian culture" (Hristić 2010), and is described as "Islamic lollygagging", reflecting a "degraded model of communication" (Dragić 2010) and an "entirely new life aesthetics", where "the crucifix and the Versace cross were equally revered" (Baljak 2010). Evidently, the elitist employment of *rural/urban* divide in their critique of turbo-folk (and NCFM) stems from the cultural elite's (both neo-liberal and national) orientalist attitudes, whereby the presence of Eastern musical elements is understood as a foreign intrusion and a danger to Serbian national culture, in spite of the historical fact of the 500-years long Ottoman cultural supremacy in the region and, as Todorova (1997, 180) argues, the unsuccessful "de-Ottomanization of the tenacious phenomena like food, music, popular beliefs, custom, attitudes, and value system". What is evident in the fact that primarily *Oriental/Islamic/Middle-Eastern* musical elements of turbo-folk and NCFM are marked as *primitive, low-cultural*, and, simultaneously *nationalistic* and *foreign*, while the westernized

[18] After the Hungarian hyperinflation in the period from 1946-6 (Hanke 2007).

character of both turbo-folk and NCFM is read as “improper application” (Baljak 2010) and “exaggeration of the commercial elements of [Western] music production” (Simjanović 2010), is that “the ideological border between East and West” (Komnenović and Unverdorben 2019, 166) is generated in the discourse of Serbian neo-liberal and neoconservative elites, and not the regularly vilified local pop-folk style. In other words, these accusations ignore the fact of NCFM and turbo-folk’s hybrid character (mixing of multi-cultural musical elements), which testify to the genres’ cosmopolitan nature, and its ability to reinterpret the cosmopolitanism of the “Ottoman oecumene“ in the contemporary Serbian context (Šentevska 2015). What is more, Zoran Ćirjaković (2004) connects turbo-folk to Arjun Appadurai’s ‘alternate modernities’, interpreting the genre as helping the Serbian population deal with the effects “painful and traumatic” transition to neoliberalism, but also understand how post-colonial experience is important for comprehension “our post-communist condition” (ibid.). On the other hand, the very insistence on the clear separation of Eastern and Western musical elements permeating the Serbian cultural elite’s discourse, reveals that the ideological border between East and West is generated in the elitist discursive framework, not in that of NCFM or turbo-folk. Additionally, despite the common knowledge that both NCFM and turbo-folk remained popular across ethnic borders during the ethnic conflicts (as well as outlived the 1990s regime), the culmination of the elitist, negative evaluation of turbo-folk, illustrated in attributes such as “the newly-composed soundtrack of war” (Kronja, 2001) or even “turbo-fascism” (Papić 2002), is the stance that, on one hand, turbo-folk was a political tool of the *mafia capitalism* of the 1990s (“Bread and circuses”, Janjatović 2010), but also the evidence of the “the fermentation of fascism” among the “uneducated” and “collectivist” rural mass, void of “ individualist free will” (Krašovec 2014).[19] This paper argues that these propositions are a kind of diverging of attention from the fact that nationalism originated in, and was disseminated from, the Yugoslav social intellectual circles. Namely, although not a lonely case or the earliest, for its materiality, one document suffices to make scapegoating of turbo-folk untenable. From 1985 to 1986, a memorandum was drafted by a committee of the 16 “most prominent members” of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), and its main

[19] Fabled response of the man who sold Serbian turbo-folk artist’s records in Sarajevo, while under attack on behalf of the Serbian forces was: “Art knows no borders” (Sentevska, 2015)

thesis held that the Yugoslavian constitutional structure discriminated against the Serbs, and that decentralization was leading to the disintegration of Yugoslavia (Hudelist 2016). The authors of the memorandum, who were denounced by the government officials of the Socialist Party of Serbia for inciting nationalism, posited that Serbia's development was eroded by support for other parts of Yugoslavia (SANU Memorandum, 1986). There are even mentions that the late president of SANU, Antonije Isaković, spoke of the necessary 'eighty thousand victims' for resolving the 'Serbian national issue'[20] in 1987 (Perović 2016). As mentioned above, the 'purge of liberals', as the president's 1972 letter is referred to today, was, among other things, an invitation for the liberal reformists to condemn the nationalist sentiments among their colleagues, which they refused, resigning their positions. According to Bogdanovic (2016), the historical revisionism present in the contemporary elitist discourse unifies the neo-liberal and neo-conservative narratives, by building on the theory of 'Two Totalitaranisms' and its equation of fascist and communist ideologies, thus, allowing both factions of the contemporary cultural elite to distance themselves from their 'communist past', as well as from the ethnic violence of the 1990s and, as stated before, declare themselves a part of the European elite. Having provided the historical context of Yugoslavian cultural policy as well as its effects on the rise of 'auto-colonial' discourse, I move to the theoretical discussion of the discursive framework of Serbian 'auto-colonial' narrative and the related youth-cultural strategies as they are employed and represented in Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary.

Only few studies on the 'auto-colonial' discourse of the Serbian, contemporary, cultural elites are available, this is because the subjects of these studies govern most of the institutions responsible for the production of social science, such as institutes, universities and NGOs. The example of this is the case of the journalist Zoran Ćirjaković, who is regarded as the first person to fall victim to the *cancel culture* (the obstructed publication of his works, loss of job as a university professor), due to his critical stance towards the work of his colleagues (academic workers), which Ćirjaković accused of being "auto-colonial brigades of exceptional

[20]

Serbs" (Srbljanović 2020). However, what the existing studies suggest, and what this paper explores, is the existing connection between the cultural elites' neoliberal stigmatization of class, and their auto-racist and Balkanist discourses (Orientalism). In order to properly understand the role of self-exotization in the contemporary, Serbian pop-folk styles, it is necessary to clarify the cultural framework operating behind the neoliberal decomposition of class. As Primož Krašovec (2014) suggests, during the 20th century, explicit and aggressive racist discourses lost their effectiveness in justifying European colonization of the periphery, thus, they were redirected to Islamophobic interpretation (Muslim migrants as a danger to the European cultural purity) and regulation (e.g., *Frontex*) of migration flows from former colonies into European colonial centers. Evidently, this change was not pertinent to Eastern European, post-socialist semi-periphery, as this region was never a part of the colonial center (ibid.). However, in the process of Euro-integration of the post-socialist semi-periphery, an ongoing issue in the case of Serbia, racist discourses position these countries as "the socialist Other" (ibid.). As Krašovec suggests, while classic European racism is used in these post-socialist spaces for "segregation and condemnation of migrants and 'illegal' workers, another form of discourse develops simultaneously, 'auto-racism'" (ibid.). Thus, in the broadest sense, *auto-racism,* corresponding to 'nestling orientalisms' (Bakić-Hayden 1995), can be defined as the application of regular racist discourses onto one's own people and national culture. As understood by Ćirjaković (2020a) and Krašovec (2014) this is because the *otherness* of Eastern Europe was not only produced by external, colonial forces but results from self-imposed, state socialism. Accordingly, in the auto-racist perspective, there is no other culprit for the underdevelopment except the people themselves, their cultural and intellectual degeneracy, and their habitual dependency on the state, all of which are understood as remnants of decades-long, communist "brain-washing and 'totalitarian' political climate" (ibid.). This is illustrated in the press-conference statement made by a judge of the Court of Appeals, Miodrag Majić (2021), "the communist period" led to such "mixing of social cards" that "persons with elementary education now expect to take their families to vacation each summer", an expectation which the judge Majić considers to be "simply not realistic and

utterly wrong." In this perspective, the 1990s are interpreted as a necessary meeting with the reality of the contemporary world (Krašovec 2014, Kronja 2004, 101). Yet, the people of the European, post-socialist semi-periphery, still drowning in their *backward (rural)* and *vassal* mentality, were unprepared to respond to the challenges of the liberal democracy and market economy. This way, the *auto-racist* narrative "structurally replaces the colonial period of the third-world with the socialist period in Yugoslavia" (Krašovec 2014): not as a source of political frustration and strife for emancipation, but as a self-inflicted wound that can only be healed "by a long and painful process of self-disdain, self-denunciation, as well as cultural and mental 'decontamination'" (ibid.). Furthermore, the local auto-racism relies on the conceptual framework of, what Todorova (1997) terms Balkanist discourse,[21] a form of cultural racism whereby the distinction is found in the separation of *urban* from *rural*, or *high* from *low* cultural expressions: the *urban* is pictured as modern, secular, cosmopolitan, liberal, individualistic, open, tolerant and market-friendly, while 'rural' is represented as a barbaric, religious, nationalist, collectivist, narrow-minded and dependent, or as a continuation of socialist mentality and culture in a different capacity (Archer 2012, Šentevska 2015). Class relations, as structural relations of social domination, are thus mystified as relations based on meritocratic values, stemming from individual, cultural, and intellectual achievements (Atanasovski 2009, Delić 2011c, Krašovec 2014, Komnenović and Unverdorben 2019). An advanced example of the described narrative is a recent statement given by prof. Jovo Bakić, a professor of sociology at the University of Belgrade and a self-declared leftist, in which he explains Serbia's "neocolonial status" by referencing a controversial study[22] which showed that an average IQ in Serbia is "a mere 89" (Bakić 2022). Moreover, the contemporary elitist dislocation of social, economic, and cultural differences from class distinctions corresponds to Tyler's "decoupling class from inequality", a form of "class stigmatization" (2015, 498): inequalities are defined, not as a result of systemic cultural and material deprivation,

[21] Todorova builds on Edward Said's (1978) Orientalism, applying his insights onto the Balkans as Europe's semi-peripheral Other: "In it, but not really of it. They are Europe's dark shadow, its inherent Other, and possibly, its very own internal Orient" (Todorova 1997, Vladimirova 2020, 70)

[22] Lynn, "IQ and The Wealth of Nations",2002.

segregation and expropriation characteristic of capitalist societies, but as a result of cultural degeneracy of the rural or *wrongly urbanized/enculturated* masses. The ideological effects of the negative, elitist representations of the, at once, marginalized and mass "sociality" (Skeggs 2011, 488) is "internal racialization" in which certain segments of the "national body" become "something similar to other race, that is, perceived as inferior subspecies and as second-class citizens" (Krašovec 2014). Or, in words of the journalist Zoran Ćirjaković (2012):

Auto-chauvinism, or auto-colonialism in practice, [is not a matter of] self-hate, but begins when somebody perceives themselves as 'exception', 'a systematic error', and ascribes his compatriots, the objects of this person's hate, with lack of humanity and suggests that their 'barbaric' nature is something eternal, indestructible, and lasting, and intrinsic to their mentality.

The *auto-chauvinist* or *auto-racist* accusations are, thus, centered on the individual emotional and intellectual propensities, and are understood not only as a way for the elites to gain political capital by stigmatizing class (Tyler 2015), but also as an integral element of the process in which individual members of the elite ("the accidental Serbs", Ćirjaković 2020b) construct their social and cultural identity, or "self-subjectification through unconscious adoption of norms relevant for self-representation and self-perception" (Hofman 2013, 284). Lastly, the elitist self-subjectification process is integral to what Bourdieu (1984) describes as "the struggle about the meaning of the social world", central to which is the power over "classificatory schemes" (479), which are not only used to describe social groups, but involve real-life consequences and are "operative" because they define "the possibilities for action and bound one's sense of agency" (Waterton 2003, 113). As a counterweight to the liberal-elitist discursive self-empowerment in the form of the 'auto-racist' narrative production, the contemporary pop-folk styles in Serbia employ 'auto-balkanism' (Dumnić 2012), which serves to alleviate the external, negative stereotyping of the Balkans through pop-cultural reproduction of positive stereotypes (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 1). This application of the 'auto-balkanist' strategy occurred also in the development of turbo-folk's successor genre, *trepfolk*, which fused the already established pop-folk form associated with turbo-folk with the

explicit social commentary characteristic of rap music (Veljković 2019). Because it is a relatively new pop-cultural phenomenon, the existent academic literature on *trepfolk* has yet to investigate its social significance in Serbia. In my effort to investigate the role of *trepfolk* in the process of the neo-Diesel youth-cultural negotiation of 'auto-racist', discursive tendencies of the Serbian cultural elites, I now proceed to the analysis of the nature of *trepfolk* as it is presented in the music-making of Mimi Mercedez.

Serbian auto-racism and the representation of the Neo-diesel authenticity in Mimi Mercedez' music-making

> *They say my music debauches the youth. I say that I am but an eminent member of the 'debauched youth'.*
>
> (Mercedez, Instagram story, December 2021)

> *I got that skill to cover up my misery with kitsch.*
>
> ("Connect to the Machine", *Bombs of the Nineties*, 2014).

In the remaining pages of this paper, particular focus is placed on the effects that the above-described "discursive practices of othering" (Skeggs 2011, 502), or the elitist 'classification schemes', together with the material conditions of socio-economic precarity, have on the marginalized youth personhood formation as the production of cultural value is understood as necessary to the "personhood performance" (496). In this sense, the development of *trepfolk* in the youth-cultural circles (Veljković 2019), could be seen as an attempt to amplify not only economic (of youth producers) but also cultural capital (youth producers and consumers) by publicly articulating the values and meanings associated with the neo-Diesel, youth-cultural discourse and the related process of alternative authenticity formation. More accessible than any of the previous pop-folk styles, due to its digitalized production, *trepfolk* kept the form of turbo-folk (the mixing of local and global musical elements), but has introduced a more

explicit, socially engaged poetics, associated with rap music. As other mass-popular, folk genres, *trepfolk* drew the attention of the Serbian cultural elites as the "impossible combination" of turbo-folk and rap music, characterized by "superficial lyrics" and "kitsch arrangements" (Dragojlo 2019). In the view of the university professor and a musicologist, Žarko Cvejić:

> *Trash music seems inseparable from our people's entertainment habits, first it was turbo-folk, now it's trapfolk. Correcting youths' tastes has proved ineffective and counterproductive in the past, but the situation where trapfolk seems like the only musical choice is dangerous...Parents and experts must realize their responsibility.* The youths have no control over this popularity, as they are bombarded with it […] [trapfolk] has catastrophic effects on the value system of our youth. (Cvejić 2020)

What is obvious in the above quote, is that the Yugoslavian cultural policy of monitored emancipation continues in the contemporary, official, cultural discourse in Serbia, whereby cultural experts understand pop-folk music consumers as passive, uneducated, and in dire need of "correcting [of] tastes" lest their moral and aesthetic value system falls victim to the detrimental effects of the "trash music". In the Serbian public discourse, the youth-cultural expressions (music taste, clothing style, social habits) are most often evaluated as "morally faltered" (Cenzolovka, 2022), a result of "turbo-folk education" (Tasić 2014), while the youth cultural practices toward cultural emancipation, as well as their political engagement (*trepfolk*, football fan clubs, squatting of empty, publicly-owned spaces), are dismissed as employing a "false approach" (Vlaovic 2019), or as engaging in "distorted emancipation" and "possessing lack of taste" (Ra, 2017). This points to the miscommunication present in the interaction between the official, cultural discourse in Serbia, and the neo-Diesel, youth-cultural discourse. For instance, drawing from the Vice documentary (Nikačević 2019) on Serbian t*repfolk* and the history of the official discursive treatment of earlier pop-folk styles in Serbia, Marija Dumnić-Vilotijević defined the genre as "not rooted in some political project or belief in some

artistic value-it is absolutely commercially oriented" (2020, 5). However, in the documentary, we can see the music producer, Slobodan Veljković aka Coby, commenting on the viability of the digitalized music production, as opposed to the actual instruments (guitars, synthesizers, etc.) being used in the earlier turbo-folk music-making. In addition to this, Coby makes clear that *trepfolk* is valuable for its marketability, but adds the following comment abruptly:

> *My father was a taxi driver and my mother worked as a cleaning lady, so* [we are] *working-class,* [with] *no pedigree to speak of, nobody acros my entire family tree ever worked on anything that was profitable. But let me ask you something, what if I, as their rich kid, still refuse to go to Kolarac* [classical music venue in Belgrade]*? What am I then, a lower form of life? I grew up hating folk music, but I still don't understand why an adult person would have a need to express disgust* [with pop-folk music styles]. (Veljković 2019)

Even though Coby does not explicitly comment on the socially- engaged character of *trepfolk,* this proposition could be seen as implied in his statement. The producer, without being asked to refer to his family background, *defends* his position (of being the 'trash' music producer), by referring to his class origin in relation to his entertainment habits ("refuse to go to Kolarac"). When I asked Mercedez to explain the relationship between the main genres constituting *trepfolk* (turbo-folk, rap, and electronic/dance music), due to her previous insistence on the interrelatedness of these genres, the rapper responded the following:

> *Those three are the Holy Trinity of the people's music. These are the musics of the people on the global level. Also, the production of this music is the least expensive, so it's accessible to all […] All these genres developed among the lower classes and that is why they're special. On the global level, that is the music that everybody can identify with, the music that is supposed to connect people in the broader sense, not isolate them. I always wanted to mix all these genres, to make each group of people, that dig either of the three, understand that all three are one and the same. It is the same concept behind them, and that is having a lot of fun, and freedom, and the fact that this music is the music of the majority.* (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022)

The above statement testifies to both the hybridity of *trepfolk*, especially in its faculty, and task of "bringing people closer", both globally and locally, by combining many different

musical styles based on their perceived interconnectedness (Feixa and Nilan 2006). In addition, Mercedez views *trepfolk's* "accessible [production]" as the factor in "connecting people in the broader sense" instead of isolating them. Thus, one of the main characteristics of *trepfolk*, related to its social significance, lies in its combination of seemingly unrelated genres because it enables broad identification (across the class spectrum, that is, of people with different pop-cultural tastes). Furthermore, despite the fact that in her analysis of the role of auto-balkanism in *trepfolk*, Dumnić-Vilotijević (2020) recognizes self-exotization as bottom-up, cultural empowerment, the author reproduces the liberal-elitist hierarchization of cultural expressions by defining *trepfolk's* revalorization of the "turbulent nineties" as showing the genre's "lack of moral and aesthetic norms, [whereby] its shallowness" implies "stylistic omnivorism of this generation" (ibid., 6). The described "omnivorism", understood by Dumnić-Vilotijević as a negative side of *trepfolk* that leads to the genre's "shallowness", this essay argues that "stylistic omnivorism" is what makes the genre significant to precarious youth ("bringing people closer"); that is, the genre's popularity is not something "youths have no control over", as Cvejić noticed (above quote), but the reason behind *trepfolk's* popularity among the (precarious) youth is the genre's crossing of social boundaries ("taste as classed category", Bettie 2000). As I mentioned in the section on the birth of 'auto-colonial' discourse, the liberal-elitist hierarchization of culture implies the elite's demand for clear isolation of different cultural codes and genres, and, with that, different social groups, ethnicities, etc. Having this in mind, it becomes evident that, by catering to different audiences (turbo-folk, rap, electronic music, but also dancehall and reggaeton), *trepfolk* circumvents the liberal-elitist notion of pop-cultural taste as the source of social differentiation and creates pop-cultural conditions for social connection. Additionally, *trepfolk's* social significance, much like NCFM and turbo-folk, rests on its communicative power, that is, the genre's ability to "slip between the components of hegemony" (Vidic-Rasmussen 1995, 242) and "lay out the local [and global] musics, identities and meanings as aesthetic experience" (ibid.). The difference between NCFM and turbo-folk, on one hand, and *trepfolk*, on the other, is that *trepfolk* not only aesthetically (hybrid musical form) "slips between the components of hegemony", but, in the case of Mimi Mercedez at least, semantically as well. As Mercedez

explained in one of her media interviews (2016), commenting on the excessive vulgarity and materialistic outlook of her lyrical content:

> *If you wanna introduce 'your normality', you can't just come and say: Hey, here I come with something interesting […] Music is like a theatrical performance, you need that dramatic effect [...] You have to provoke an explosion, like a bomb [laugh], and it does the job for you. Only then can you reach some, how do I put it, the middle ground that is acceptable to you. That is the political pendulum we are talking about.* (Mercedez 2016)

The theatricality as a strategy is present in both NCFM and turbo-folk, yet it is limited to the visual and melodic aesthetics of these songs. Conversely, in Mercedez' *trepfolk*, the incorporation of "dramatic effect", or, what I term, the *Pendulum technique* (main poetic strategy), is important to the neo-Diesel negotiation of communal and national belonging, or "reaching some […] middle ground that is acceptable to you". In other words, by appropriating a materialistic, *luxury-demanding* outlook and using vulgar vocabulary in her lyrical content, or what Cvejić views as having "catastrophic effect" on the youths' value system, Mercedez challenges the neo-liberal shift toward rationalizing class inequalities as being a result of individual cultural frameworks in the attempt to "introduce her normality", or the notion of 'authentic' personhood expression. Through the textual and ethnographic analysis of the Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary, as well as the audience's accounts of their relationship to Mercedez' music and to the neo-Diesel discourse, I will investigate the process of 'authentic' personhood formation on behalf of young individuals, who came of age in the years following the dissolution of Yugoslavia (2000-2015). By framing Mimi Mercedez' *trepfolk* music-making as a neo-Diesel, youth-cultural practice I will examine how Serbian youth employs appropriative pop-cultural consumption in order to thwart the (personhood) effects of the elitist auto-racist discursive tendencies and tailor the 'authentic' youth subjectivity "within a number of salient discourses [permeating the Serbian official discourse]" (Feixa and Nilan 2006, 3). Thus, analogous to the elites' *self-subjectification* process, Mercedez music is understood as a neo-Diesel, "performative practice of hybridity",

directed at negotiating "personal and group identity and belonging in the context of "rapid social transformation" (ibid, 2). I will investigate Mercedez representation of the neo- Diesel formation of 'authentic' personhood expression, by analyzing the rapper's employment of the *Pendulum Technique* strategy, used for the discursive rearrangement of the liberal-elitist narratives.

Fire the tires, godfather/ Step on the gas when you enter curves, godfather (Gas)/
The city's burning, godfather/ You heard of us, bitches/
Dish the cash out, godfather/ Shower them bitches with cash, godfather/
I was broke as hell, but now my bank account is filling up (What?!)

Happy slava, godfather![23] Your famous now, godfather!/
I'll always shower you with cash like you're getting married, godfather!/
Dishing out white lines, I'm not saving for the rainy days/
I am young, godfather! (I'm young)/ Bussing loaded guns, me and my godmothers!
Around me a bad crowd, but with killer butts/ Baksheesh flying all around, tonight this godmother treats all around/ Childish cause we grew up too soon, godfather/

Godfather, my king, dish the money out, it's our turn to celebrate tonight/
Let them hear, let them know-it's a party in my hood/
Dushmans always protest-they wanna take us off our throne/
Around us only dark bitches/ Darks as pumas, godfather/
Around you are brother, godfather/ But they only playin' you, godfather (Yeah, yeah)/
Who did what to whom, godfather/ Karma's a bitch, godfather/
I am your brother till I'm gone for good, godfather/ No doubt in that, brother of mine/

Buss the long guns, we going to war, godfather!
Ripping out the hearts, biting, cutting the throats, godfather,
To anyone who dares spiting on your name
Cause you're my brother, godfather,
Nobody understands this life of ours, godfather

("Godfather", Mercedez and 30Zona, 2020)

[23] 'Slava' is the Serbian Orthodox tradition of the veneration and observance of the family's patron saint. The phrase "happy slava!" ("srećna slava!") is said to the person upon entering their house (in which the celebration occurs) and giving them traditional gifts (coffee, alcoholic beverages, chocolate), but the phrase can also be used to express joy and celebration of having someone as a friend, or in the events of unexpected luck.

The above song is titled "Godfather" and was produced in the collaboration between Mimi Mercedez and the Croatian *trapfolk* collective, 30Zona. The reason I chose this song is because it is representative of the *gasser* sociality/relationality, employs the *poetic strategy* of *defiant entertainment,* but also demonstrates the neo-Diesel's prioritizing of class division over ethnic ones (cultural differences). The form of the song is dialogical, that is, the first verse is sung by the rapper Shin, the second by Mercedez, the third by another member of 30Zona, Galaš, and, the last one, is also sung by Mercedez. The use of the word "godfather" ("kum") corresponds to the Balkan, secular usage of the word "kume", which is correlated to the Christian meaning of the word in that it implies an alliance, not through a blood relationship, but via pledging to lasting, mutual loyalty. In other words, I could have replaced the word "godfather" with "brother", without changing the meaning of the song. However, the use of the word "kume", signals *trepfolk's* exploitation of folk phraseology, similar to the way NCFM and turbo-folk incorporated "the people's lexical index" (Vidić- Rasmussen 1995). Additionally, as one of the main themes of *trepfolk,* in general*,* is criminality and illegal avenues for upward mobility (the only one available to precarious youths), the use of "godfather" could also be understood as drawing from the films about Italian mafia, where the word "godfather" is associated with being in control and respected. Moreover, in the first verse, the rapper describes the *gasser's* sociality, which includes a fast lifestyle or the imperative of speed ("fire the tires"), and the line "step[ping] on the gas when [one] enters curve", possibly refers to a life that requires risk-taking and a lack of self-doubt, as well as the need for self-motivation, whereby the "curve" represents material and other obstacles placed before the precarious, young person. The *cash-talk* (the sub-strategy of *defiant entertainment*), illustrated in the lines "dish out the cash", "shower them with cash", and "my bank accounts filling up", could be seen as the emphasis on the primacy of economic factors (over cultural, personal) in the contemporary society, but also, again, as self-motivation. In other words, as conventional status attainment routes are increasingly inaccessible to precarious youths, the manifesting of, in this case, possession of material wealth, characteristic of gangster rap and trap music styles, serves as a way to build a reputation of a moneyed, yet free-handed and prioritizing indulgence in luxury over economizing (Kubrin 2005, 364). In the next verse, Mercedez responds to the gasser, in a celebratory and encouraging way, acknowledging the

gasser's need for recognition ("famous") and joy ("happy slava"). Moreover, Mercedez supports and identifies with the gasser's desire for luxury and indulgence ("shower with cash", "dishing out white lines like you're getting married"), thereby attaching value to his personhood expression. In the next two lines ("I'm young" and "bussing loaded guns"), it appears as if Mercedez is defining precarious youth personhood (the gassers she identifies with, or "bad crowd") as already equipped ("loaded guns" and "killer asses") with the armory for self-empowerment. Additionally, the using hot weapon-symbolic enhances the rapper's metaphoric expression considering the context of the liberal-elitist understanding of turbo-culture (with that, also the sociality of the genre's main consumers- the working class) as 'war mongering and aggressive. And the line "childish cause we grew up too fast", could be understood as the leitmotif of Mercedez' representation of the neo-Diesel formation of 'authentic' personhood expression, whereby the rapper *justifies* the self-destructive, 'improper' sociality of precarious youths by inverting the liberal-elitist understanding of the causality between the person's economic impoverishment (having to "grow up to fast" due to the lack of material infrastructure) and a certain cultural expression ("childish", the desire for luxury over smart-spending). The third, Galaš' verse, in a way, could be viewed as expanding on the gasser's need for recognition ("let them hear, let them know"), as well as the manifestation of strong personhood who prioritizes entertainment and indulgence in spite of hardships ("it's a party in my hood"). Next, the use of the Turkish word "dushman" ("enemy"), to refer to the "those who protest" (the liberal-elites) against his personhood empowerment ("take us off our throne"), is a tongue-in-cheek, reversal of the liberal-elitist Orientalist discourse (utilizing Ottoman cultural heritage (the word "dushmen") to define the liberal-elites as enemies, not as culturally inferior). The lines describing the rapper spending time surrounded by "dark bitches", could be understood as the manifesting of social power inscribed in receiving women's attention, that is, the attention of women who are "dark as pumas", attractively built, but also "dark" as in rejecting forced positivity (the trait of the neoliberal elitist discourse) and sharing the rapper's experience of dark, precarious reality. While, on the other hand, Galas' imagined opponent is surrounded by "brothers", failing to draw women's attention, but also establish loyal friendships ("only playing you"), unlike the rapper, who is loyal to his brothers till his death ("I am loyal till I'm gone, brother").

Evidently, nurturing loyal and lasting relationship highly valued in the neo-Diesel understanding of 'authenticity', and, as *cash talk,* serves as a poetic strategy for ascribing value to one's personhood. The last verse could be understood as representing the neo-Diesel refusal to inherit the inter-ethnic animosities of previous generations and, instead, establish close relationship with Croatian youth (30Zona) on the basis of their shared class location ("cause you're my brother, nobody understands this life of ours"). It is as if Mercedez is prepared to defend his personhood (Ripping out the hearts, biting, cutting the throats, godfather, to anyone who dares spiting on your name"). In the context of the liberal-elitist rationalization of the 1990s ethnic conflicts as arising from the savage *mass* of the Balkan working-classes, Mercedez' inviting of 30Zona to "buss [their] guns] and "go to war", implies not going to an ethnic war against each other, but against those who don't "understand" their way of life (the class-other, from the precarious, youth perspective, is the elite). This is not to suggest that Mercedez is advocating bloodshed in the name of class conflict. Instead, this paper argues that the nature of the *trepfolk's* main poetic strategy, the *Pendulum Technique,* implies exaggerated statements that serve for the surfacing of the reality of socio-economic conditions as viewed from the precarious, youth's perspective. In other words, I argue that, by rearranging the meaning and value systems which are propagated by the official Serbian discourse, and viewed as problematic by the precarious youth, *trepfolk* accomplishes the role of being the pop-cultural vehicle used for the non-punishable *violation* of cultural norms in the strife towards precarious youth personhood empowerment.

The aim of this persistent *violation* seems to be the clearing and expanding of one's vision and understanding of one's surroundings, including the cultural boundaries set by the elitist exclusionary, class-othering practices (hierarchization of cultural expressions). That is, by "bending vision of reality" as it exists in the exclusionary discourse of the Serbian liberal elites, through the mirroring discursive strategies (i.e., criminality as categorically wrong vs. bottom-up criminality as survival tactic), *trepfolk* has the power of alleviating the effects this elitist, class-othering "vision" has on the youth personhood (instilling the feelings of fear and shame). For instance, when I asked my friend's young sister, an 18-year-old, working-class girl from Borča, the capital's peripheral neighborhood and a Mercedez' fan, how she feels

about attending an elite, city- center high school where most of the other kids have an upper-middle- class background, as well as how she relates Mercedez music to her school experience, she said:

> *All my friends live like this, their parents barely make ends meet, yet I am supposed to carry this huge shame within me. In the first year, they even gave us, like, a form to fill, where they asked us about our parents' jobs and [level of] education. I felt weird, I was never ashamed of them before, and I wanted to disappear at that point. All these kids had doctor-parents or whatever. They said it was for statistics, but that didn't make it easy. What, like, do they need to know which kids get the most pocket money? Or if my mom worked a 10-hour shift, does that mean I was a neglected child with potential learning disabilities? [...] The good thing about Mimi's music is that she talks about these things in a powerful and personal way, and these are not the things people talk about. Of course, I brushed it off [the school questionnaire], "to hell with sadness and depression, only principled, cold-hearted hate"*[a reference to Mercedez' song "Hate", 2019]. *This fucking attitude helps you love yourself and not hate other people who may see themselves as better than you, because you realize there's nothing wrong with you specifically, and you're not the only one feeling this, it brings you closer to some people [due to] this shared trouble. [Conversely,] Not all, but some very rich kids, they don't understand anything, it's like you're talking to a child. When you realize it's bigger than your own little self-consciousness, you start seeing a bigger picture, like, how would my mom feel if she knew I was ashamed or how does she feel about herself when she sitting at the parents' meeting? I'm never backing down like that again.*
>
> (Mina, personal communication, November 16, 2021).

What is evident in Mina's account is that the process of 'personhood formation' involves both the external (the liberal-elitist discursive vilification of the precarious youth personhood) and the internal, affective (e.g., feelings of pride and entitlement, or shame and fear) mechanisms, and, as such, is very sensitive to the institutional treatment of a given individual or group, but also to one's personal history of lived-experiences, both in terms of material conditions and socialization. The "bigger picture" Mina refers to are the effects that class inequality has on the given society's culture, and with that, Mina and her mother's *emotional* self-perception. But, as Mina explains, the "attitude" (the realization of the impersonal nature

of class relations) represented in Mercedez' song "Hate" (2019), alleviates Mina's shameful "ugly feelings" produced by what she experienced as misperception of her and her mother's personhood value (Skeggs 2011, 506). That is, via positioning of the source of this emotional stress outside of both Mina's and her mother's personhood, and by voicing "the things people [do] not talk about", that is, the relationship between a person's emotional state and the lived experience of economic and cultural marginalization, Mina's emotional hardship (shame of one's personhood, fear of one's inadequacy) is diminished. Furthermore, the "rich kids don't understand anything" comment testifies to the "materially conditioned relationality" (Skeggs, 488), or a class-based nature of the person's meaning and value-construction. For instance, "very rich kids" may not understand the frustration produced by "not having enough money for a concert ticket" (Asja, personal communication, December 2021), in the same way, Mina could hardly sympathize with the shame of, for instance, having poor skiing skills[24]. Thus, what is understood as crucial for the formation of 'authentic' personhood expression in the neo- Diesel youth discourse, is a critical understanding of the impersonality of the established, cultural-class relations ("nothing wrong with you specifically"). By subverting the source of shameful feelings (the liberal-elitist definition of 'proper' personhood expression), Mina is not only able to authentically express herself, but also better relations with her shamed, working-class parents ("how would my mom feel if she knew I was ashamed or how does she feel about herself when she is sitting at the parents' meeting?").

The negotiation of the inherited shameful feelings surrounding one's class location, as the effect of the liberal-elitist class-othering, is additionally complicated in the case of precarious youths who come from upper-middle-class families and their efforts toward the formation of 'authentic' personhood expression. As I have mentioned before and as my research shows, due to the economic downward spiraling of the Yugoslav middle-classes, the effects of economic precarity are felt also by the middle-class 'babies of the nineties', meaning that these youths have developed a different "relationality or sociality" (ibid.) in comparison to their parents', owing to their *socialities* being embedded in "different historical circumstances" (ibid.). That

[24] During the interview, Mina and I made a joke about *skiing habits* of the "very rich kids".

is, due to the widespread economic, social, and cultural impoverishment in Serbia from the 1990s onwards, the 'precarious youth sociality', to which the majority of middle-class youths I interviewed identify (low wages, long and tiring shifts, lack of proper housing and access to inexpensive healthcare), is more similar to the *sociality* of the 'broad masses of Serbian people' than that of their parents (Yugoslav middle- class), who identified with the sociality of the Yugoslav cultural elites. This is illustrated in the interviewed youth's attitudes towards pop-folk music genres and entertainment, perhaps due to the long-lasting liberal-elitist insistence on monitoring the pop-cultural taste and entertainment patterns of the lower social stratum. As Mercedez notices: "Today, music is no longer an easy way to detach yourself in that elitist way. Some like rock, some like folk. All is everybody's." (Mercedez, personal communication, January 2022) Or, as my friend Nikola, a lower-middle-class, 24-year-old, professional rock musician from the city's center explains:

> *My parents are very confused that I like both rap and narodnjaci [a pejorative term for 'folk music']. Their generation grew up having access to things, yet they were less flexible and not fluid enough to adapt to some cultural trends, I think. When we played with Repetitor [Serbian rock band], they played a Sinan Sakić*[25] *song before the concert because he died that day. Some old guy turned to the sound guy and asked: "Why the fuck are they playing this shit?". To which this guy responded: "The band asked." That's the trip: it's not only about Sinan, but about the background, you know? But most of the older generations don't even see that background, but just hear a nardonjak and reject it. My mother hates me when I listen to Sinan.* (Nikola, personal communication, November 2020)

Nikola's conclusion that "the older generations don't even see the background" suggest not only that different material conditions produce affect the formation of different *socialities,* but also that one's sociality governs one's vision which makes some of the youth-cultural strategies, even though they are a direct response to the elitist discourse, "imperceptible to the bourgeoisie gaze" (Skeggs 2011, 496) and, consequentially, read as "improper emancipation" (Vlaović 2019). In this particular case, the youth rock band (*Repetitor),* having in mind the historical discursive split between Western (rock) and Balkan folk music genres, as well as the

[25] Sinan Sakić was a Yugoslav-Romani folk singer and a member of *South Wind.*

class connotations implied in this split, purposefully asked that a NCFM hit is played at the beginning of their concert, as a way to honor the late singer; but also to position themselves ideologically (the neo-Diesel) by countering the elitist submerging of both NCFM and turbo-folk. However, this paper argues that these youth-cultural strategies are *imperceptible to the bourgeoisie eye* precisely because these strategies counter the very cultural conditions on which the elite's self-subjectification rests. In other words, to establish their own notion of an 'authentic' mode of personhood expression, the Serbian precarious youth must also reconcile with the fact that, in the elitist perspective, the lack of recognition of the reality of class relations is a fundamental element of the reality of those relations (Bourdieu 1990, 138). It is clear that the relationship between authenticity and cultural empowerment is a complex issue because, on the one hand, the precarious youths express the need for public recognition of their personhood desires and needs as valid, on the other, the very milieu (the liberal elites) dominating the Serbian public discourse produces the discursive conditions for the precarious, young personhood disempowerment. I will now proceed to a brief theoretical discussion of the concepts relevant to my discussion of the relationship between youth-cultural empowerment through the formation of 'authentic' personhood expression and *trepfolk* music style.

In his paper on popular culture and political change, Stuart Hall (2005) posits that "cultural forms are a play on contradictions, especially in the domain of the 'popular'" and to expect them to be entirely deviant or entirely authentic is potentially "dangerous" (ibid., 68). As we have seen, in the case of NCFM and turbo-folk, this "play" occurred in a covert, metaphorical way, whereby "contradictions" arising from the liberal-elitist (contradictory) notion of top-down emancipation, or monitoring of the self-managing worker's emancipation process, were negotiated mainly by the bottom-up emphasis on the primacy of entertainment and the rejection of the liberal-elitist imperative of cultural elevation (self-bettering). That is, without explicitly commenting on the disbalance of social power relations, these genres were "not disaggregated from the political" (Skeggs 2011, 506). Yugoslav pop-folk producers and working-class consumers circumvented the elitist devaluation of their 'backward' cultural framework (personhood expression) by using pop-folk styles as a vehicle for "a statement of different desire" (Skeggs 2011, 506), that of using their leisure time not for adopting the taste for high-cultural consumption, but for entertainment. Considering this, the contemporary

trepfolk inherited the above strategy (*defiant entertainment)* yet enrichened it with the lyricism possessing an overtly political tone. This paper argues that, what affected this change, besides the global development of popular music (global popularity of (t)rap music), is the notion that, even though the previous, lower-class generations' pop-folk music styles (NCFM and turbo-folk) were never explicitly political, they were read by the cultural elite's as an attack on social order (detrimental to the nation's value system). In relation to this, Mercedez' *trepfolk* representation (explicit social commentary) of the precarious youth's sociality "plays on contradictions" of the liberal-elitist idea of monitored emancipation of lower social classes by proposing that the recognition (and fulfilling) of the precarious, youth personhood's needs and desires as valid is a way toward emancipation, not the vilification which results in self-doubt and self-inhibition on behalf of the precarious youth personhood. As Tricia Rose posits in her study on African-American, inner-city youths and their relationship to rap music, the author explains the genre as "very competitive and confrontational", with these traits being "both resistance to and preparation for a hostile world" (1994, 79). That is, in relying on the "recuperative energies of the rhetoric" characteristic of gangster rap (Watts 1997, 52), the rapper's rendition of the neo-Diesel notion of authenticity could be viewed as inviting precarious youths to regain trust in the validity of their personhood values needs and desire ("preparation for hostile world"), by critically approaching their class location ("resistance to" the liberal-elitist, discursive class-othering), instead of understanding it as a given. Furthermore, drawing from Stef Jansen's (2006) concept of "socially situated creativity", this paper positions the neo-Diesel youth culture as a "subordinate culture" and, as such, its autonomy is "only relative" (ibid., 272-3). Even though it occurs as a response to the exclusionary, Serbian public discourse and the "hierarchical differentiation" (ibid.), both in a cultural and economic sense, the neo-Diesel's subcultural capital, based on the reinterpretation of the liberal-elitist demand for authenticity, can only be realized within the marginalized youth groups, not in relation to the rest of the Serbian society, and especially not in the youth's relationship to the cultural elites. Lastly, the fact of "social misrecognition" (ibid., 269) and the impact it has on the precarious youth personhood cannot be obliterated through pop-cultural production and consumption, even though the neo-Diesel subculture is equipped with the publicity enabled by the popularity and omnipresence of *trepfolk* in the Serbian culture, yet

the subcultural capital offered by it can make day-to-day life more bearable. Thus, the social significance ascribed to Mimi Mercedez' music-making by numerous precarious youths in Serbia could be understood as the signaling of the precarious youths' need for more transparency in interpersonal relationships, especially in terms of addressing, and, thus, minimizing, the effects of class on culture, with that, their personhood.

Accordingly, in their efforts toward establishing a sense of national and communal belonging ("to feel acknowledged", male fan, personal communication, October 2021) and an 'authentic' mode of personhood expression, the Serbian precarious youths, especially those youths with a working-class background, are seemingly left with the choice of either siding with the elitist, negative evaluation of themselves and (their) working-class, parent culture, or strive to tailor an 'authentic' cultural model based on class and youth subjectivity (Bettie 2000); the neo- Diesel cultural model which is loyal to their class background, but, at the same time, workable in the contemporary Serbian conditions.

Chapter Two: Cultural Value and Social Reproduction: Neo-Diesel youth culture and the precarious youth-cultural negotiation of neoliberal/neoconservative ideology

Luckily, or not, for the Serbian rap scene, I'd say, Mercedez and Gudroslav [another member of Bombs of the nineties collective] are the two of three rappers in Serbia, who did not spit on the

Diesel heritage, cause they managed to draw a parallel between these youths of the nineties, themselves and the rappers of Black America, [Black America is] the sky we all, more or less speak to, cause we are all, willingly or not, spiritual children of the blacks.[26] *Important thing about darkness, is that it is [even more] a matter of consciousness than skin. Rare are the MCs who know how to pack up that "Balkan darkness" [gesticulation] in the most locally [relevant], most Balkan, most Serbian way possible which everybody here who wants to understand it, can. Being able to do that I think is the rarest thing in MCs, globally. These two started rapping cause they simply saw they can, end of story. I had a privilege to work with both of them, talk about music and the role of trepfolk, and rap, in general, in the country where double morality is the favorite discipline, and making rap the triumph of one's vanity. You, as a rapper, you're just a storyteller, you talk about things that are a constant, but you give them your own signature […] that constant's trajectory is the curve of life in poverty [which implies] aspiration for the better [life conditions], aspiration for the best, aspiration for recognition and, aspiration for fun.* (Sprite (a neo-Diesel trapper), personal communication, February 12, 2022)

The idea of "Balkan darkness" is central to the contemporary Serbian youths' revival of the 1990s *Diesel* subculture. According to the Sprite's statement, the value of Mimi Mercedez' music-making lies in the rapper's ability to not only recognize the similarities between *dizelaši,* contemporary *gassers* and "the rappers of Black America"*,* but also present this cultural interconnectedness in a way that is familiar and meaningful to local youth consumers. In other words, by establishing this analogy through the adoption of rap music's representational form, the neo-Diesel rappers appropriate the subcultural capital that is globally ascribed to African American hip hop culture, and rap music in particular. This analogy (*dizelaši- gaseri*- African American rappers), springs from, what Sprite understands as, "the curve of life in poverty", that is, the sociality/relationality ("a matter of consciousness") which arises from socio-economic marginalization of social groups ("aspiration for the better, aspiration for the best, aspiration for recognition and, aspiration for fun"). The neo-Diesel intent to draw a parallel between the poverty-stricken and isolated

[26] "Crnac" is a non-pejorative term for populations with a mid to dark brown complexion, usually refers to African populations and the African (South and North) American population.

Serbia of the 1990s and American inner cities is clear, but the question of where one draws the line of class and ethnic distinction, which seemed so clear-cut in the United States, remains open. To further understand how this association was possible, I will briefly provide the socio-economic context of the 1990s *Diesel* subculture.

Due to the decomposition of the existing (socialist), and the establishment of a new political and economic system in Serbia (capitalist free-market economy), as well as the broader context of the collapse of the Westerns welfare states and the Eastern European socialist systems, the cultural and socio-economic atmosphere of the 1990s Serbia was marked by uncertainty and confusion and Serbia was in the need of the reconstruction of the entire social structure (Delić 2011, Šenetvska 2015, Kovačević 2018). On the one hand, the isolation and economic impoverishment of the 1990s Serbian society, resulting from the UN's introduction of international sanctions (1992-1995) as a reaction to country's involvement in the Bosnian War, was marked by the rise of unemployment and crime rates, hyperinflation ("the world's poorest billionaires", Nikšić 2016), a shortage of basic goods and medicinal supplies, as well as electricity restrictions. According to the CIA assessment of the sanctions produced in 1993: "Serbs have become accustomed to periodical shortages, long lines in stores, cold homes in the winter and restrictions on electricity." (Mijatović 1993) On the other, there existed a confusion in terms of social identity and collective belonging, whereby the cultural divide between the village and the city was "rampaging across the stiches of youth crews" (Delić 2011c), as the football hooligans subculture became more radical, violent and, widespread (Čolović 1995), an influx of war refugees from Bosnia and Croatia who being to populate the peripheral city-neighborhoods, street protests that gathered concomitantly the neo-chetnik political parties (Serbian Renewal Movement = "Srpski Pokret Obnove") and the people "dressed as hippies, in Converse snaeckers and *lenonkama* [Lennon sunglasses], intonating the chorus of the song "Give Peace a Chance" (Delić 2011c), followed by the other group's nationalist chanting of "Prepare, prepare, chetniks" ("Spremte se, spremte, četnici"), while the corrupted, secret police agency "dealt simultaneously with the state officials, its opposition, and criminal organizations" (ibid.). A great number of football hooligans was going to the warzones across Croatia, trusting that "fun" was better there than "in Belgrade drained by heroin" (Čolović 1995, Delić 2011c), while the punks transformed into skinheads, and

intellectuals, placing blame on the "uneducated and ignorant mass that indulges in being manipulated" (ibid.) for the societal downfall. In this transitional, socio-political context of the lack of class consciousness (Bolčić 2003), the precarious youths in Serbia of the 1990s formed their collective identity based on "raw, tribal form of strong identification with a neighborhood crew, a hooligan band, or a gang" (Kovačević 2018). Like American hip hopers, Russian *gopniks*, and British *chavs*, these youths, in the meantime termed as *dizelaši*, expressed the need to not only manifest their social power through appropriation of luxury Western good (cars, golden jewelry, branded clothes), but also displayed a total disrespect for state institutions (from police to education) (Gavrilyk 2009, Jones 2011, Kovačević 2018). For instance, one of the most important traits of the *Diesel* visual expression (style), is the prioritizing of physical strength over intellectual capacity (Jansen 2006, Music and Vukčević 2018), whereby along with brands like *Gucci, Versace* and *Coogi*, the most recognizable *Diesel* outfit consists of a tracksuit (*Kappa*, *Sergio Tacchini, etc.)* and (usually) *Nike Air Max* sneakers of the 1990s (Delić 2011c, 2012). In this sociality, the contemporary *gaseri* found stylistic and ideological inspiration for their negotiation of communal and national belonging and the efforts toward the formation of an 'authentic' personhood expression. The main difference between these two youth-cultures can be located in the youth's understanding of the relationship between class inequality and cultural distinction. In relation to this, my essay argues that, in order to properly examine the neo-Diesel youth-culture as it is represented by the music-making of Mimi Mercedez, class should be primarily viewed as a cultural identity, and cultural differences existing among different classes in Serbia, as corresponding to the ethnic distinction as manifested in the American society (Musić and Vukčević 2017, Kubrin 2005). I propose this operational framework because, in the liberal-elitist discourse, these class-cultural differences are emphasized and used as a justification for economic inequality existing among Serbian population.

In the following subchapter, I will deal with the meaning of the 1990s *Diesel* subculture in the contemporary neo-Diesel youth-culture, and Mercedez' *trepfolk* rendition of this subcultural revival. Next, I will focus on Mercedez musical representation of the bottom-up, youth-cultural self-subjectification and the negotiation of the communal and national belonging via tailoring of a new form of 'authenticity'.

I will analyze the neo-Diesel appropriation of the Diesel subcultural capital (style, pop-cultural taste, the orientation toward state institutions) and the related *poetic strategies* employed in Mercedez' music-making using the following conceptual framework: situational authenticity (Harkness 2012), style as a form oblique of refusal in subcultures (Hebdige 1979), culturalization of political struggles and de- politization of cultural differences (Brown 2006, Komnenović and Unverdorben 2019), the bottom-up process of accruing/ attaching value to one's personhood (Skeggs 2011), stigmatization of class (Tyler 2015), dialectic lens of gangster rap (Watts 1997), socially situated creativity (Jansen 2006), underclass theory and the notion the need for socio-economic recognition/redistribution (Fraser 1997, Murray 1999, Bullen and Kenway 2005) and the notion of appropriative consumption (Rose 1989, 1994). In my investigation of the neo-Diesel youth-cultural problematization of the correlation between economic inequality and cultural distinction, I will analyze how Mercedez employs the poetic strategies of *the power of the attitude* and *one's desire, demand, and need as guidance (DDNG)* in her rearranging of the liberal-elitist, hierarchical cultural framework, in order to provide a better explanation of the neo-Diesel notion of authenticity and connect it to the relationship between class and culture.

The meaning of 'Diesel' in the contemporary neo-Diesel, youth-cultural discourse: 'This Mercedez too is powered by Diesel'

> *Back in time, in chemistry classes of my era [1990], we often mentioned the litmus paper. It is a sort of paper used in laboratories for testing whether solution is acidic or basic, and so on. The* Diesel *can be used in the same way in social situations. Most of the time, it is very effective for categorizing social contacts. The hate toward this subculture as the official cultural expression of youths, not only in Serbia, but also globally, is the crucial point of conflict of the Serbian culture war. This also makes it a political question. Plus, it is hard for local elites to accept the fact that this subculture accomplished a better westernization than any political or cultural body in Serbia. On the wings of turbo-folk, the Diesel culture familiarized the masses with McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Marlboro and Suzuki more than any other organization or individual. That, and sexual emancipation, high-fashion, the recreational use of opioids, musics, all those good things about Western culture were introduced by dizelaši.* (Delić 2011c)

As we see in the above quote, the significance of *Diesel* in the neo-Diesel youth-culture lies in its role in the process of constructing collective, precarious youth identity, that is, differentiating between, as we have seen in the introductory chapter of this paper, *civilians* and *tough heads.* That is, between those identifying with the *Diesel* relationality, and those whose value and meanings system is in correspondence with the liberal-elitist, cultural discourse (which displays "hate" toward the *Diesel* culture). Understanding what Delić' terms "the Serbian cultural war" as the cultural struggle over the meaning of 'authentic' personhood expression, creates conditions for understanding Mercedez' music-making as participating in the symbolic struggle over cultural capital where the question of causality between economic inequality and cultural distinction is of crucial importance.

I never go out, never go out without wallet full of pictures/ Full of pictures of my dear ones on the red stacks[27]*/In here nothing is free/ especially not the style/ Each of my bars, is like a bomb of the nineties/ Never once did I go broke/One minute I was on the streets/the next I was renting my own place, came out a baller chick/ Grew up just off the Blue Bridge/ No wonder I'm gross/ Doesn't matter what you've been through/But what you take from it/ Tattoo on my arm, fire in my heart/ That burns like the sister when they take down her brother/ But the head is cold as ice, and it keeps on counting cash/ Nobody that's in my heart/ Will live like a vassal/ Mimi Mama, children of war, we grew up with the bombs/ Minimum wage, we didn't grow up on snow[cocaine]/ So the brain is disintegrating, like the ole SFRY/ But I am BFOĐ, I never run from fight/ Mimi Mama, children of war, we grew up with the bombs/ So the brain is disintegrating, like the ole SFRY/ But I am BFOĐ, so I am staying here/ They want you to be a bomb/ But not to explode/ I feel like a beast inside a cage/ They want you to be a bomb/ But not to explode/ I feel like a beast inside a cage/ I'mma, I'mma, I'mma beast inside a cage/ Nothing but a slave to my abilities/ My desires are a strobe that I let shine, they call that aggression/ Our life-a war-simulation/ Balkan is a tricky map/ Friendly fire from a brother, ha?/ Never counter, always terror// Pull a knife on the whole team/ Whole of Konjarnik, never blue, always black'n'white/ Around me's not a hood, but a hard core/ Lady goes with a king, not a gendarme (cop)/ In my part of the city, houses have no façade/ The flats are 30 square meters/ Cracked windows and grenade shots/ We ain't flower children, we are the children of war/ (chorus)/ Don't fool yourself, thinking a nightly stream of alcohol will help/ or buying*

[27] As in red banknote. 1000rsd~10 euros

rounds of drinks/ No use shutting your eyes either, cause they wanna see it all/ You won't be able to fall asleep, oh no.

("Children of War", *Hate*, Mercedez 2019)

The quote above is from a song called "Children of War", published on Mercedez' solo album *Hate* in September of 2019. The song both illustrates the neo-Diesel relationship to the 1990s *Diesel* subculture (establishing of new understanding of the correlation between economic inequality and cultural distinction), as well as offers insight into how Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary, as a neo-Diesel youth-cultural practice, employs poetic strategies to both reference and rearrange the liberal-elitist meaning and value structure, which enable the elite's *wrong enculturation* narrative. Firstly, the title of the song "Children of War" has a two-fold meaning, whereby the world "children" in both versions refers to the material embeddedness of person's sociality, while the word "war" points to two different historical facts: the influence of the international sanctions (the consequence of the Bosnian War of 1992-5) and the influence of, what Delić understands as "Serbian cultural war" (2011c). Notably, the rapper starts the song with what, at first, seems to be a sentimental bar, "wallet full of pictures", but quickly establishes that she is talking about the "red stacks" or red banknotes, making a statement about the primacy of economic factors and about economic mobility as preconditional to personal freedom ("You're as big as the cash you carry", "Money, sweet money", 2018; "And it feels like I am not alive when the money-rainbow isn't peeping out my wallet", "Prettiest rainbow colors", 2017). That is, as Mercedez herself explains: "Wanting luxurious living is nothing bad or superficial because you then don't always have to think about money, [otherwise] it's hanging over your head all the time" (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022); in other words, being materialistic and greedy from a marginalized social and economic position is read as a desire for freedom ("aspiration for the best", Sprite, personal communication, February 12, 2022). Furthermore, "nothing is free, especially not the style" is a wordplay with a double-entendre, emphasizing the lack of equal access to basic needs, but also lack of access to symbolic value-accrual in the case of marginalized social groups, as "style" (corresponding to the *Diesel* youths' desire for luxury goods as manifestation of social power) is treated as an element of personhood expression and

a tool for cultural empowerment. What is more, in gangster rap poetics, “style” is understood as “a form of identity formation which plays on class distinctions and hierarchies by using commodities to claim the cultural terrain” (Rose 1989, 42). Moreover, the “never once did I go broke” bar embodies another one of the characteristics of rap poetry, the instilling of words with healing or therapeutic properties (Crook and Travis Jr, 2017), as Mercedez explains:

> *When you rap about the things that aren’t true, it’s not lying, it’s manifesting. Words have a lot of power, like magic. There’s a shame surrounding the fact that you want money, a better, plentiful life, better circumstances […] I think this shame serves to delude people into thinking they should stay on some lower level of society, that someone like them mustn’t ask for more. (*Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022; my emphasis*)*

Additionally, the ‘magical’ relationship to the future is an alternative, youth-cultural route, to what Skeggs (2011) describes as “inherited conditions of precarity still structuring their present, anticipation of future loss, rather than future accrual” (504); an alternative which serves to mediate the feelings of anxiety and fear related to economic insecurity. Furthermore, intimate relationships among the ‘hard core’ of her friend group, are positioned as the most relevant aspect of life, “burns like the sister when they take down her brother”, a bar echoing the tone of the Serbian folk (epic) poetry about sisterly/motherly love (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020). Evidently, as NCFM and turbo-folk, Mercedez’ *trepfolk* exploits the folk phraseology, draws from the sociality of the broad masses of precarious youth, yet addresses the experience of ‘social alienation and marginality’ in an overtly political tone (Hofman 2013, Dumnic-Vilotijević 2020). In addition to this, the bar “nobody who's in my heart will live like a vassal”, is a direct reversal of the “vassal mentality” proposition, integral to the liberal elitist self-subjectification process, whereby *the broad masses of people* are defined as uneducated and easily manipulated individuals, whose mentality signals “primordial layers of memory of the oppressed mass” (Kalajić 1978) owing to the historical, long-term, Ottoman colonization of the region. This way, Mercedez, again, prioritizes the economic relationship inscribed in the word “vassal”, rejecting the *wrong enculturation* proposition, while also pointing to the importance of the role of economic factor in the formation of sociality (views the neo-liberal

elites' Western-centric sociality as a consequence of this layer's direct economic dependence to Western capital, i.e., European fond for the activist, non-governmental organizations).[28] As a 'baby of the nineties', Mercedez retells her 1990s growing up "on minimum wage" and "with the bombs", emphasizing that poverty caused by 1990s inflation and embargo, as well as the context of the 1999's NATO bombing, lead to "the brain disintegrating like the ole SFRY", referencing the political and social instability, but also the fact of it being psychologically and emotionally taxing. Moreover, the bars that describe BFOĐ (an acronym for Mercedez' girl gang "Bahata Familija Obrijane Glave"= "Haught Family of Shaved Pussies"; members: Mimi Mercedez (Milena Janković), Olgemc (Olga Janković), and Majoshke (Maja Milivojević)) as committed to the fight that is daily living in Serbia, with "Balkan" being "a tricky map" and "friendly fire from a brother" (referencing both to ethnic tensions of the 1990s and the contemporary "Serbian cultural war") , necessitates an offensive attitude and rejection of self-victimization ("learned helplessness", Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022). Similarly, the line "never counter always terror, pull a knife on a whole team", emphasize the complexity of nurturing personal relationships in the contemporary socio-political system. On one hand, the 'hard core' friend group is illustrated in BFOĐ, a relationship in which the rapper can count on loyalty and team work, whereby "the whole gang creates, you're just a poet who can put all in rhyme […] otherwise you're just some bore talking about himself, his emotions" (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022). On the other hand, "friendly fire from a brother" emphasizes the inability to establish trusting relationships, due to the "commodified value of human beings in capitalism", as well as the competitive nature of the neoliberal cultural discourse, which I will discuss more in the following pages (Rose 1989, 82). Furthermore, the line "they want you to be a bomb, but not to explode", describes the psychological state which makes the rapper feel "like a beast inside a cage", is at once, a reference to her ex-rap collective *Bombs of the Nineties,* and a commentary on the liberal elitist media portrayal of both *dizelaši* and *gaseri* (neo-Diesel youth) as dangers to social order and (self-)destructive in their moral and aesthetic confusion.

[28] A "vassal" was a person in the relationship of mutual obligation with the feudal lord. In return for military support, the vassal would receive certain privileges, such as land (Wikipedia 2022).

Mercedez further tackles the liberal elitist vilification of the precarious-youth personhood, whereby one's "desires that shine like a strobe" are understood as "aggression", which points both to the discursive elitist tendencies (the liberal media in Serbia such as *N1, Danas* and *Peščanik),* but also the institutional (prominence of police violence, discriminatory/classist discourse in educational institutions). The original *dizelaši,* as well as contemporary *gaseri,* are associated with petty crimes, as well as being 'foot soldiers' in the organized state criminal, mainly drug dealing and physical intimidation (Čolovic 1995). In relation to this, "Konjarnik never blue, always black'n'white" is a bar embodying a central strategy of hip-hop culture, *representing the hood (or precarious youth lifestyle)*, "never blue" as in being anti-police, and "black'n'white" are the official colors of the football club *Partizan*. Mercedez explains that her employment of the football symbolic ("I love Konjarnik and hedonism, like *Grobari* [fans] love Partizan", "Sushi", 2015) is due to the significance football has in the precarious, youths' sociality (also the general working-class sociality, Djordjević 2009), as well as because: "the media paints them in the worse of colors, they are a part of society that is kept under control a lot," because they are "rebellious, courageous enough to fight a much stronger [police] force [and] united" (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022). Additionally, the described anti-police attitude ("never blue") arises from the fact of the high-rate of police brutality in Serbia and that of drug dealing being a popular source of income for numerous young individuals in the capital, as one of my informers admits:

> *You always know a couple of kids who deal, some as young as 15 or 16. Normal boys and chicks. I knew one 15-year-old girl a couple of years ago, both parents working decent jobs, but you still gotta do something on the side if you want your pocket money, or should I say drug money?! She was selling "peticu" for 30 euros.*[29] *I have friends who deal and I'd say most people have at least one friend who was involved in something like that, or has had some trouble with police. So, even if you don't deal, you get searched. I heard a lot of stories, second and first-hand, where police stops you with something on you, and then blackmail you into selling their shit, a kilo or less, or you go to jail, as they will frame you with the kilo they have on them. But even those that don't deal, you get stopped with some illegal thing because you look like an idiot, or not, or you look completely okay*

[29] "A fiver"= five grams of amphetamine powder

but for some reason, that reason being you are strong, healthy, muscular boy and they immediatelly have a right to assume you go to your little gym, and then take your little dose of any kind of "brzina" and you smoke that shit you hide in your panties.[30] *And then, they also have a right to undress you, or beat you, inspect every opening on your body right there in their Jeep, parked next to a curb. "Interi" (special police unit) are the biggest betrayal. They are all kids from who knows where, or boys from the hood, who fucking chose to satisfy their desire for domination by wearing the badge. It's bullshit, some of them from New Belgrade (Novi Beograd, a working-class neighborhood), I know a kid whose brother became a cop and he beat this guy's friends, with a couple of other "kerovi" () and, of course, their fucking clubs and military boots.* [31] *(*personal communication February 15, 2022*)*

As we see in the member's account, the liberal-elitist vilification of precarious youths could be understood as enabling the heightened police surveillance of this social group. For instance, the police unit *interi* or četvrtaci ("the fourths"= from *Fourth Department of Police),* are officially responsible for "special actions, interventions, defense, and reserve preparations" (Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs 2022), yet colloquially, among the youth, this unit is known as *guzna policija* (lit."ass-loving police*",* due to customary, semi-public forcing of rectal examination performed on young men). Additionally, the fact of "boys from the hood" becoming policemen can also be added to the interpretation of the line "friendly fire from the brother". In connection to this, *the cost of style* has multiple implications, one of them also being that physical appearance can be one of the reasons for potential, random police checks, although not necessary. In the words of Asja, a 25-year-old girl from the city center:

I usually make an effort not to exit my house looking like a total 'ćoman',[32] *but, you know, sometimes you happen to be at a house party or an after-party and, somehow, you know, you end up staying there a couple of days, two-three, right? And then, you and your idiot friends, decide to go*

[30] "brzina"= slang word for "uppers", speed in literal translation, but also "spid" , "ds", "(pa)tike" or "running sneakers

[31] Novi Beograd, originally a working-class neighborhood in Belgrade.
"kerovi"= lit. dogs, slang word for policeman

[32]"ćoman"= an abbreviation of the word "narkoman"= junkie

outside for some reason, to buy something. Then there you are, in the middle of the city, in broad daylight, dressed like lunatics. This dude is wearing pajamas and pink AirMax sneakers […] And that right there is the perfect way to get yourself stripped in the middle of the street by a couple of crazy dudes with guns [policemen]. Luckily, there aren't that many girl cops so we don't get searched that often. But they can always take you to the station and finish the job. The fines are from 500 euros and up, I have a pending 1000 euros fine [for carrying less than 5g of marijuana] and I have no clue how I am going to pay that with the 300 euros [I make a month]. (Asja, personal communication, February 12, 2022)

Asja's account adds to the meaning of the "in here nothing is free, especially not the style" bar: style of clothing is *unfree* in one more sense, it can potentially be a reason for a violent, and public, police search. Put differently, styling one's outfit, especially in the *Diesel*-inspired style (Nike sneakers with air soles, tracksuits, cap, or bucket hat), is an act that requires courage and devotion on behalf of youth, especially those with previous, violent, and random police encounters. Style (clothing) is thus, besides *trepfolk* music, an important element of the neo-Diesel "grounded aesthetics" (Bennett 2000, 26), or as Mercedez describes it:

The message always comes across better if it's accompanied by style [and] Diesel outfit used to be a visual rebellion, or provocation, a couple of years ago, because of these hypocritical, negative connotations to that subculture and the whole 1990s era, as social regression. They are not willing to understand how Diesel came to be, and why? It's not black and white like the established opinion presents it. When society is hit with great adversity [like in the 1990s], what happens is the explosion of creativity. I also used to get inspired by Dara Bubamara's 1990s haircut as well,[33] *so all it matters is that you feel powerful, but also to present yourself, a kind of non-verbal communication, for which Diesel style was perfect exactly because [it allowed] for the rattling of the established values. It's not just about the outfit, but what it's supposed to stand for […] a set of characteristics and values that we wish to present, what we would like people to think we own. You don't even have to say anything, but people can conclude from your style.* (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022).

[33] Dara Bubamara (lit. Ladybug) is a popular turbo-folk singer.

In relation to the above statement, the chorus "we aren't flower children, we are children of war", is a declarative rejection of the liberal-elitist, Western-centric concept of the cultural revolution (the main liberal elitist in the "Serbian Culture wars") and their romanticized view of the West, whereby its cultural superiority is viewed as being reflected in the economic one. At the same time, the chorus is kind of a dialectic materialist *wake-up* call (the sub-strategy of the *DDNG*: *calling out the contradiction*), whereby Mercedez invites the liberal elites to rethink the relationship between class and culture. More precisely, Mercedez addresses the *civilians,* the outsiders to the neo-Diesel youth-culture, to realize that material conditions brought by the 1990s ethnic wars and the concomitant inception of 'Serbian cultural wars' resulted in the rise of *Diesel* subculture, not vice versa. Additionally, Mercedez also invites the precarious youths to empower themselves by gaining a critical understanding of their cultural heritage (*Diesel* subculture) and its socio-economic implications, or the relationship between economic inequality and cultural distinction. Having analyzed Mercedez' rendition of the meaning of *Diesel* subculture in the neo-Diesel youth-cultural discourse, I turn to a theoretical analysis of the neo-Diesel employment of *Diesel* phenomenon in the youth-cultural process of the formation of 'authentic' personhood expression.

Firstly, I turn to Beverly Skeggs and her study (2011) on the processes of alternative value production on behalf of the working-class Brits, in which she poses the following question:

> *How then can we understand how people who are excluded from the possibilities of accruing and attaching value to themselves, who are positioned outside of the dominant symbolic as the constitutional limit for the proper self, or as the zero limit to culture, develop value/s? (496)*

In the case of the Serbian, neo-Diesel youth culture, the quest for an 'authentic' mode of personhood expression ('attaching value to oneself') implies a (stylistic) rearranging of "the hierarchical cluster of conditions used to govern authenticity" (Harkness 2013, 295). As my analysis of Mercedez' lyrical content shows, the aim of this discursive rearrangement is the

emphasizing of the political and economic conditions governing the precariousness of marginalized youth, as well as the emphasis on how the liberal-elitist, discursive practices of othering (negative evaluation of youth personhood) are directed at enabling the continuation of the existing class relations ("They want you to be a bomb/ But not to explode") The purpose of the described emphasis is the empowering of/ 'attaching value' to the marginalized, youth personhood via facing the youths with the artificiality of the elitist, top-down representations that "position [the precarious youth] as the constitutional limit for proper personhood" (Skeggs 2011, 503), and with that, diminish the undermining effects that these liberal-elitist, external definitions have on the precarious, youth-cultural process of 'authentic' personhood formation. Most prevalently, as Delić also suggest ("the crucial point of conflict of the Serbian culture war"), the neo-Diesel discursive rearrangement is accomplished via positive reevaluation and identification with the notorious *Diesel* subculture and its members, "the Serbian children of neoliberalism" (Pejović and Papović 2016) (as mentioned above, analogous to American *hip hopers*, Russian *gopniks* or British *chavs)*. Drawing from Dick Hebdige's study (1979) on the meaning of style in subcultures, I argue that the revival of the 1990s *Diesel* style serves as an oblique challenge to structures of domination (ibid., 17, Bennett 2020), and a refusal of the liberal elitist definition of the relationship between economic inequality and culture (appropriation/critique via style). In other words, more than an imitation of the *Diesel*'s visual style, Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary, and other neo-Diesel cultural practices, build on the elitist cultural framework used in reference to the Diesel subculture and expand on the original Diesel value and meaning system by interpreting it in accordance with the contemporary Serbian social and political environment. That is, it is precisely the elites' 'negative connotations' to the *Diesel* subculture that enabled the neo-Diesel youth to initiate the interaction between the elitist and the youth cultural discourse, and 'to rattle the established value [system]', expressing the precarious youth's need for "positive attention" (Bullen and Kenway 2005, 59) and a desire for social belonging, or "recognition and redistribution" (Fraser 1997, 16). As Mercedez explained in our interview:

> *Sort of a multilayered provocation, that has an aim to connect us all […] Today the risks are different than they were for dizelaši, it has to do with the image, the reputation. 'Gas', a*

contemporary word for Serbian spite, yet it's a global thing right now, I think, is how you motivate yourself from where you're at. I know many people who are ashamed of the way they live their lives and feel the need to present a toned-down version of themselves. They feel guilty for enjoying the things that let them feel free. I wanted to make people listen, the ones who think they are so much better, so I built this vulgar, loud, unrefined façade, a trap I caught them in, to show them their own superficiality of only seeing me through this visual prism and as a stereotype. And I succeeded in a way, Diesel is the mainstream now. (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022*)*

"The multilayered provocation" refers to the rearranging of the liberal-elitist meaning and value systems, which has for an aim "to connect us all", by defining the cultural distinction (by implication, the social division based on cultural differences) as secondary to class inequality. That is, the neo-Diesel's revival of the *Diesel* subculture (visual, discursive) can be understood as a "form of resistance in which experienced contradictions and objections to the ruling ideology are obliquely represented in style" (Hebdige 1979, 133). Considering that in the neo-Diesel, youth-cultural perspective this 'contradiction' is found in the liberal-elitist understanding of the causality between class and culture, the employment of *Diesel* aims at removing the primacy cultural division, not by obliterating difference in cultural expression *per se*, but defining it as a product of class divisions. Moreover, in Mercedez' view, the importance of "reputation" among precarious youths is a result of the mirroring effect that the official Serbian culture has on the "subordinate" (Jansen 2006, 273), youth culture, and functions on the basis of psycho-emotional ("ashamed","feel guilty") regulation, whereby precarious, young people "feel the need to present a tone-downed version of themselves", and, thus, betray their own 'authentic' personhood (desire, demand, need). The rapper further argues that, by realizing the artificiality of the official cultural norms (defining the 'proper' personhood expression), and the "superficiality" of the "stereotyped" vilification of the precarious youth's 'authentic' personhood expression, the precarious youths may feel less isolated and inadequate (the negotiation of communal and national belonging).

To further understand the role of the *Diesel* subculture in the contemporary neo-Diesel youth-cultural discourse, it is necessary to consult theoretical perspectives which clarify the relationship between neoliberalism and culture (Murray 1999, Brown 2006, Wacquant 2012).

Accordingly, what the neoliberal shift, described succinctly in Wendy Brown's thesis of "culturalization of political struggles/ depoliticization of sources of political problems" (Brown 2006, 16), implies is the extension of the idea of proper personhood "as an ideal imperative to all" (Skeggs 2011, 499). In other words, the commencing of the "Serbian cultural war" and the related rise of 'auto-colonial' discourse in the late 1990s, but also the rise of the *Diesel* subculture and its need for social domination (via style), can be understood as the result of the described neo-liberal shift. Additionally, what this paper argues is that, the fact of the 2000s discursive proliferation of the liberal-elitist definition of 'proper' personhood expression (and vilification of alternative cultural expressions), despite the absence of institutions responsible for monitoring of cultural consumption, can be explained as conditioned by the cultural elite's socio-economic interests (the production, promotion, and trading of high-cultural products), whereby 'neo-' in neoliberalism refers "precisely to the ways in which it involves a reengineering and redeployment of the state as the core agency" for ruling and fabrication of "the subjectivities, social relations and collective representations suited to realizing markets" (Wacquant 2012, 67). Furthermore, as is established in the first chapter, through the process of elitist self-subjectification, economic inequalities are reinterpreted as a result of individual choices whereby "wealth is 'earned' and poverty is 'deserved'" (Skeggs 2011, 505). This is precisely why the 1990s *dizelaši* served as inspiration for Mercedez and the neo-Diesel youth culture: these youths symbolize the violation of the elitist demand for hierarchical ordering of both social groups and their respective cultural expressions, but also represent the early (local) attempt at the subaltern reinterpretation of the individualist, neoliberal cultural framework (Delić 2011c). Analogous to NCFM and turbo-folk music styles, *dizelaši* embodied the presence of the *rurban*, or *seljačko* (lit. "peasantly"= in a peasant manner), in the urban context (the liberal-elitist accusation) but also the mixing of the contemporary (neo-liberal: individualist, unending self-upgrading through commodities) and the traditional/ folk (distrust in the state institutions, "tribal identification with the neighborhood crew"). As already established in the introductory section of this chapter, as the first generation of the working-class youths following the collapse of the socialist state, the *dizelaši* developed a materialistic outlook, a taste for expensive and flashy clothes, cars, and

technical gadgets, as well as antagonism towards the intellectual ability in favor of physical strength and prioritizing of comfort over productivity (hence, sportswear) (Musić and Vukčević 2017). In the words of Tricia Rose (1994, 82), the *dizelaši* "negotiated [the reality of economic and cultural impoverishment] by adopting the neoliberal worldview for personal benefits", which is most evident in their desire for domination (Delić 2011c), as opposed to their dominated social location. This correlates to Mercedez' description of Juice, an older generation Serbian rapper and a pioneer of linking rap music to the *Diesel* subculture:

> *Juice was extremely hated, even though he wasn't very explicit at all, like talking about drugs and sex. He was hated simply because he had a winner's attitude, confident and pompous. A confrontational attitude, meaning that you don't back up, you attack, and you win, that's how you move the boundaries, move the whole story to another level.* (Mercedez 2015)

Since the *Diesel* subculture is viewed as the most successful effort toward westernization (Kovačević 2018), due to its appropriation of Western commodities (clothes, cars, other gadgets), music genres, and a materialistic, Western commodity-oriented relationality, what is revealed in the elitist stigmatization of *dizelaši*, aside from their demand for hierarchization of cultural (personhood) expression, is the elite's need for social differentiation (Komnenović and Unverdorben 2010). In the neo-Diesel perspective, the *dizelaši* represent a denial of the elitist self-subjectification efforts, and a subcultural blueprint for the lower-class person's appropriation of the personhood characteristics officially associated with 'the subject of value', or "the subject of entitlement, acquisition, and appropriation, who moves across social space with ease" (Skeggs 2011, 504). In the context of contemporary *gassers* and the neo-Diesel discourse, this appropriation is evident in their demand for luxury, comfortable living, and excessive consumption; and can be read as an element of the adopted neoliberal worldview, the promise (in the neo-Diesel rendition, demand instead of promise) of equal access to life-betterment and opportunity to all people. In Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary, this is understood as *the power of the attitude* (or *hood elitism)* strategy, whereby the rapper applies her strategic poetics to the mimetic appropriation of the self-important attitude of 'the subject of value' and uses it as a dialectical lens to "bend visions of reality so as to both blend and

distinguish" (Watts 1997, 55) the perspective in which cultural is primary to class (the elite) and the one where class is primary to culture (the neo-Diesel), or, differences between "street and decent orientations" (ibid., 52.) (e.g., "Dinars, marks, kunas, it only makes sense/ To swear by my own checks/ I don't understand the poor", "Girl Gang", 2019; "You can't sit with us, if you have no money/ You can't sit with us, you gotta bad reputation/ and that Versace is fake […]/ Prohibited for civilians/ If you don't have the right mentality, no use of your money and entrance ticket/ You don't have our mentality, street credibility/ In with the big fish/ Out with the petty souls", "Can't sit with us", 2016). In relation to this, during the impromptu, focus-group interview that occurred outside of the club where Mercedez was having a gig, one of the gathered boys noted the following:

> *She won't tell some hotheaded underage teen that he is a tripped-out idiot, as much as won't tell a girl who's decided to use her sexuality for social advancement: "go home and sleep, you whore!". She won't bash someone's desire to feel good and look stylish-she understands that we are all, willy-nilly, on the same side, "the system creates you, then fights you". And that each of us, if I can put it this way, is made to confront the situation we are placed in. The great majority of rap fans respect that daily dose of madness and bitchiness, but they also understand the collective significance [sic] of the fact that through the real MC, at least a thousand people are speaking*. (male fan, personal communication, October 11, 2021)

As evidenced in the above, fan account, using the *power of the attitude* strategy, the rapper, at least for the duration of the song, renders the elitist 'discursive practices of othering' ineffective regarding the process of youth-cultural 'personhood formation'. Instead of reproducing the liberal-elitist exclusionary definition of authentic, Mercedez embraces a culturally hybrid model as the new 'authentic', that of being "in-between" (Feixa and Nilan 2006, 2) the West and the East, the rural and the urban, the local and the global, traditional and contemporary, neoliberal/neoconservative and anti-liberal, that is, of occupying a liminal value-space. Finally, in the neo-Diesel perspective, the liberal-elitist notion of authenticity is, as we have seen, understood as 'hypocritical', exclusionary, and a tool for social division. From a theoretical perspective, the liberal-elitist conceptualization of authenticity can be understood as being fueled by its "recognition of differences" with an aim to "de-politicize

and translate them into a catalogue of identities" (Komnenović and Unverdorben 2019), then organize them in a hierarchical cultural order, and use this hierarchical construction as a referential framework for the classification (separation) of different social groups (e.g., *gaseri* look like *dizelaši*, thus they are deviant elements of youth, or "inauthentic", Žolt 2021) ; hence providing "a strict and servile definition of the possible" (Badiou 2008, 50). Consequently, Mercedez' strategic poetics rearranges the principles at the basis of the elitist hierarchical, cultural construction in order to reveal its purposeful artificiality and tailor a more inclusive notion of authenticity that rests on "self-trust", critical awareness of socio-economic conditions, and "experimentation" (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022), or in the rapper's own words:

> *You take the things generally propagated and you pull them to the opposite side. That's what we mean by being extreme, what we call excessive exaggeration, to simply pull things towards some, for us, acceptable middle ground.* (Mercedez 2016)

As established in the previous chapter, the "acceptable middle ground" refers to a process of youth-cultural negotiation of the elite's 'definition of the possible' through the *Pendulum technique* or *Excessive Exaggeration* strategy, whereby precarious Serbian youth utilize pop-cultural publicity of *trepfolk* to enter the struggle over symbolic power of 'defining the possible'. Having established the neo-Diesel relationship to the 1990s *Diesel* subculture, I briefly return to the analysis of the two excerpts from Mercedez' lyrical content, with an aim to provide a more detailed illustration of the strategic poetics of the rapper's *trepfolk* imaginary, used for the rearranging of the liberal-elitist *culture-then-class* discourse, and the related, neo-Diesel notion of 'authentic' personhood expression.

The neo-Diesel self-subjectification: Mercedez' strategic poetics and the neo-Diesel 'authenticity'

The following excerpt testifies to the highly contradictory nature of the neo-Diesel conceptualization of authenticity, which is reflected in Mercedez' use of poetic strategies as well, namely, *the power of the attitude, defiant entertainment* (or, *entertainment as political*

attitude), and *ECF* (*Experimentation>Creativity>Freedom*) or *DDNG* (*one's desire, demand, and need as guidance*) (the last one has only been mentioned in relation to the first two. In my discursive analysis of the Mercedez' lyrical content, as well as of the rapper's and the precarious youth's interview responses, I inferred that all strategies are tightly intertwined, are used concomitantly or separately, and are composed of different sub-strategies that address various, yet interconnected aspects of personhood regarding economic inequality and cultural distinction (nationality, class location, and gender).

> *We brought back the 90s, trendsetters/ Look at those civilian chicks/ sneakers and tracksuits, laughable/ Still, you're too moderate/ Cause the colors on the outside/ Can't hide those blank souls of yours/ I'm not saying they bad/ I'm saying they're nothing/ They think they're gassers/ But they need a gas mask/ My new car smells like dirty money/ My clothes smell like magnetism/ I'm of that kind which at the smell of money/ Catches up with those in the front/ And gives no fuck who stays behind.* ("K.S.J.G", Lacku, Dizzy, Mimi Mercedez 2019)[34]

In the "K.S. J.G" song, Mercedez employs the strategy of *the power of the attitude,* or *hood elitism* strategy, used for the mimetic appropriation of the elitism of dominant social layers (subcultural elitism) to diminish the effects that the elitist exclusionary discourse has on the precarious, youth's formation of 'authentic' personhood (via instilling the feelings of shame, guilt and self-doubt). Notably, the first line is a declaration of a neo-Diesel relationship towards the *Diesel* subculture, with the line "we brought back the 90s", the rapper positions her gang ("we") as the authentic subjects or representatives of this reinvigorated subculture. Then, the line "look at those civilian chicks, sneakers and tracksuits" defines the *Diesel* subcultural capital ("sneakers and tracksuits") as incompatible with the "civilian" sociality, that is, inauthentic in the outsider's appropriation. This way, the rapper appropriates the 'rurban proposition' described in the first chapter (in relation to the 'auto-colonial' discourse), mirroring the elitist exclusionary discursive strategy of 'wrong urbanization'. That is, the wanna-be urban with clear signs of essential rurality is translated into the wanna-be *dizelaš* with clear signs of essentially being a *civilian*. But, instead of the elitist devaluation of 'excessive embellishments' of mass-consumed pop-folk styles (NCFM and turbo-folk) as

[34] "K.S.J.G" is an acronym which translates to "Kome Smeta Jak Gas" or "Anybody Gotta Problem with Strong Gas".

'Orientalist kitsch' and a flashy proof of the 'rurban' population's lack of taste (Hofman 2013, Vidić-Rasmussen 1995), Mercedez *accuses* "civilian chicks" of being "too moderate", and of being inauthentically, *improperly* neo-Diesel. Moreover, the "cause the colors on the outside, can't hide those blank souls of yours" line exemplifies Mercedez' employment of auto-Balkanization or auto-exoticization as a sub-strategy of *the power of the attitude* strategy (i.e., I may be ignorant and poor but at least I have soul), which is a discursive response to the Balkanist discourse of the Serbian cultural elites, whereby the lower social layers are defined as incompatible with the Western idea of modernity. Yet, using auto-balkanization, the rapper simultaneously de-essentializes this cultural divide between the rich and the poor by resolutely defining the *Diesel subculture* as the property of the precarious youths' cultural heritage: for this reason, the "civilian['s]" appropriation of the neo-Diesel is doomed to be inauthentic, as their "blank souls" are visible even under all the *excessive embellishment* of the *Diesel*-inspired outfit. As we have seen in the introductory chapter, this application of the word "civilian" draws its meanings from the neo-Diesel taxonomy of social groups which classifies the Serbian population into two categories: *civilians* and *tough heads/gassers*. In our interview, I asked Mercedez to explain her earlier statement, in relation to the neo-Diesel notion of authenticity, "Let them copy the strength of my attitude, but develop their own meanings to support it", to which the rapper replied:

> *The best thing you can do for yourself is to believe in your potential […] make an overestimation, what the hell does anybody else know of your power? Flex and let others flex, I'd say. Everybody can at least try, most will probably fail [laughs]. It's about not settling for any definition of yourself. I see as my purpose to confront people with how great their capabilities are and actually motivate them to explore and put them to use [capabilities]. […] These feelings of shame and fear, they are about the feeling you have a right to do something, you know? They can immobilize a person, make them think they are some kind of cultural police, for themselves and others. There is no creativity, no experimentation, and no freedom in living like that. That's the nineties [creativity, experimentation, and freedom]. That's why they're coming back. Our [neo-Diesel] ideology is that of having no shame about your life choices and decisions, about categorically distrusting moral norms [sic]. That's the core of self-motivation, self-trust […] to realize your responsibility to not be a slave to whatever people pigeon-hole you to be. We are being with subjective opinions, we're not*

> *God or some collective consciousness. We can only try and understand other's opinion in order to realize it's not the only one, […] but having opinion is what gives you a sense of meaningful life.* (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022)

The idea of "having no shame about [one's] life choices and decisions" and "categorically distrusting moral norms [sic]", the radical self-trust, is the core feature of the neo-Diesel construction of 'authenticity'. As the rapper explains, the inhibitory feelings of "fear and shame" are overcome only through "flexing [and] making an overestimation" of one's personhood capabilities, because the source of these feelings lies in the lack of entitlement felt by the precarious personhood, "the feeling that you have right to something". In the spirit of Mercedez refusal of the politics of victimization, the rapper understands the first step toward "self-motivation" (personhood empowerment) is the realization of one's "responsibility to not slave to whatever other people pigeon-hole you to be" (the liberal-elitist vilification. In other words, in Mercedez' rendition of the neo-Diesel, youth-cultural notion of 'authenticity', the idea of bottom-up emancipation implies creative experimentation with one's personhood expression, that is, the precondition to "putting [one's] capabilities to use" is the establishment of the awareness of one's capabilities through "experimentation". What is evident in Mercedez' explanation is that the neo-Diesel conceptualization of 'authentic' personhood expression is closely tied to the person's *attitude* (the ability to "make an overestimation of [one's] power]) that is, how a person presents oneself to others (*the power of the attitude)*. As Mercedez puts it, "all the things we [as humans] do, we do them to be acknowledged by some group whom you want acceptance from", which per se is not an obstacle, but a "basic human need" (Mercedez 2020). In the rapper's view, the 'authentic' personhood expression implies truthfulness to one's desires, creative and experimental approach to life, and freedom from the external and established definition of a 'proper' lifestyle ("moral norms"). However, as humans are social and interactive beings that necessitate an outside "reaction", to live authentically is a task fully accomplished only through the *expression of one's 'authentic' personhood*, that is, one's truth, one's desires, and opinions, in interactions with other people. Thus, the relationship between 'authentic' personhood and a strong attitude is a tautological one, as the strength of one's attitude lies in expressing one's 'authentic' personhood (as

opposed to a ‘civilian’ personhood), and the life is lived authentically only if the person is able to present one’s ‘authentic’ personhood by having a self-assured attitude in interaction with other persons. Furthermore, with the line “I’m not saying they’re bad, I’m saying their nothing” (subcultural elitism or *hood elitism)*, Mercedez, again, responds to the cultural elite’s discursive class-othering (*low-cultural* as *non-cultural*, non-existent), which is illustrated in the liberal-elitist descriptions of turbo-folk as “total cancellation of aesthetic and moral values” (Tasić 2014). Through mimetic appropriation of the attitude of the ‘subject of value’, the rapper positions herself as the cultural authority on behalf of the neo-Diesel youth culture, but instead of defining *civilians* as “bad” and inferior, she strengthens her argument (attitude) through a hyperbolized negative evaluation of *civilians* as “nothing”, a total cancellation of *Diesel* values. Moreover, the line “they think they are gassers but they need a gas mask” demonstrates how quickly the rapper changes the tone of her lyrics inside one verse. Briefly breaking from the *power of the attitude* strategy, Mercedez now addresses the precarious youths who are privy to the neo-Diesel meaning system, clarifying that *civilians* may appear on the outside as gassers but are still “outside of [the precarious youth’s] storyline” (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022), as the intruders whose *weak attitude* reveals their elitist conditioning (sociality). In the remaining lines, Mercedez switches back to the *power of the attitude/ hood elitism* strategy. With the lines “I’m of that kind which, at the smell of money/ catches up with those in the front/ and gives no fuck who stays behind”, the rapper’s use of the first-person narration could be understood as expressing a critical stance toward the Serbian liberal elites, blaming them for embracing financial capitalism (reversing the liberal-elitist blaming of the mass sociality for societal downfall, from the 1990s onward), the privatization of the national industry and the deregulation of the Serbian financial markets, or simply, as describing the profit- oriented competitiveness of the capitalist society. Additionally, the line “and gives no fuck who stays behind” could be understood as a reference to the fact that the early 2000s privatizations led to the highest-recorded level of unemployment in the country (Papović and Pejović 2015), which, of course, contributed to the widespread precarity in Serbia. “Those in the front” could be seen to represent foreign (mostly Western) investors, while “who stays behind” refers to the main victims of the 2000s austerity measures, the members of the Serbian working class. As previously discussed, in the neo-

Diesel youth-cultural narrative, "to live authentically" implies the adoption of a critical understanding of the mechanism operating behind one's own socio-economic precarity.

Stoja: *We are always the target of the demi-monde/ Because it's clear we are the center of the world/*

Mercedez: *The world is turning around us/ And when I let my voice be heard/ The world pauses for a second/ And when I say, go, it starts turning again/ World is turning around us and when I say "gas"/ The world turns around once more and revs for me/ We are the life's purpose/ We who aren't afraid/ We who aren't ashamed/ Without us it would all be dark/ cause I can roll up anything/ Or turn it to dust.* ("The world is turning around us", Mercedez and Stoja, 2019)

The above excerpt was taken from the song "World is turning around us", which is one of the musical collaborations Mercedez has done with a renowned (or notorious) turbo-folk star, Stoja. I chose this excerpt because it includes both the rapper's *hood elitism* and *ECF/ DDNG* strategy.[35] Notably, the line "target of the demi-world", sang by a turbo-folk singer who is most widely recognizable for her "voluminous, nasal alto and melismatic ornamentation" (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 9) or, in the elitist liberal discourse, 'Oriental screaming',[36] represents a symbolic reversal of the elitist cultural (and social) hierarchization, whereby the Serbian (cultural) elites are the "demi-monde" which obsessively "target" those who are "the center of the world", the main subscribers of the turbo-folk sociality-*the broad masses of the working-class people.* Besides appropriating the entitled, superior attitude of the 'subject of value', with the bar "the world is turning around us", Mercedez compares the precarious social layers (or the labor force) with the Sun, the source of light and heat, or solar energy. Moreover, the lines "when I let my voice be heard, the world pauses for a second/ And when I say go, it starts again" serve to ascribe importance to the voiced desires, demands, and needs of the working-class *mass* (sub-strategy: *trepfolk as therapeutic),* expressing the idea that the labor force *makes the world go round,* consequently, if persons constituting labor force

[35] The lyrics for the song were written by Mimi Mercedez.

[36] Namely, Stoja sued a famous Serbian actor and film producer, Dragan Bjelogrlić, for public defamation after the actor stated the following on live TV: "If you don't want your kids looking like Stoja and other paid witnesses, better pay the TV subscription [and watch the TV series I produced and stared in]". Stoja won the lawsuit and received five thousand euros in compensation. Source: https://www.kurir.rs/stars/3468633/vidimo-se-na-sudu-najvece-tuzibabe-na-estradi-evo-koliko-vredi-njihov-ugled-i-cast

prioritized their desires, demands, and needs, or "let [their} voice be heard", the world would stop at their command. Thus, positioning *the mass* at "the center of the world" serves both to empower precarious personhood, but also for Mercedez to position herself, and neo-Diesel youth culture, ideologically as "loyal to the truth we see among our people" (Gudroslav 2016). Additionally, the bar "when I say 'gas', the world turns around once more and revs for me" points to the neo-Diesel idea of *gassing oneself up* ("izgrasirati se") as self-motivation, which is inextricable from the precarious (young) person's daily experience. In relation to this, when I asked Darko Delić (the frontman of *Bombs of the Nineties)* if he can explain the neo-Diesel meaning of *gas* in one sentence, he responded the following:

When your motif for waking up in the morning isn't the justification of your [high] social status or your loyalty to social propriety, when you are cornered both by economic and cultural destitution, you get so depressed and dark-minded that you develop a survival skill, and that survival skill is called gas. When you don't wanna open your eyes and see the state of your neighborhood, but you gotta, that's gas. (Delić, personal communication, March 4, 2022)

Thus, *gas* is, in a way, synonymous to Mercedez' idea of 'strong attitude' or, better yet, a tactical substitution. As previously established, to be 'authentic' is to follow your desires, demands, and needs. However, precarious personhood is often unable to realize its authenticity fully due to economic insecurity (the imperative to sacrifice one's DDN in order to earn their livelihood) implied in the precarious person's class location, and is, thus, left with an option of *gassing oneself up.* Moreover, the bar "we are the life's purpose, we who aren't afraid, we who aren't ashamed, without us would all be dark", which is illustrative of the *radical self-belief* sub-strategy (of DDNR), again, represents a commentary on the liberal-elitist idea of progress and cultural advancement through unending self-betterment. As an alternative, Mercedez suggests that "the life's purpose" is the overcoming of inhibitory emotions (fear and shame), that cloud and darken one's vision and imagination ("responsibility to not slave to whatever people pigeon-hole you to be"). In other words, in Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary, negative, inhibitory feelings such as fear and shame result both from the precarious living conditions (class inequality) and the elitist, cultural devaluation of

the precarious personhood (cultural class-othering). The overcoming of these feelings by *gassing yourself up* (in a manner demonstrated in the song), is pre-conditional to establishing an 'authentic' mode of personhood expression, but also for the discontinuation of the existing class relations.

Finally, we see how the neo-Diesel conceptualization of the relationship between economic inequality and cultural distinction is oppositional (in its criticism) to the elitist one, but also harmonious in their appropriation of neo-liberal ideology (competitiveness, "aspiration for the best", self-upgrading through commodities, etc.). Although critical of the capitalist relations of power (class inequality) and the neoliberal culturalization of political struggles, the neo-Diesel notion of authenticity as presented in Mercedez lyrics (especially the insistence on economic mobility as freedom), is undoubtedly connected to the "neo-liberal policy [of] class decomposition through individualization" (Tyler 2015, 499), as its consequence. However, as Imogen Tyler further suggests, the result of the class decomposition is "that people may no longer recognize themselves as belonging to an existing social class or positively identify with historic class names" (ibid.). Considering Mercedez' statement that "for the people who are unprotected by the state, whom the law is turned against, the recognition of equality before the law means nothing, as true equality is not accomplishable in the system based on inequality" (Mercedez 2016), it can be argued that the social significance of Mercedez' music-making lies exactly in its surfacing of certain mechanisms underlying class relations, in a popular and entertaining form. Drawing from Paul Willis' (1977) idea of "relative autonomy of culture", whereby "structural determinations act, not by direct mechanical effect, but by mediation through the cultural level" (174), I propose that Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary is neo-liberal in its method (insistence on cultural empowerment), but not in its ideological content (critical of the cultural reproduction of economic classes/ critical of the elitist culturalization of economic inequality). In other words, the reason that the neo-Diesel youth cultural discourse, as represented in Mimi Mercedez' music-making, appears harmonious with the neo-liberal, cultural discourse (in its focus on cultural instead of political empowerment), is because, to "gain entry into cultures core", this unofficial discourse has to appropriate certain aspects of the official cultural discourse (Harkness 2013, 283-298). That is, by using a form familiar to

the mass of Serbian precarious youths (*trepfolk)*, yet in correspondence with the liberal-elitist cultural framework (mimetic appropriation of the dominant discursive strategies), to tackle the relationship between economic inequality and cultural distinction, Mercedez succeeds in her mission to empower "those that live like her" (Mercedez 2020) by "revealing a multilayered problematic of the most current situation that includes the present, recycled heritage of the past and projections for the future" (Ivić 2015, 98). In relation to this, the precarious youth's "need for positive attention" (Bullen and Kenway 2015, 59) stems from their "positional suffering" which is a result of the liberal-elitist devaluation of their personhood accomplished through, what Imogen Tyler (2015) phrases as, "discursive practices of othering" (501), or the elitist misrecognition of the youth's socio-economic position. That is, the precarious social position of Serbian youths implies both economic and cultural impoverishment, and, as such, necessitates both "redistribution and recognition" (Fraser 1997, 16, Murray 1999. Underlying the neo-Diesel search for an authentic mode of personhood expression as a path to cultural empowerment, is a rationalizing that is founded on the precarious youth's need to "both claim and deny their specificity" (ibid.). As Tricia Rose reminds us, "in every region, hip hop articulates a sense of entitlement, and takes pleasure in aggressive insubordination" (1994, 84). In this effort, trepfolk's combination of hip hop culture, as analogous to the 1990s *Diesel* subculture, and turbo-folk music genre, as one of the main elements of the *Diesel* cultural expression, allows for the affirmation of specificity and local character of the neo-Diesel cultural forms and expressions, as well as their place in the global network of precarious, youth cultures.

From the above, it is clear that Mimi Mercedez' rendition of the neo-Diesel notion of authenticity implies the subordinate nature of the neo-Diesel discourse, its efforts toward bottom-up legitimization of precarious personhood only emphasizes the relatively autonomous relationship that this youth-cultural discourse has with the Serbian hegemonic discourse (Jansen 2006). The struggle over cultural capital, that is, over the definition of 'authentic' personhood expression, occurring between the official, Serbian cultural discourse (institutional discourse, and the unofficial, neo-Diesel, youth-cultural discourse (pop-cultural discourse-*trepfolk*), revolves around contesting definitions of the relationship between class and culture.

More specifically, the evidence presented has shown that the neo-Diesel, youth-cultural effort toward negotiation of communal and national belonging could be understood as the struggle to define class inequality as the source of cultural distinction, not vice versa.

Chapter Three: 'Femimism': the looks and outlooks of the Serbian ratchet

> *My biggest trip is to remove that stigma, you know, cause it's really not about [biological] sex at all. That bullshit, "hey, women, free yourselves", can also be applied to men. I think I am more open than most of the male rappers. I see those comments online, "if she were a guy, you'd love him". No, it's not about that at all. The point is in the winner's attitude, that's when your gender become unimportant in our society, if you know how to assert yourself as powerful. If you have the means, any means, you should use them to exit the situation you don't like. Become aware of your responsibility to do this, is what gives you freedom […] The women I talk about are raunchy skanks [name of the album], of course. The chicks who dig that the attitude is what matters.* (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022)

In the above quote, we see how Mimi Mercedez treats cultural norms related to gender, as the rapper proposes that cultural oppression based on gender identity, specifically the insecurities and negative experiences arising from the official definition of 'proper' femininity expression ("situation you don't like") can be overcome through "asserting yourself as powerful" using the "means" available to you. In other words, Mercedez defines the notion of 'strong attitude' as having emancipatory potential in terms of gender-power disbalance ("Looser's mentality, got no love for the pussies/ Cause it leads to nowhere/ Sort yourself out/ And calm your ego trip", "No Compassion", Mercedez 2016), while rejecting self-victimized attituded as voluntary self-subjugation ("Pussies, I piss on your two-faced living/ My aim is to be the only boss of me", "MMM", Mercedez 2014). The idea of using "any means available" refers both to an acquirement of a self-confident personhood expression ("the attitude"), but also instrumentalization of one's sexuality. The latter, the instrumentalization of sexuality (bodily autonomy, by implication), represents a complex issue in Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary. On the one hand, Mercedez understands participation in sex work, not as a result of the lack of choice, but as a choice to exit precarious working conditions in a difficult way ("[sex work] is really not for everybody, it's hard to come out of that thing without damage", Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022), refusing the situation of material immobility and demanding comfortable living (high wages, shorter working hours). In other words, Mercedez defines economic independence as preconditional to 'authentic' living, and, from the perspective of precarious, youth woman, sex work is one of the few options allowing that. However, Mercedez occupies a different stance toward the notion of utilizing one's sexuality for social advancement, whereby sexual promiscuity (enjoying one'self) is tolerated only if it does not impede on interpersonal relationships (loyalty, trust, courage) ("Chicks beg for a slap/ Living by the rule, taken man is twice as sweet", Pussy Syndrome, Mercedez 2016). In the analysis of Mercedez' representation of an 'authentic', precarious (young) womanhood, I will examine the manner in which Mercedez confronts the injustices arising from the intersection of class and gender.

Firstly, I will examine Mimi Mercedez' music-making in order to demonstrate how the rapper's uses the *power of the attitude* strategy in her construction of the neo-Diesel, alternative femininity. In relation to this, in the second subchapter I will investigate how Mimi

Mercedez, and the neo-Diesel youth culture, understand the intersection of gender and class-cultural identity, especially focusing on the rapper's problematization of the instrumentalization of bodily autonomy (sexuality, physical strength) for economic advancement on behalf of the precarious youth.

I will analyze Mimi Mercedez' employment of *poetic strategies* in her construction of gender identity in relation to the rapper's effort to represent the neo-Diesel formation of an 'authentic personhood expression relying on the following theoretical framework: the concept of masculine/feminine side of femininity/masculinity (Hall 1997), situational authenticity (Harkness 2013), use of capital at hand (Bullen and Kenway 2005), sex as power (Alexander 1987, Zatz 1997), sexuality and glamour as sites for struggle over value, demand for decadence (Skeggs 2011, Žižek 2000) perverse shift of perspective (Harraway 1991) dialectical relationship of the gangster rap narrative (Watts 1997) *, übermateriality* of sex work (Ivić 2015), post-socialist, feminine, libidinal entrepreneurship (Jelača 2015), sexuality, race and gender as markers of social difference in a class society (Ebert 2005). As we have seen in the previous chapters, the liberal-elitist understanding of the causal relationship between class and culture defined class inequality not as the source, but a reflection of cultural distinction. In terms of gender identity, the essentialized conceptualizations of it, help maintain differences in class location invisible (Julie Bettie 2000). I argue that Mercedez' effort toward representation of an 'authentic', precarious (young) womanhood, implies the declaration of class, "as a category of belonging or causality" (ibid., 28) as primary to gender identity. Thus, this essay critically examines the neo-Diesel rejection of the politics of victimization, in relation to both the ideas of the liberal-feminism and the patriarchal, cultural norms in Serbia. Through my analysis of Mercedez' use of *poetic strategies,* I will demonstrate how the neo-Diesel youth-cultural discourse enables precarious, young women in Serbia to circumvent the exclusionary, paternalistic discourses (negative evaluation of the young, precarious woman's personhood), as well as the lack of access to the official avenues for the accrual of economic value.

The neo-Diesel anthropologization *of culture: The power of the (man's) attitude*

> *Feminism had its crucial place in the development of modern world, but now we need something much more progressive if we don't want to stagnate. I see women's emancipation not separate from that of men, and it is a part of a much bigger fight, the one against poverty and class inequality. I understand today's feminism as just another thing people use to distance themselves as some sort of elite, you know…And really, there are people who allow themselves to judge your way of fighting these 'women's problems' [or] the problems women encounter when they try to make a living on their own account. These people downgrade your way of fighting, while I know they grew up in different conditions, they had different families, different surroundings, yet they judge on the basis of their own lives […] They shit about feminism, using some vocabulary that is unfamiliar to me, in order to make judgments about me. That's why I declare myself as an anti-feminist, even though I think of myself as someone who contributes to the better [social] standing of women in this society [...] throughout my music career, I experienced classist attacks in the name of feminism. It's [Mercedez' music] the matter of a totally different perspective, the perspective of the women who grew up like me, and they have a representative now. Feminism of today demands equality in the heads of individuals, which means they believe that social consciousness can change regardless of the economic system, that's empty talk. So, when I was young, I made this, at the time, controversial Facebook post about 'femimism'[…] I'd say 'femimism' strives to find out the cause of inequality in the society and understand that men and women are not natural enemies, that they didn't invent gender roles as we know it yet must live through those roles […] we strive to understand the burdens of patriarchy experienced both by men and women, I'd even say that, culturally, Serbian men are under greater pressure than women in some things.* (Mercedez 2020)

In the final chapter of my thesis, I focus on the neo-Diesel notion of authentic mode of personhood expression in relation to the intersection of gender and class. More precisely, I will explore how Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary problematizes the socio-cultural power dynamics between genders by proposing an alternative expression of femininity (*the power of the male's attitude)*. As we see in the above quote, Mercedez understands gender identity, a person's internal and lived experience of gender, as inseparable from that person's class location, that is, from the broader political and economic organization of society. What is more, the rapper defines official feminism as "just another thing people use to distance themselves as some sort of elite", or, in other words, as a liberal-elitist cultural practice of class-othering, whereby the people "who grew up in different conditions", base their feminist

views of social justice on their own gender-experience, and "downgrade [lower class women's] way of fighting, […] using a vocabulary" that excludes the very women the liberal feminists vow to free. Moreover, Mercedez acknowledges the systemic basis of gender roles, admitting that she "experienced classist attacks in the name of feminism", and, as a way of distancing from the elitist reading of women's emancipation which she deems as generally inapplicable, the rapper devises a *neologism*- "femimism". Considering Mercedez' clarification, "femimism" is in close correspondence with the ideas propagated in the intersectional feminist theory, which addresses the issue of socio-economic and cultural marginalization as a product of complex, systemic, and multifaceted discrimination, taking into account differences among women themselves (class, nationality, ethnicity, race, physical appearance, gender, sexuality, language, and religion) (Crenshaw 1991). Additionally, "femimism" reflects the rapper's idea of using music-making as a medium for "mass-communication" (Mercedez, personal communication January 23, 2022), whereby the ideological content and aesthetic form of Mercedez' lyrics draw mainly from the "people's lexical index" (Vidić-Rasmussen 1995), in other words, the meaning and value system of the precarious youth sociality, which is, as we have already established, greatly embedded in the sociality of the broad *masses* of Serbian (working-class) people. I say this because, according to my ethnographic research, most Serbian youths (of both urban and rural origin), especially those who subscribe to the neo-Diesel discourse, associate feminist rhetoric with the liberal elitist discourse and view it more as a "marketing trick" (Mina, personal communication, November 21, 2021), than a liberation movement which "has any real significance in [their] lives" (Asja, personal communication, February 12, 2022). Having established the analysis of Mercedez' relationship to liberal feminism, I will now proceed to the analysis of the selected excerpts from Mercedez' lyrical content in order to demonstrate the neo-Diesel conceptualization of cultural empowerment (the formation of an 'authentic' expression) regarding the relationship between a person's gender and class location.

> *Life gives you no choice/ But it is you who creates them/ Be sure of one thing/ Every choice you make is wrong/ Yes, the times are hard/ But I am a difficult woman/ Young, self-assured, ready for anything/ Sometimes nice and respectful/ Sometimes a deranged bitch/ My psyche's rock-hard, working third shift ain't easy/ But I am a lioness, Belgradian little beast/ All I do, I*

> *do it/ To make boundaries disappear/ German quality, Serbian mentality/ Pussies, I piss on your hypocritic, little lives/ My goal is to be the only one who controlling myself/ That's why I work the nights/ And sleep all day/ Make my own money, live the way I desire/ I dig the men's shit, sex, rap, violence and cash/ You get me? Raise your hands/ We are a few but still toughest bitches around/ What makes the world turn, is what make my ass move/ And everybody's asking: Is it because of those like me/ That our country's falling apart?/ Or is it the fuck-up country that creates people like me?/ Some say I'm mad/ Some say, the chick's got balls/ But I am just a sister, Piggy from the Hood/ That knows if you want something outta this life/ You gotta forget the words shame and fear/ 'Cause pain goes away/ Reputation is forever/ Those that never try their luck/ Never get to know what's it's like/ Only money cultivates and motivates me/ You can't fool me pretending you're some tough bitch/ 'Cause my bitches eat the likes of you as appetizers/ Haughty family of shaved pussies/ I am the dearest sister out there and there's no way I can't stop.* ("MMM", Mercedez 2014)

The above song illustrates two of Mercedez' poetic strategies, *the power of the attitude* and *DDNG.* As we have seen in the previous chapters, Mercedez employs the *power of the attitude* strategy in her mimetic appropriation of the (attitude) characteristics associated with the 'subject of value' (entitlement, acquisitiveness, superiority) in order to attach value to the marginalized, youth personhood the rapper *represents.* In this case, the 'subject of value' is the male-performing personhood (assertiveness, acquisitiveness as ability to provide, aggressiveness, comradeship). Firstly, Mercedez defines the external, material conditions for personhood formation, pointing to a lack of choice which is resolved by "creating choices" on your own, but the rapper quickly reminds the listener, that there are no absolutely good or bad choices but that "each choice you make is wrong", which could be understood as the rapper's distancing from a teleological perspective of the liberal-elitist understanding of socio-historical processes (The existence of absolute Good and absolute Evil, implied in the Balkanist and 'auto-colonial' discourses), which I discussed throughout the first chapter. Additionally, Mercedez declares the fear and shame of making a "wrong choice" as inhibitory to the process of realizing one's desires and empowering one's personhood, "if you want something outta this life, you gotta forget the words fear and shame". Moreover, Mercedez refuses the idea of women as passive, insecure, emotionally unstable, and dependent, and, in describing herself as "young, self-assured and ready for anything", the rapper could be seen as discarding the idea self-victimization being a tool for cultural empowerment, in favor of agentive (acquisition, entitlement, assertiveness) womanhood (e.g., "I'm unmoved by all your

sad stories/ You wanna be saved, yes/ But even God don't fuck with the pussies/ You play your pathetic game of tears/ I'm used to taking what I want", "W/o Mercy", Mercedez 2016). The line "sometimes nice and respectful, sometimes a deranged bitch" exemplifies the *DDNR* strategy (prioritizing of one's authentic needs and desires, by implication also the expression of authentic feelings), whereby Mercedez rejects the patriarchal binary opposition of mother ("*nice and respectful*")/ whore ("deranged bitch"), replacing it with the image of a woman who freely expresses her emotional reaction to material reality ("my psyche's rock hard, third shift ain't easy"). Furthermore, Mercedez' self-assured attitude is a way towards self-motivation through rap's *therapeutical* and 'manifesting' properties ("words have power", Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022); by stating that the purpose of her efforts is "making borders disappear", referring, of course, to the cultural "borders" set by the liberal-elitist othering practices (i.e., "downgrading of [young, precarious woman's] way of fighting", ibid.), Mercedez ascribes purpose (authentic meaning) to her self-assured personhood expression. In the line "German quality, Serbian mentality", Mercedez draws directly from the *people'*s lexicon. More precisely, this bar is a commonly-used, auto-ironic phrase inspired by the stamp on imported goods ("German quality"), which is expanded with "Serbian mentality" part, in order to point to the disbalance in economic prosperity between Western Europe and the Balkans, but also to parody the liberal-elitist, stereotypical understanding of the lack of equal distribution of wealth as being a consequence of unequal cultural development among nations ("only money cultivates and motivates me"). In addition to this, "Serbian mentality" is a neo-Diesel, auto-balkanist reversal of the liberal-elitist, Euro-centric cultural hierarchy, as Mercedez herself explains:

> *It's a party mentality. It's about really indulging in luxury as opposed to working for shitty wages, and for us that luxury always meant imported, German or Italian-made goods, that's Diesel culture in four words. Plus, Serbian mentality is usually talked about as something negative, as regressive, you know? It's good to be self-critical, but that's bordering self-hate if you ask me.* (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022)

That is, the line "I piss on your hypocritical little lives, my goal is to be the only boss of me", means that Mercedez rejects the official hierarchization of cultural (personhood) expressions, and, instead, strives towards an 'authenticity'- to live according to her *desires, demands, and needs.* In order to accomplish this independency ("the only boss of me", "live the way I desire"), the rapper becomes her own provider by "working nights" and "sleep[ing] all-day". Thereby, once a precarious, young woman herself, Mercedez defines financial independence as preconditional to 'living authentically', but the lines also imply that numerous precarious youths make a living by working night shifts in the illegal job market, such as strip-tease and other forms of sex work, drug-dealing, etc. ("Hear the police siren howling through the night/ When you're racing the boys in blue/ I know you don't work what you schooled for", "Black bandana", Mercedez 2016). Furthermore, with the line "I dig the men's shit, sex, rap, violence, and cash", Mercedez, in a way, explicates the *power of the attitude* strategy, presenting an image of a woman who acknowledges the fact of a male-dominated environment, discards self-victimization as ineffective in the established social system, and prospers using her body as a tool for economic advancement (sex work), "what makes the world turn, is what makes my ass move". The verse "is it because of those like me/ that our country's falling apart/ Or is it the fuck-up country that creates people like me" represent the neo-Diesel *anthropologization* of culture, whereby Mercedez challenges the liberal-elitist "culturalization of political struggles" (Brown 2006, 16), by prioritizing *nurture over nature* (both in terms of class and gender, as she is representing a lower-class womanhood). In other words, the neo-Diesel *anthropologization* of culture is connected to the precarious youth's demand for communal and national belonging, and the related rearrangement of the liberal-elitist understanding of the causal relationship between economic inequality and cultural distinction. However, the line "'cause pain goes away/ reputation is forever", again, points to the neo-Diesel rejection of the politics of victimization and the idea of the importance of social image ("assert yourself as powerful […] who even knows anything about your capabilities?", Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022). That is, the precarious youths represented in Mercedez' lyrics, both men and women, reject pleading for equality, instead, due to the lack of recognition of their personhood value, they "try [their] luck" (*risk-taking* as youth-strategy) to socially advance by appropriating a strong, acquisitive,

and entitled attitude. In the context of the described 'auto-colonial' discursive tendencies of the official Serbian discourse, the word "reputation" carries the meaning of recuperating the negative value attached to the precarious, youth personhood, but also reflects the harmonious relationship that the neo-Diesel discourse has with the neoliberal individualization tactic and the imperative of competitiveness, embodied in, what Mercedez terms, "reputation wars" among the youths themselves, "that have to do with risk-taking" Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022). In terms of gender, "forget[ting] the words fear and shame" correlates to "reputation" in such a way that for young women to live authentically, which may include, for instance, sexual promiscuity (living according to one's desires), they must overcome the fear of being labeled, or socially ostracized. As Mercedez explains:

> *I find it very weird when I see girls, the ones who appear to have let go of those things [fear of judgment], have this trip, deep down, that nobody will be able to love them in a classical way if they act a certain way, be their partner in a classical way, and, you know, they wonder, in a way, if anybody's gonna wish to be their authority in a classical way.* (ibid.)

The sentiment expressed in the above quote, the inhibitory effects of the fear of departing from the patriarchal definition of femininity, is problematized in Mercedez' lyrics in various ways, one of them being: "I was taught to be bold and loyal/ to be a brother even though I'm a woman/ and the fact they hate us/ is what brings us together- Mimi, Olga, Maja!" ("Sound of Sirens", Mercedez 2019). Thus, in Mercedez' view, precarious, young women in Serbia face two-fold discrimination (being a girl and being lower-class), which they overcome firstly by prioritizing their *DDN*, and, secondly, by appropriating the attitude of the socially dominant personhood: the male-performing 'subject of value'. In addition to this, the last verse describes the importance of teamwork in the neo-Diesel imaginary, as well as the idea of female friendships as founded on loyalty and bravery, "my bitches eat the likes of you as appetizers", as opposed to the patriarchal notion of woman-on-woman interactions as competitive, jealous bickering over male attention. When I asked Mercedez to elaborate on the idea behind B.F.O.DJ. (Mercedez' girl crew), the rapper said the following:

> *The things we did together, it wasn't something that girls did on their own, at the time [the late 2000s, early 2010s]. It was totally out of tune with how things went on around here, for*

> *girls to be brothers to each other. We needed no outside directive and we never waited for someone to show us how to have fun. We lived like a little boy squad and that was our gas, to imitate the boys [...] the core of my music is teamwork, where you start from zero together and go forward together. That kind of community, because human interrelations are the most important thing. Nothing is above that, and the ways you can better those relations, to make them more and more right and of quality, that's crucial and that's how we grow.* (Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022)

The above response points to what we already established in the second chapter, which is the notion that Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary occupies a fine line between contrasting and mirroring the individualist imperative of neoliberal cultural discourse (the imperative of competitiveness). In the case of close relationships, the neo-Diesel youth culture departs from the individualist perspective, claiming that, what is necessary for the formation of 'authentic' personhood, besides communal support (belonging), is the responsibility that a person feels towards their *gang* (being loyal, honest, and trusting) and the joined effort "to better" those relations. Accordingly to this view, when Mercedez was asked in one of her media interviews to explain the lyrics- "never gonna complain about discrimination/ chicks don't get searched even when cops bust in/ fools protest, I use the situation at hand/ and when I get my period, haters lick my pussy ("The only thing I know", Mercedez 2013)- she responded the following:

> *Even discrimination is a call for action, that teaches you to be flexible, creative, and experiment with what you've got. In my crew, the social role you were given is not something you approach emotionally, and by having complexes, but by critical thinking […] nobody ever received equal treatment, you gotta make people listen to you.* (Mercedez 2016)

The "crew" in the above quote refers to friendships with both men and women, whereby bravery to face your own insecurities related to gender and class, is understood as preconditional to honest and lasting relationships ("Now, go ahead/ Leave a comment, say I'm a whore/ But my people know they're not hanging with a pussy/ Cause that's all that matters", "Pussy Syndrome", Mercedez 2015). Thus, in female friendships, Mercedez emphasizes the lack of competition and joined refusal of external judgment ("We are not polite/ So why pretend?/ In the toilets, with the boys, biting and choking/ We burn shit, then we split/ Hey,

let's pick up the boys who get high and then fight/ Fuck, I hate intervention unit, but we have the same taste in boys", "Only rave", Mercedez 2015; *Relax,bitch/ Loosen yo man's collar/ Even without a goalie, I'd hit the post/ Cus' I'm not up here for boy's pleasure/ I already told you that,* "Who's gonna stop me?", Mercedez 2015). While in friendships with men, Mercedez emphasizes shared experience of precarity and the ability to *man up. (*"My path isn't easier, shorter, or cheaper/ so, step on the gas", "Just drive", Mercedez 2017; "I am a woman/ 'cause of my pussy/ not 'cause I break my back for you/ And I know the only true heads/ Are those with the attitude and a story of their own", "All I know", Mercedez 2013). Having provided the analysis of Mercedez' lyrical content, regarding the issues of gender and class as connected to *the power of the attitude* and the prioritizing of one's *desires, demands, and needs,* I now proceed with the related theoretical discussion.

As was the case in previous chapters, the most useful theoretical framework for discussing the relationship between different aspects of social identity (gender) and one's class location, is Skeggs' (2011) understanding of differences in a person's sociality or relationality as embedded in different material conditions. Thereby, the way a person approaches the issue of women's emancipation depends on that person's lived experience (parent culture, schooling experience, peer relationships, sexual encounters, etc.). For Mercedez and the neo-Diesel, youth discourse the rapper subscribes to, gender identity is inseparable from class, that is, the construction of gender roles is inseparable from the broader, societal power dynamics and is to be viewed "only as a manifestation of class divisions" (Ivić 2015, 97). This is not to say that the neo-Diesel discourse ignores the gender-based inequalities altogether but that this youth discourse holds that all, allegedly incommensurable, natural differences between persons "become marker[s] of social difference only in a class society" (Ebert 2005, 38). For instance, during one of Mercedez' live performances of the song "Cleopatra" (2016), which is unquestionably a feminist song ("to strengthen my mind, I articulate my character, to strengthen my power, I manipulate with my pussy"), majority of the young men in the audience shouted these lyrics, holding their fists in the air and being visibly ecstatic. After finishing the song, Mercedez jokingly addressed the audience: "You go, boys, use the pussy that mamma gave ya!", to which all the young men around me laughed. This event illustrates

what Simon Firth (1996) noted in his study on the value of popular music, which is that social identity is a process that implies mobility, and that popular music "seems to be the key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and other, of the subjective in the objective" (110). In other words, Mercedez' *femimism* relies greatly on being promoted in *trepfolk*, because the genre's equal attractiveness to all genders, its entertaining character, and publicity allows for *public* recognition of the marginalized person's, in this case, the precarious woman's subjectivity (Bullen and Kenway 2005, Thornton 1995). That is, the subcultural capital (the power to represent as valid what is officially marginalized) of *trepfolk*, but also that of Mercedez' pop-cultural persona, "offer a conceptual framework [..] that acknowledges the multiplicity of viewpoints operating in social space" (ibid.), allowing for an atmosphere where young men are willing to not only hear the *female* perspective but find ways to identify with it. While this process may be slower in the communication between the neo-Diesel (precarious youth) and the official Serbian discourse (the cultural elites), I argue that, inside the precarious youth's cultural discourse and their communities ("crews"), the cultural gap between young men and women diminishes. More than being a consequence of the *trepfolk* representational faculty, this cultural narrowing of the gender divide owes to the manner in which female subjectivities are constructed in Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary.). Namely, decidedly against the politics of victimization, Mercedez does not "linger on the politics of identity or female subjectivities" (Ivić 2015, 94), but blends the dominant definitions of *manly* and *womanly* (Watts 1997), treating them more as performances than "natural and inevitable causal social forces" (Bettie 2000, 28). Following the analysis of Mercedez' lyrical content, the rapper's approaches the representation of precarious woman's perspective by "using the capital at hand" (Bullen and Kenway 2005, 49). Beside sexuality (sexual attractiveness as a form of capital, Skeggs 1997), which will be discussed in detail in the following pages, Mercedez recognizes *the power of the attitude* as a symbolic capital that allows young women to position themselves as men's equals by prioritizing their shared marginalization related to the precarious class location(as well as readiness to independently exit precarity), thus weakening the symbolic weight of the gender-related differences. This is possible because, in the neo-Diesel discourse, *the power of the attitude* is measured not only according to the level of the person's assertiveness, but also that person's readiness to be loyal

to their "crew", and courageous enough to both justify their 'strong attitude' by living authentically (*DDNG),*[37] as well as to approach their own marginalized position without self-victimization. In other words, what is vital for *the power of the attitude* strategy to be effective, is the person's trust in the validity of their own perception and evaluation of reality (subjectivity). Moreover, Mercedez' representation of the precarious, young woman as acquisitive and assertive, the rapper rejects the notion of "the historically defined ideal of femininity [as] middle class, passive and dependent" (Bullen and Kenway 2005, 56). Drawing from Julie Bettie's study (2000) on how working-class, high-school girls construct their gender, race, and class identities, in which the author postulates that "class struggle is waged more over modes of identity expression than over concrete political ideologies" (29), I propose that the significance of Mercedez' *trepfolk* representation of the precarious woman's subjectivity lies in the rapper's de-essentialization of gender through declaring the primacy of class identity and its cultural dimension that is shaped by the person's location in the social structure. That is, by approaching gender as a cultural identity that is performed in accordance with the person's class location, Mercedez' provides the precarious, young women with a framework for personhood empowerment (awareness of the causality of class.

Considering the neo-Diesel notion of authentic personhood expression, I argue that cultural empowerment is only possible if the person's formation of authenticity includes the awareness of how one's class location-the access to material and cultural resources-influences the performance of cultural capital (ibid.), as well as of the causal relationship between class inequality and cultural distinction. Moreover, in the neo-Diesel perspective, the formation of 'authentic' personhood expression is a cumulative process and implies the necessity to understand that the performance of gender identity is not only a matter of individual propensity, but that gender itself is "an organizing principle in its own right, a process that is co-created with class" (ibid., 30). Finally, to acknowledge that culture is an important element in the reproduction of the existing class relationships, and that the manipulation of one's

[37] As already established, 'to live authentically', in the neo-Diesel understanding, means to live in accordance with one's desires (e.g., luxury goods), demands (e.g., transparency of the Serbian public discourse) and needs (material and spiritual).

gender performance (*the power of the attitude*), unlike self-victimization, can amplify one's symbolic power, is a vital element of the neo-Diesel construction of authenticity.

Class, then gender': the hoe, the player, the sister

> *This life's hard/ But ladies go first/ Real woman knows what's really valuable/ Only diamonds, gems and gold/ Real woman is not satisfied with minimum wage/ That's why we take money from mommy's little boys/ They think they buy us/ But no, they treat our friends/ That's a tried-out strategy/ From Serbia to Arctic/ We fuck the rich-and take what's ours* (Mercedez, "The only thing I know", 2013).

In the final section of my paper, I discuss Mercedez' perspective on the instrumentalization of female sexuality for economic advancement, in the broader context of the neo-Diesel understanding of the relationship between class, gender and authenticity. In the above excerpt, Mercedez provides the listener with the definition of "real woman" as possessing a materialistic outlook that values "only diamonds gems and gold", contending the liberal-elitist definition of 'proper' personhood as cherishing spiritual wealth over material goods, a definition which is, in the neo-Diesel discourse, read as "hypocritical" and "double morality" of the Serbian elites (Delić 2011). What this implies is not that Mercedez' claims there is a single way to be an 'authentic', real woman. On the contrary, the rapper employs the *hood elitism* strategy (specifically, the mimetic appropriation of the liberal-feminist discursive strategy of proper femininity) as a way of refusing the liberal-feminist myth of incommensurability between the spiritual and material values ("[Mercedez] teaches young girls to use their attributes, sell their bodies in order to have nice things, that's not feminism, that's men's version feminism", Stojanov 2017); with this myth being an important element in the *wrong enculturation* proposition, especially relevant in the elitist discrimination of precarious womanhood. In our interview, I asked Mercedez to explain the notion of 'double morality' in regards to the cultural elite's insistence on the primacy of spiritual values, to which the rapper responded:

> *Yeah, that's such a civilian move. It's really tiring […] when people separate the material and spiritual sides of life as if they were completely disconnected. You see someone's desire to live more comfortably and freely, and just, in better conditions, as them being a shallow person, someone who hasn't had a chance to develop any spiritual and moral principles. I think it's*

> *important that we see the two [spiritual and material] operate as one. When you want a better life for yourself and the people you love, even if you have some great ideals and higher goals, it's still crucial that you can handle the material aspect of life. It's quite an important prerequisite for spiritual growth, yes?* (Mercedez*, personal communication, January 23, 2022)*

As evident in the above quote, Mercedez is critical of the liberal-elitist separation of spirituality and materiality and understands this move as an elitist misrecognition of the fact that the state of material destitution produces the "desire for a better life for yourself and the people around you". In addition to this, Mercedez understands the elitist accusations of a neo-Diesel "deranged value system" (Šivljanin 2011) as the strategy of dominant social classes to "keep the things in society as they are", that is, as maintenance of class hierarchies. With this in mind, the line "real woman isn't satisfied with minimum wage" illustrates how the rapper's emphasis on the economic motif is a way of legitimizing the precarious, young woman's desire for economic mobility as a way to reach independence/ freedom (*DDNG*). Moreover, the following verse "that's why we take money from mommy's little boys/ they think they buy us/ but no, they treat our friends/ that's a tried-out strategy/ from Serbia to the Arctic/ we fuck the rich-and take what's ours", represents an additional step in the same direction, whereby Mercedez legitimizes sex work as a more dignified option to living in poverty, i.e., working 'normal' jobs for an unlivable wage. This is clear in the consideration of Mercedez history of being employed as a stripper, a profession the rapper chose not because she was "starving or because I loved it, it was a result of rational calculation. I was sick of not having things I want, and I was sick of working for 20 thousand" (Mercedez 2016). By ascribing a self-assured, entitled, and acquisitive attitude to a sex worker, positioning her as the subject of the song and an example of a "real woman", the rapper rejects the notion of victimhood in relation to precarious womanhood. More precisely, by stressing the calculative agency of *sponzoruša (*gold-digger), Mercedez declares a critical stance toward the liberal-elitist perception of the sex-worker as a *victim* of the patriarchal system and, instead, proposes a perspective in which participation in any form of sex work is viewed as a precarious, young woman's "way of fighting" and "making a living on her own account" (Mercedez 2020). Lastly, the bar "we fuck the rich-and take what's our", implies both a literal meaning, and, as we have seen in the previous section, represents Mercedez' explication of the *emulation* strategy, as if the rapper is

saying: we live the way we know best, and ignore the elitist devaluation and misperception of our efforts. Having established Mercedez' approach to the one-dimensional, liberal-feminist notion of sex-work as patriarchal exploitation, I now proceed to the analysis of the lyrics for the song "Oh Money, Sweet Money", from Mercedez' album *Godmother* (2018).

> *All my girlfriends work for money, sweet money/ Girls husk that pole for money/ do nails and make up for money/ some even sell their pussy for money/ now, I gotta explain for the boys as well/ Boys deal drugs for money, they bodyguard doors and fight for money/ Later, they hustle in courtrooms for money/ I gotta give shout out to all my friends/ I gotta holler for all the fighters, relegate all the pussies, cause they only spoil my concept/ They call me Godmother, cause I pull all the strings/_You'll have to work buddy, who's asking ya? / in here, nobody has a start-up capital /here, it's all or nothing/ and nobody cares about your life story/ you are as big as the dough you cash in / it ain't about the size of your dreams/ if you're broke/ they look down on you/ who the fuck cares about your personality?/ But cash ain't all, bro/ I want gold/ I want real estate/ I want my people swimming in cash flows/ Cover that pretty face, girl/ Put a price on your forehead/ Didn't you know all the world's a market, baby (*"Oh Money, Sweet Money", Mercedez 2018*)*

In the above song, Mercedez reconciles the "girl" and "boy" perspective by understating the gender difference (as cultural performance) and highlighting their shared class location and the situation of material insecurity (economic) with the bar "all my friends work for money, sweet money". In the first part of the song, the rapper is addressing an outsider, whom she must "explain" why precarious youths "husk the pole, do nail and make-up" or "deal drugs […] bodyguard doors and fight", constantly repeating the youths' motif- "for the money". Mercedez then stresses the perseverance and courage needed for participation in the underground economy, positively evaluating these boys and girls as "fighters", as opposed to "pussies" whose misperception of the described motifs "spoils [her] concept"; the "concept" being one's belief in the validity of their 'authentic' desires and need, and the validity of the manner in which they are fulfilled ("downgrade my way of fighting", Mercedez, personal communication, January 23, 2022) . In the verse "you'll have to work, buddy, who's asking ya" and "in here, nobody has a start-up capital", the rapper changes the addressee, taking the role of the "Godmother" who offers *tough-love* advice to precarious youths. Furthermore, Mercedez switches to *appropriating* an authoritative attitude of cultural elites (e.g., "The youth is chained in the deranged value system, in which expensive car is worth more than

interpersonal relationships", Štavljanin 2011), but rearranges the cultural logic of the elitist class-othering discourse by explicitly referencing the exploitative, impersonal nature of the neoliberal class system-"and nobody cares about your life story/ you are as big as the dough you cash in / it ain't about the size of your dreams". The rapper further inverts the elitist insistence on the primacy of spirituality, saying- "if you're broke/ they look down on you/ who the fuck cares about your personality"- as a way to, even more explicitly, demystify the purpose of this insistence. Finally, following a symbolic obliteration of the gender divide, in the last verse, "cover that pretty face, girl/ put a price on your forehead/ didn't you know the whole world's a market, baby", Mercedez addresses only the precarious "girls", possibly due to their two-edged marginalization (gender and class), motherly advising them not to take their commodified value personally, treating make-up "cover" as combat face paint and "market" (capitalist market, in the original, "tržište") as a warzone. To further understand the role of the sex-work theme in Mercedez' effort toward defining the relationship between gender and class, I will now analyze the song "Look at her" (2019), which represents a sort of a satirical ode to *sponzoruša*.

> *Look at her (x3)/ Why is she dressed like this?/ Why is she speaking that way? (Strong, strong)/ Why isn't she like everybody else?/ The law bypasses her?/ Morality bypasses her?/ She is the proof that justice is slow/ Or maybe even that justice is a joke/ For haters, a perfect beach picture/ She is naked in the sunset/ She got that dick thanks to her car (Wroom)/ Or she got that car thanks to the dick?/ The hater stutters 'cause he doesn't even know the half of it/ Oh, you're bypassing the life, she approaches you on a yacht/ This surely isn't her brother/ Yeah, that guy must be old (No)/ Surely she's a whore, she must be lying to you/ She goes to spas, she's got tattoos/ Yeah, thanks to the dick she got that gig/ The hater is stuttering cause' all he can say is/ Look at her (x3)/ Why is she dressing this way?/ Why is she speaking that way? (Strong, strong)/ Why isn't she like everybody?/ Well, all you can do is watch me/ But I think I'll bum you out/ When you see the mouth fulla gold/ And you're not even gonna steal a smile from me/ Not a smile, not a glance/ My hips are swaying, you need a binocular/ You're looking here, but life's over there.* ("Look at her", Mercedez 2019)

In the above song, Mercedez invites the male gaze ("Look at her"), and, as if standing beside "the hater" and looking at the same direction, the rapper narrates the hater's thoughts in a sarcastic tone. In the first verse, the rapper wonders, in gradation, what the girl's personhood expression (style of clothing and speech) reveal about her moral principles and sexuality, but

also legality- “the law bypasses her?/ morality bypasses her?/ she is the proof that justice is slow”. Additionally, with the line “or maybe even that justice is a joke/ for haters, a perfect beach picture”, Mercedez ironically points to another ‘hypocritical’ tendency of the elitist discourse, *placing trust in the state institutions*, as opposed to the precarious youth’s perspective in which the state institutions are viewed as either hostile or unresponsive (“a joke”).[38] In the further text, the rapper illustrates the girls refusal of self-inhibition under the threat of other’s condemnation, and, instead, describes her as unphased by “the hater[‘s]” gaze, “she’s naked in the sunset”. In his wondering whether the girl is a *sponzoruša* or not, inspecting her looks (“tattoos”), lifestyle (“goes to spas”) and company (“surely not her brother” and “the guy must be old”), “the hater” becomes so immersed that he seizes to prioritize his personhood (“bypasses life”), which ascribes even more power to the girl he’s looking at (“approaches you with the yacht”). In the last verse, Mercedez abruptly reveals that the girl is herself (“yeah, thanks to the dick she got that gig”), signaling that “the hater” embodies the refusal of some male rappers to acknowledge her effort and talent (“Mimi Mercedez is a passing trend, the fact the she is a loud woman who gets the poetics of cash does not make her a good rapper. It makes her a gold-digger with a lazy vagina”, Radojković 2015), by claiming that Mercedez rise to fame was a result of her being a *sponzoruša* (Mercedez 2015). Thus, the song represents Mercedez’ mimetic appropriation of the misogyny implied in the male gaze, which not only strips women of any other value than that granted by her sexuality, but also defines expressions of female sexuality as men’s possession. Mercedez surfaces the cultural logic operating behind the male gaze, reading it as “the catch 22” which “entraps the women[’s agency] as such” (Mercedez 2015): as the rapper argues in the referenced interview, on the one hand, women’s bodies are oversexualized, and on the other, the women who utilize the systemic oversexualization of their bodies for their own benefit are viewed as amoral and a threat to *true values*, but also legally sanctioned (i.e., the almost yearly mass arrest of “elite prostitues” in Serbia).[39] Lastly, Mercedez welcomes “the hater[‘s]” gaze,

[38] As we have seen in the second chapter, the violent behavior of police towards the youths is prevalent and customary. However, drawing from my emic insight, the social groups who are not targeted (primarily the cultural elites) refuse to acknowledge this as problematic, but understand it as the state’s obligation to “suppress societal threats” (Majić 2020).

[39] The sanctions include both imprisonment and fines.
https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/135/hronika/1785086/hapsenje-zbog-elitne-prostitucije.html

"all you can do is watch me/ but I think I'll bum you out", and ascribes power to the state of *being watched* and remaining unbothered, as opposed to *being the fault-finding observer* ("you're not even gonna steal a smile from me/ not a smile, not a glance"). In other words, Mercedez rearranges the patriarchal cultural hierarchy to empower her own personhood by translating the judgmental observer's attention into symbolic capital for herself.

To further understand the subcultural significance of Mercedez' poetic rearrangement of the gender exclusionary cultural framework present in the Serbian, official, public discourse, it is important to consider how Mercedez establishes an atmosphere of comradeship in her live performances. For instance, Mercedez announced two concerts in Belgrade this June, taking place in the same club on two consecutive days, titled "Montana" and "Kopakabana".[40] In her Instagram announcement (@mimimercedez, May 20, 2020), Mercedez wrote that on the first night, "Montana", all who come are to dress in black, that the night is a "celebration of men", that the repertoire will be composed of "tougher songs" ("tvrdjih pesama") and that there will be a contest for "the best boy's ass" in which the winner is awarded with 100 euros. Conversely, the second day, "Kopakabana", is announced as the "celebration of women", with the dress code "Brazil", a "sexy" repertoire of songs, and a contest for "the best girl's ass", whereby the winner is also rewarded with 100 euros. In addition to this, the concerts occurred in the same month when the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, announced short-term, financial help, in the amount of 100 euros, to be given to all persons between the ages of 16 and 29. Firstly, by organizing a competition based on sexual attributes of not only women, but also men (sexualization of men's bodies for economic purposes), Mercedez could be viewed as rearranging the gendered hierarchies of power. By positioning both male and female sexual attributes ("best ass") as liable to external gaze and competition (instead of viewing women's bodies as *sexual* and men's as *strong*), Mercedez potentially weakens the potency of patriarchal narratives of over-sexualization of women's bodies. Secondly, Mercedez

[40] Inspired by the rapper's lyrics: "I'm dangerous, even though I'm unarmed/ Mimi-Montana, Mimi-Copacabana" ("That's the one", Mercedez 2013).

rearranges the liberal-elitist cultural hierarchy of spiritual/material values by banalizing the neoliberal principle of competitiveness (Gane 2020). That is, the “best ass” implies *hard work*, in the sense that the person attends the gym regularly and puts effort into budling muscles, yet this *hard work*, though demanding willpower (spiritual), shows results in the form of a good physique (material). Thus, Mercedez simultaneously parodies both the patriarchal idea of competing, female sexualities, and the liberal-elitist narrative of competing spiritualities (spiritual as *true* vs. material as *false* value), by organizing an event and creating a space in which competition as a principle is approached as a game, in which there are no losers, but only two winners.

In her essay on the culture/ nature divide, Donna Harraway (1991) posits that “a slightly perverse shift of perspective might better enable us to contest for meanings, as well as other forms of power” (154). Regarding Mercedez’ problematization of sex-work, this “perverse shift of perspective” is reflected in the rapper’s strategic appropriation of the assertive and acquisitive attitude characteristic of ‘subject of value’. The rapper’s employs this appropriated attitude for the inversion of the liberal-feminist perception of a sex-worker as a victim of the gendered power hierarchy. But let me briefly retrace my steps. In accordance with the neo-Diesel youth-cultural discourse, Mercedez understands the formation of an ‘authentic’ mode of personhood expression as a process of negotiating the direction of causality between economic inequality and cultural distinction. In viewing gender as a performative cultural identity that corresponds to one’s class location, the rapper challenges both the notion of gender as natural and that of sexuality as one-dimensional (reproduction purposes). As Julie Bettie (2000) posits, in viewing gender as performance correlated to one’s class identity enables us to “acknowledge exceptions to the rule that class origin equal class future”, but also to “understand that economic and cultural resources”, though not inevitable, “determine class futures” (ibid., 28). By employing this perspective, we can better understand how precarious persons negotiate the effects arising from the intersection of their social identities, but also how this intersection (of class and gender) shapes the lived experiences of persons. In her study on the post-socialist patriarchal structures, turbo-folk and gender-performativity, Dijana Jelača (2015) devises a “feminine libidinal entrepreneurship” for describing a particular kind of entrepreneurship that utilizes “the emerging social and economic hierarchies during the

times of political transition and veers towards traditionally inappropriate uses of female sexuality" (42). As already established, Mercedez' *trepfolk* imaginary is greatly influenced by the cultural logic of turbo-folk, especially regarding the genre's reinvention of the idea of women's empowerment (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, Ivić 2015). This reinvention is accomplished through turbo-folk's "play on contradictions" (Hall 2005, 68) that are inscribed in the traditional model of gender relations, and potentially allows for the "transgress[ion] of the naturalization of class and gender roles" (Jelača 2015, 43). More specifically, the idea of "performance-conscious cultural articulations" being a part of the process that "occasionally undoes or makes visible" (ibid., 47) the gendered power structures, corresponds to the way Mercedez' approaches the issue of sex-work (with that, also gender and alternative forms of femininity). In her lyrical content, Mercedez places emphasis on the primacy of economic motif in sex-work, but, as a part of her rejection of the politics of victimization, the rapper also stresses that some forms of sex-work fulfill the precarious, young woman's desire for social power, or domination (Bettie 2000, Delić 2011, Jelača 2015).

As we have seen in the second chapter, and as Jelača reminds us, post-socialist precarity implies both cultural and economic impoverishment (Bullen and Kenway 2005, Jansen 2006, Ivić 2015, which means that young women in Serbia necessitate both "recognition and redistribution" (Fraser 1997, 16). In other words, beside economic redistribution, or, the alleviation of their economic hardships, precarious, young women in Serbia need both a recognition of their personhood value and of the fact that their precarious social location was not self-imposed, but a given. According to Mercedez' reevaluation of the 'feminine libidinal entrepreneurship' as radical bodily autonomy, precarious, young women's participation in sex-work satisfies both the need for 'recognition and redistribution' ("cause with cash flowing outta my wallet, who's gonna feel ashamed?", "I'm rich, you're shit", Mercedez 2015), as bodily capital is "a source of dignity and recognition for those" (Prieur 1999, 36) lacking economic and/or cultural capital. In other words, Mercedez treats precarious, young women's sexuality as the "capital at hand" (Bullen and Kenway 2005, 49), which is employed for economic advancement (economic redistribution via sex work). Again, see how the neo-Diesel understanding of sex work mirrors the neoliberal strategy of commodification of human beings (Rose 1994). Thus, Mercedez' revalorization of sex work reflects what Skeggs (2011),

describes as a “circuit of value [that enables] capital accumulation” (508), whereby precarious class location produces alternative value formations, which are in congruence with their lived experience (i.e., desire for social domination, demand for economic mobility, need for recognition vs. material reality of marginalization) of “facing capitalism in a very different way” (ibid.) than upper social layers. Moreover, the need for cultural recognition is then accomplished by the sense of power that the sex worker may feel due to being able to economically advance by using the very tool (over- sexualization of the female body) of her social subjugation for her own benefit. This is due to fact that the “instability of the context” surrounding sex-work, allows for ”power and resistance to coexist” in harmony (Zatz 1997, 303). In other words, sex work presupposes equation of sex with power: in the perspective of the man/consumer, the power is contained in his “ability to buy access to any number of women” (Alexander 1987, 189), while for the woman/ sex worker, the power lies in being able to “set terms of her sexuality” (ibid.), as well as demand monetary compensation for her skillfulness and effort. As Skeggs (2011) argues, personhood, “as social and moral state”, is produced through encounters with others “located within relations of production and reproduction” (508), but not each person is allowed to “produce and perform themselves as a subject of value.” (ibid.)

Clearly, to what degree a sex-worker exercises power (or resistance) is determined by many factors, but, in her efforts to empower the precarious, young women’s personhood, Mercedez stresses the importance of one’s own evaluation for the formation of ‘authentic’ personhood. This essay argues that, rather than understanding Mercedez’ approach as celebratory (and advising) of the participation in sex work, we should view it as the rapper’s effort at contesting the exclusionary rhetoric implied in the liberal-elitist, purist cultural policing (Jelača 2015) and patriarchal vilification of an auto- sexualized female; while remaining within the neoliberal idea of “governable self”, with the person “as the key unit of value that does not just sell labor but comes to exchange already loaded with capacities for finding and increasing value” (Skeggs 2011, 509).

Conclusion

In this essay, I attempted to shed light on how precarious, Serbian youths utilize popular music production and consumption in their effort to strategically negotiate their communal and national belonging by constructing an ‘authentic’ mode of personhood expression. For this purpose, I devised the term ‘neo- Diesel’, to refer to the unofficial, youth-cultural discourse, and positioned the phenomena of *trepfolk*, a popular folk genre in Serbia, as one of the neo-Diesel youth-cultural practices. To provide a comprehensive analysis, I focused my investigation on the music-making of the Serbian rapper Mimi Mercedez, as a neo-Diesel youth-cultural practice, the audience’s responses to it, as well as the Serbian, hegemonic discursive treatment of popular folk music genres and their audiences (Serbian lower social classes). In the Serbian official, cultural discourse I detected two ideological tendencies, the neoliberal and the national, or neo-conservative, the former one showed tendencies toward auto-racism, and was analyzed in more detail as the ‘auto-colonial discourse’ (Chapter I; the

neo- Diesel was analyzed throughout the paper, by implication). In order to assess the neo-Diesel construction of 'authentic' personhood expression, this essay investigated different conceptualizations of the relationship between class inequality and cultural distinction (these parameters were induced from the initial content analysis of Mercedez' lyrical content and the official- cultural discursive texts) existing in the Serbian cultural discourse in order to understand their role in the dynamic process of social identity construction of different social groups in Serbia, primarily focusing on precarious youths. The main conclusions emerging from my analysis is that the conceptualization of the causality between class inequality and cultural distinction is central to the construction of 'authenticity'; as well as that differing definitions of the direction of this causality, and the resulting, contesting notions of 'authenticity', are closely related to the person's/group's class location. I collected the qualitative data needed for my analysis using different ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, interviews and *nethnography*, then analyzed them using content and narrative analysis. I presented the gathered data via the theoretical framework that treats class as performative cultural identity, different 'authenticity' constructions as related to the notion of different sociality/relationality (personhood), which are understood as affected by different class locations, and the concept of youth (class-cultural)- subjectivity. Then I discussed my findings employing the concept of creativity/ entertainment as socially situate and, the idea of subaltern youth-cultural hybridity, as well as that of discursive self-subjectification and class-stigmatizing/ need for recognition. This way, I was able to address Mimi Mercedez' authenticity-construction process and her strategy of stylistic rearrangement of the official-cultural, discursive framework, or the *Pendulum Technique* strategy (*defiant entertainment, the power of the attitude/ hood elitism,* and *DDNG).*

Firstly, in discussing the highly complex relationship between the notion of authenticity and cultural empowerment, I analyzed Mimi Mercedez' use of different poetic strategies which constitute Mercedez *Pendulum Technique* strategy. Firstly, I examined the rapper's employment of the *defiant entertainment* strategy, in relation to the neo-Diesel notion of bottom- up emancipation, and the constructive process behind the neo- Diesel 'authenticity' concept. In my investigation of Mercedez' mimetic appropriation of the elitist, discursive self-

subjectification, or the process of re-arrangement of the liberal-elitist value and meaning systems, I demonstrated that the neo- Diesel youth-cultural formation of 'authentic' personhood expression suggests the precarious, Serbian youths' need for openness in interpersonal relationships regarding the effect that one's precarious class location has on one's personhood (the sense of one's own validity), as well as that this transparency in intimate, youth relationships has a potential of minimizing the potency of the negative effects of both the precarious material living conditions (financial insecurity) and the elitist exclusionary and belittling (class-othering) discursive practices. Additionally, I found that the idea of the entertainment as political attitude arises from *trepfolk's* ability to interpret the relationship between economic inequality and cultural distinction in a *fun* way, which my analysis showed is understood in the neo- Diesel discourse as having emancipatory potential (developing critical worldview through fun-having). In other words, in the neo-Diesel youth culture, the concept of entertainment is viewed as an important communal and individual activity that has an emancipatory potential due to its ability to banalize the detrimental personhood effects of the socio-economic marginalization.

Secondly, through my investigation of the neo- Diesel, youth- cultural revival of the 1990s, Serbian *Diesel* subculture and the accompanying turbo-folk music style, it has been established that the precarious, Serbian youths negotiate their communal and social belonging by positively evaluating these two cultural phenomena. More precisely, the evidence presented has shown that the youth- cultural revalorization of the notion of *Diesel* represents an important route for the tailoring of 'new' authenticity. By analyzing Mercedez' use of the poetic strategies of *the power of the attitude/ hood elitism and DDNG (one's desires, demand, and needs as guidance)* in the effort toward the described revalorization, I discovered that the neo- Diesel, youth- cultural process of the formation of an 'authentic' personhood expression is also accomplished through attaching value to one's personhood by rearranging the liberal-elitist cultural framework related to the treatment of the *Diesel* subcultural and turbo- folk (appropriation of elitist attitude- *hood elitism*). Relatedly, I concluded that the idea of 'authentic living' is in close connection to the notion of 'strong attitude', or the ability to confidently assert one's 'authentic' personhood needs and desires, but also cultural demands

arising from precarious class location (e.g., inclination toward violence or the desire for luxury (over moderate consumption) as an articulation of political demand- economic redistribution). Lastly, I found that the process of youth-cultural, strategic negotiation of communal and national belonging could be viewed as the struggle to discursively redirect the causality between class inequality and cultural distinction (define class as primary cultural identity).

Thirdly, I explored Mimi Mercedez' rendition of the neo- Diesel conceptualization of the intersection of class and gender identities, focusing on the rapper's employment of *the power of the attitude* and *DDNG* strategies. In this effort, I analyzed Mercedez' relationship to liberal-feminist cultural framework, instrumentalization of female sexuality (as radical bodily autonomy), and the related victimization politics, whereby I came to two conclusions. Namely, I discovered that Mercedez understands cultural empowerment of precarious young womanhood is preconditional to any other emancipation. This cultural empowerment, I found, in Mercedez' perspective, implies the mimetic appropriation of the 'strong attitude' officially associated with the dominant male gender, as well as the entitled and acquisitive of the dominant social layers, which enables young women to acquire symbolic power which has a potential of being translated to other forms of capitals, but also helps bridge the gender gap in youths' interpersonal relationships. In relation to this, I discovered that, in the neo-Diesel, youth-cultural process of the formation of 'authentic' personhood expression, the rejection of self-victimization is crucial because self-victimization is understood as voluntary self-subjugation, and as fueling the liberal-elitist process of the precarious personhood vilification, as well as the broader, cultural effort toward the continuation of existing social hierarchies. The second conclusion was that Mercedez employs the theme of sex work in her songs dealing with the issue of gender, in order to redirect the causality between class inequality and differing cultural expressions, Mercedes rearranges the dominant value and meanings systems, defining the precarious woman's desire for comfortable living as primary factor for their participation in sex work (not er promiscuous, lazy and greedy nature), but also stressing the importance of the desire for social domination, which is also fulfilled through sex work. Additionally, I concluded that the aim of Mercedez' efforts to empower the precarious, young women's personhood could be viewed as resting on the prioritization of the precarious

person's subjective evaluation (demands, needs and desires) , as a substitution to relying on the official cultural norms of 'proper' femininity, which is viewed as exclusionary and discriminative in relation to the precarious youth-womanhood.

Finally, throughout my analysis, I focused on the neo- Diesel youth-cultural discourse by exploring the significant role of personal values, represented both in Mercedez lyrics and the youths' attitudes towards it, in determining the cultural framework of communal identity construction and empowerment. In inspecting the relationship between the unofficial, neo-Diesel discourse and the official- cultural discourse of Serbian cultural elites, I found that both discourse show correlation to the neoliberal cultural discourse, mainly the individualist imperatives of competition, continuous self-betterment, desire for social domination, and the idea of the decisiveness of cultural factors (on one hand, empowerment, on the other, inequality). The main difference between these two narratives is that the bottom- up, youth-cultural discourse is the role of these neo- liberal tendencies in each discourse; while the neo-Diesel discourse struggles for validation, the cultural-elitist discourse struggle to maintain the existing class hierarchy. In addition to this, I concluded that the fact of the coexistence of resistance to and containment of the dominant values and meanings in the neo-Diesel discourse (evidenced in, among other things, the neo-Diesel appropriation of the liberal-elitist discursive strategies), testifies to the youth-cultural discourses' subordinate relationship to the official, Serbian discourse. In other words, I discovered that, in terms of research, the significance of Mercedez' music-making lies in offering insight into the Serbian youth's imaginary and its relationship to the broader Serbian society; while in terms of youth-cultural empowerment, the importance of the rapper's music is reflected in its ability to provoke open discussions about ordinary and systemic, yet shared and intimate hardships (e.g., poverty, drug abuse, promiscuity, etc.).

The existing research on *trepfolk* music style mostly focuses on the discussion of the establishment of Balkan Music Studies, and the related defining of the meaning of 'Balkan', both in the academic research and in popular music (Dragojlo 2019, Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, Medić 2020). On the other hand, the research on *trepfolk* which incorporates the study of the

genre's its employment in the contemporary, Serbian youth-cultural expressions (Papović and Pejović 2016a, 2016b, Ivić 2015, Ćetković and Djurović 2017) lacks a multi-perspectival approach, especially the analysis of youth-cultural meanings and values related to subcultural capital inscribed in *trepfolk* imaginary, which allows for a better understanding of the cultural effects of economic precarity and the "positional suffering" included in the lower-class youth's lived experiences (Bullen and Kenway 2005). Moreover, my study suggest that building on existing (social) connections with persons with whom I have intimate relationships with and shared experiences can potentially surface the stories which would alternatively remain obscure. My positionality of both identifying with the members' I study and approaching them in the function of an academic research, fueled my motivation to frame the members' stories in a way that illuminated the significance and rich meanings of these stories, enabling them to resonate with the reader.

In spite of my desire and effort to present the stories of precarious youths in Serbia in a concise yet exhaustive manner, sensitive to the multiplicity of perspectives, as well as the irregularity of meaning and value system of the neo- Diesel youth-culture, I am aware that my lack of experience in academic research has affected my production of an impartial, anthropological, ethnographic study. I acknowledge that further investigation into *trepfolk* music genre, necessitates a more comprehensive analysis of the genre's lyrical content and of the meanings the audiences attach to it, and that my focus on Mimi Mercedez and her audiences inevitably narrowed my perspective on the role of *trepfolk* in the Serbian, youth-cultural expression. Personally, my interest in the subject lies in my desire to understand how Serbian, precarious youths establish the sense of authenticity related to their personhood as well as quality, long-lasting relationships with others, which is a knowledge that can potentially be useful considering the increasing *precarization* of the world's population, and especially the global youths.

Appendix

The following list of songs formed the corpus of my textual analysis:

Mercedez, Mimi. 2011. “Puffed-up Piggies”, a single. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_inMWD5Twg

Mercedez, Mimi. 2013. “All I know.”, a single. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z997MY16kFA

Bombs of the Nineties. 2014. “Connect to the Machine.”, a single. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cELRJ8KXlmM

Mercedez, Mimi. 2014. “MMM.”, a single. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgCTZ7qaM9Y

Mercedez, Mimi. 2015. “Who’s gonna stop me.”, *Raunchy Skanks.* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--Z5DucJKUQ*

Mercedez, Mimi. 2015. “Pussy Syndrome.”, *Raunchy Skanks.* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhtObNerwm0*

Mercedez, Mimi and Čare, Polo. 2015. “Turbo-folk made me do it.”, *Trepfolk.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EL-Y5SPLSeI

Mercedez, Mimi. 2016. “Can’t sit with us.”, a single. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWo-xc8BJdI

Mercedez, Mimi. 2016. “No mercy.”, a single. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dX0vfw9vPE

Mercedez, Mimi. 2018. “Money, sweet money.” *Godmother.* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tXCkpCAYIg*

Mercedez, Mimi. 2018. “Prettiest rainbow colors”., *Godmother.* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgubtinc3Aw*

Mercedez, Mimi and 30Zona. 2020. “Godfather.”, *30.*

Mercedez, Mimi. 2019. “Hate.”, *Hate.* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JV13jJNnf1A*

Mercedez, Mimi. 2019. “Children of War.”, *Hate.* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gxJo1u5DII*

Mercedez, Mimi. 2019. “Look at her.”, *Hate.* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wuK4PZLDQ0o*

Mercedez, Mimi. 2019. “Girl Gang.”, *Hate.* *https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=zenska+banda*

Lacku, Dizzy and Mercedez, Mimi. 2019. “K.S.J.G.”, a single. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnPpSGDfca0

Stoja and Mercedez, Mimi. 2019. “The world is turning around us.”, a single. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNfxHG5ddIk

Mercedez, Mimi. 2019. “Black bandana.”, *Guda Gang*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9jwuXQjPFI

Mercedez, Mimi. 2019. “Sound of Sirens.”, *Godmother*. *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oOMI9kzdaw*

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