

ROMA RAP AND THE *BLACK TRAIN*: MINORITY VOICES IN HUNGARIAN HIP HOP

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

As hip-hop has become a world-wide phenomenon international hip-hop artists have applied the core of the genre itself by cutting and mixing African American hip-hop and adapting it to their own sound and experiences. In this paper I examine how metaphor and constraints on language choice interact with the artistic, social, and political aims of a popular late-90's Hungarian Roma hip-hop group, known as *Fekete Vonat* (Black Train).

Within other genres of Roma music, the use of Romani is common, particularly in traditional music. In *Fekete Vonat*'s work, however, Romani appears to be a marked choice within Hungarian-Roma hip hop. On the album *A Város Másik Oldalán* Romani emerges as the in-group code, while Hungarian is the sole language used to convey political and social messages about the conditions of the Roma within Hungarian society.

I examine the way that race is used as a metaphor for distinction in global hip hop as well as constraints on code choice that come into play in the production of popular music. I show that code choice in music cannot be viewed as simply mirroring everyday linguistic practices. Several other factors intrinsic to the act of producing a commercial artistic expressive form constrain linguistic choice: notably the intended audience, the subject matter, and marketability. The goal of this paper is to examine how *Fekete Vonat* works within these constraints in order to establish their own identity and the identity of their intended audience with respect to the various topics they address.

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1. INTRODUCTION: WHY HIP HOP?

As hip hop has grown into a global phenomenon it neither changes completely nor remains the same (Pennycook and Mitchell, 2009, p. 27).¹ The genre has been described as ‘black music, of and for blacks’ (Costello and Wallace, 1997, p. 21), but this characterization has become too simplistic as hip hop has been adopted and appropriated around the world and artists have contributed and shaped it into a broader cross-cultural community of practice (Alim, 2009, pp. 4–5).² While retaining recognizable features associating it with African American urban culture, global hip hop has been appropriated in such a way that it also reflects the local culture of wherever it is produced (Androutsopoulos, 2009, pp. 43–44; Mitchell, 2001a, pp. 1–2). Hip-hop artists around the world use the genre to speak about the social, cultural and political conditions they live in. Their language choices also stem from their linguistic practices and environments, employing the various linguistic varieties they have at their disposal in order to achieve the artistic and commercial ends they seek.

Global hip hop provides an arena in which to investigate globalization phenomena as well as the interplay between language and identity construction (Androutsopoulos, 2009; Darling-Wolf, 2008). A great deal of ethnographic background work is necessary when examining the indexical relationship between language and identity. We find this ethnographic groundwork already partially laid down, as hip-hop lyrics can be examined alongside interviews or other discourse in which artists discuss the identity they wish to project and/or fans discuss the identities they perceive. This complementary discourse often provides more concrete evidence for the specific ways artists use language to establish identity and whether or not these identities are ratified by the audience.

The language of hip hop is also of interest to sociolinguists for the multitude of variation phenomena that occur, such as style-shifting, code-mixing and code-switching (Alim, 2009, p. 5). The distinct verbal style associated with rap has motivated a particular focus on the linguistic aspects of the genre, whether it be lexical choices (Cutler, 2009; Mitchell, 2001b), rhythmic patterns and prosody (O’Hanlon, 2006; Fagyal, 2007), or language choice and code-switching (Higgins, 2009; Sarkar and Allen, 2007).

The global spread of hip hop, described by Androutsopoulos and Scholz (2003) as ‘the productive use of an originally imported cultural pattern’, can be viewed through Lull’s (1995) framework of the movement from *detrterritorialization*, ‘the loss of the “natural” relation between

culture with geographic and socio territory' (García Canclini, 1989, p. 288) to *reterritorialization*, where 'the foundations of cultural territory . . . are all open to new interpretations and understandings' and 'culture is constantly reconstituted through social interaction' (Lull, 1995, p. 159). Through these processes hip hop has been taken up from its original habitat in African American urban culture, introduced to other cultures around the world, and fused with their linguistic and musical traditions and local experiences to the point that it eventually becomes recognized as a local art form (Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003, pp. 467–468).

This paper seeks to contribute to current debates about global hip hop as succinctly formulated by Alim in the following three questions:

- (a) Just how is it that 'Hip Hop Culture' has become a primary site of identification and self-understanding for youth around the world?
- (b) [...] what linguistic resources do youth manipulate, (re)appropriate, and sometimes (re)create, in order to fashion themselves as members of a 'Global Hip Hop Nation'?
- (c) [...] in doing so, what challenges do they face and pose, within distinct, local scenes, which privilege their own often competing, locally relevant categories of identification?

(Alim, 2009, p. 5)

More specifically, I will examine language and identity construction in the lyrics of a popular late-1990s Hungarian Roma hip-hop group known as Fekete Vonat ('Black Train') and the various factors and constraints that shape and determine the final product. The Roma, more commonly known as gypsies, are a highly marginalized population within Hungary.³ I will look at how Fekete Vonat linguistically constructs their identity and establish authenticity, paying particular attention to language choice and metaphor. I will also examine an incident with the band's recording label that raises questions of filtering and marketability, highlighting the importance of viewing hip hop as a discursive construct and a collaborative process. Based on these observations, I will consider more broadly what the experiences of this group signify about the establishment of authenticity within the Global Hip Hop Nation (GHHN) and in terms of sociolinguistic constraints on code choice in hip hop.

2. HIP HOP AS A LOCUS OF GLOBALIZATION

Hip hop has been embraced around the world as a formidable instrument for the expression of youth, minority, political and class issues. The foundations of hip hop – such as rapping, scratching, and breakbeats – have been fused with various global musical and linguistic traditions that put a new spin on the genre. The choice of language varieties varies from community to community. Pennycook and Mitchell (2009) note that linguistic localization in hip hop ‘is subject to the cultural politics of local language use’ (2009, p. 36). More vernacular forms and ‘lower’ varieties of languages tend to occur. Androutsopoulos and Scholz (2003) surveyed hip hop across a number of European countries and found that a great deal of code-mixing and code-switching between dominant and migrant languages is also used, although the dominant language of a country also tends to be dominant in the hip hop produced there (2003, p. 473). Omoniyi (2009) also notes that in Nigerian hip hop ‘in some environments hip hop artists deploy linguistic convergence in performing in the dominant official language of the cosmopolis’ (2009, p. 124). Why should the dominant language emerge as the default language of hip hop, particularly among groups such as immigrants or ethnic minorities, who might not use it as their primary language? We will see in Section 4 that the pattern that emerges from Fekete Vonat’s code choices (and the dictates of their management) indicates that audience design (Bell, 1984), as it relates to market forces, plays a primary role in defining the default.

When code-switching and/or code-mixing do occur in hip hop, these phenomena need to be analyzed as a form of public discourse. Sarkar (2009) characterizes rap as ‘highly scripted, prewritten forms of language that differ in important ways from normal conversational speech’ (2009, p. 147). Davies and Bentahila (2006) suggest that even among communities for whom unmarked code-switching is the norm, occurrences of code-switching in public discourse, such as music or speeches, represent a marked choice due to the preparation and planning inherent in these public genres. They believe such instances of code-switching to be ‘a more or less conscious, considered decision [...] for which some motivation must be sought’ (2006, p. 368). Occurrences of code-switching in public discourse can provide insight into the common mechanisms speakers and the communities they address use to explicitly construct identity through language.

The study of language and globalization is not limited to the spread of one specific *language*; it also involves the appropriation of ‘specific speech forms, genres, styles, and forms of literacy practice’ (Blommaert, 2003). This is exactly what happens in global hip hop, where artists appropriate and recontextualize features of hip hop – including language variety, rhyming patterns, or the themes addressed – rather than simply reproducing what comes out of the United States, resulting in ‘hybrid co-productions of languages and cultures’ (Pennycook, 2007, p. 6).

Androutsopoulos and Scholz (2003) put forward that ‘rap in Europe follows traditions established by US rap, but is not identical to it, because one of the imperatives of rap discourse is to express local concerns and to reflect local social realities’ (2003, pp. 475–476), and these local concerns and realities will vary from place to place. Alim (2009) ties global hip hop to broader questions of ‘glocalization’, the local appropriation and recontextualization of global resources (cf. Robertson, 1995). He suggests that ‘when local practices of music, dance, story-telling and painting encounter diversifying forms of globalized hip hop, they enable a recreation both of what it means to be local and of what then counts as the global’ (Alim, 2009, p. 27).

In her chapter on rap in Hungary, Éva Miklódy suggests that the appropriation of hip hop by other, non-African American cultures is simply taking the essence of hip hop further. She quotes Dick Hebdige as saying

the hip hoppers ‘stole’ music off air and cut it up. Then they broke it down into its component parts and remixed it on tape. By doing this they were breaking the law of copyright. But the cut ‘n’ mix attitude was that no one owns a rhythm or a sound. You just borrow it and use it and give it back to the people in a slightly different form. (Hebdige, 1987, cited in Miklódy, 2004, pp. 198–199)

Miklódy considers that international hip-hop artists have simply applied the same formula to hip hop itself by cutting and mixing African American hip hop and adapting it to their own sound and their own experiences: ‘Hungarian youth [...] create a Hungarian version of African American rap by reflecting Hungarian reality – as they view it – and by cutting and mixing basic elements of black rap with the idiosyncrasies of Hungarian musical and linguistic traditions’ (Miklódy, 2004, p. 199).

Tony Mitchell characterizes hip hop and rap as ‘a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world’ (2001a, pp. 1–2). Although far more American hip hop is exported to other countries than is imported from them, the extensive

popularity of hip hop around the world cannot be viewed as simply another example of Americanization or ‘US cultural domination’, but rather as ‘driven as much by local artists and their fans’ (Mitchell, 2001a, p. 2). Although there is arguably little influence of global hip hop on American hip hop, the global spread of hip hop does redefine and (re)create the genre: ‘the echoes around the world of new hip-hop cultures may be understood not so much as subvarieties of global hip hop, but rather as local traditions being pulled toward global cultural forms while those traditions are simultaneously reinvented’ (Pennycook and Mitchell, 2009, p. 30).

Darling-Wolf (2008) discusses how French hip hop is redefining the question of what it means to be French and what constitutes French music. French hip hop is associated with the *banlieues* (suburbs) and immigrant culture, highlighting the mixing of French culture with those of their former colonies. These local renegotiations of French identity eventually go global and are seen around the world as expressions of French identity, due to the success of French rap as a ‘cultural export’ (2008, pp. 197–201). Like many globalization phenomena, such as world Englishes, global hip hop is not simply a matter of hip hop radiating out from the United States: ‘Global hip hops do not have one point of origin [...] but rather multiple, copresent, global origins’ (Darling-Wolf, 2008, p. 40).

The question of the true origins of hip hop is a complex one.⁴ The general public tends to associate hip hop with African American urban culture, and for the purposes of this paper, I will also embrace the notion of New York City as the birthplace of hip hop, as it is such a salient assumption for fans (and non-fans) of hip hop around the world. However, while remaining an undeniable part of global hip hop, this association of the genre with African American urban culture is no longer its central or sole determinant: French hip hop is French, and it distinguishes itself from Egyptian hip hop, which in turn distinguishes itself from Hungarian hip hop, and so on and so forth.

2.1. HIP HOP, RACE, AND AUTHENTICITY

Although there are a number of aspects to one’s identity (race, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, age, etc.), race occupies a particularly prominent position for theorists, artists, and fans of hip hop alike. Raphael-Hernandez (2004) characterizes the emergence of hip hop in Hungary as a ‘blackening’ of the youth culture that embraces it (Raphael-Hernandez, 2004, p. 6). Similarly, Roth-Gordon (2009) shows how hip hoppers in Brazilian *favelas* fashion the

differences between themselves and the dominant culture as a Black vs. White divide which in reality is based more on economic factors than race. Following on from these remarks, we might ask: What exactly is the glue that holds hip-hop communities together? Is it really race, or does race merely serve as convenient shorthand, a metaphor for the various locally relevant identities hip-hop artists wish to project and problematize?

Although often linked to race by artists, fans, and the general public, hip hop seems in fact to be a locus of identification for groups who feel, or seek to be, outside some aspect of mainstream culture; groups who are ‘along the separation from the values of the dominant culture and in the integration into a community’ (Nagy, 2003, p. 130). Pennycook and Mitchell (2009) note that ‘for many hip hop artists around the world, there is an identification not only with aspects of the music, style, and language of U.S. hip hop, but also with the racial politics that surround it’ (2009, p. 37). This is not to say that global hip-hop artists rap primarily about U.S. race relations, but rather that their identification with the genre is heightened by, and in turn heightens, their perception of issues of racism and discrimination in their own local communities. Omoniyi (2009) acknowledges the ‘extensively racialized’ nature of hip hop at its inception, and raises the question ‘whether or not race and class politics are on the agenda worldwide’ (2009, p. 119). In his study of code-switching in Nigerian hip hop, he concludes that ethnicity seems to be a more salient identity marker in that context, and proposes to ‘conceive of hip hop identities as belonging to a global complex within which performers may move freely for whatever reasons they considered salient in the moments of identification in which they find and attempt to define themselves’ (2009, p. 129).

According to the cognitive linguistic tradition, speakers construct, and hearers interpret, metaphor by envisaging a comparison between a ‘source domain’ and the ‘target domain’ which is metaphorically constructed in terms of the former (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003; Croft and Cruse, 2004, p. 55). In the case of Roth-Gordon’s (2009) Brazilian hip hoppers, race serves as the source and wealth as the target domain, with a poor vs. rich distinction metaphorically constructed as a ‘Black’ vs. ‘White’ one. Metaphor is not simply a substitution of one term for another for the sake of embellishment; rather, a metaphorical expression has ‘a character that no literal expression has’ (Croft and Cruse, 2004, p. 194). Neither is metaphor limited to individual linguistic items; it can be a property of conceptual domains shared by members of a speech community: in the case of conceptual (well-established) metaphors, ‘[t]he correspondences

between domains are represented in the conceptual system, and are fully conventionalized among members of a speech community' (Croft and Cruse, 2004, pp. 194–197).

We can view the Global Hip Hop Nation as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that shares the discourse of race as a basic conceptual metaphor for thinking and talking about locally relevant aspects of falling victim to (social) inequality. This is not to deny that the category of race is itself a socially constructed one. Nevertheless, in the case of race, this socially constructed character is frequently forgotten, and, until challenged as such, race is often treated as easily identifiable and static over time. It thus serves as a readily available and convenient 'concrete' source domain in terms of which to conceptualize those more 'abstract' target domains across which identification with hip hop occurs, namely 'culture, class, historical oppression, and youth rebellion' (Osumare, 2007, p. 15). These four domains may, then, be seen as different facets of (specifically African American) race, which becomes the most salient and the default feature of hip-hop identity to artists, fans, and detractors alike. This notion of race as source domain may influence the way that hip-hop discourse is constructed, but also leaves room to understand the broad variety of groups who adopt it, groups that are not limited to one single racial affiliation.

2.2. HIP HOP IN HUNGARY

The case of hip hop in Hungary provides another argument in favor of the universality of hip hop beyond a U.S.-centric and racialized form of expression, as Hungary has never had a significant Black population similar to those of the UK, France or Germany, nor was hip hop in Hungary immediately embraced by ethnic minorities (Miklódy, 2004, p. 188). The common thread between the development of hip hop in Hungary and the United States according to Miklódy, however, is that it 'emerged from a common socioeconomic background' as it did in the United States (2004, p. 189). Hip hop has enjoyed widespread popularity in Hungary; Miklódy (2004) characterizes this phenomenon as a 'blackening' of Hungarian youth, where identification with hip hop equates to identification as Black, and 'Blackness' remains the essence of hip hop (2004, pp. 188–189). Such an analysis illustrates the race metaphor outlined in the previous section, where participation in the Hip Hop Nation becomes synonymous with Blackness. Nevertheless, I would argue that as we examine the emergence of hip hop in Hungary within the broader global context, the widespread adoption and adaptation of the genre points more to its universality and

expression of an identity that is not necessarily bound to race, as hip hop is often – though not exclusively – embraced by or associated with urban socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, such as *banlieue* youth in France or the residents of Brazil’s *favelas*.

Hip hop was introduced to Hungary in the early 1980s via Germany through breakdancing, but the use of the Hungarian language in rap did not enter in full force until the early to mid 1990s, after the fall of communism. At the time of Miklódy’s 2004 article, she estimated that approximately 300 rap groups were active in Hungary, with approximately 50 experiencing widespread success in the country. In a country of 10 million inhabitants, over half of which are estimated to be elderly, such spread is extensive when considering how specific it is to youth culture (2004, p. 189). The conditions following the overthrow of communism in Hungary allowed Hungarian hip hop to flourish not only because the country was opened up to Western media, but also because new Hungarian media and entertainment industries were allowed to develop.

The development of hip hop in Hungary follows the progression of phases proposed by Lull (1995). There is a certain fuzziness to the boundaries between Lull’s three categories of (i) transculturation, ‘a process in which cultural forms literally move through time and space’ (1995, p. 153); (ii) hybridization, ‘the fusing of cultural forms’ (1995, p. 155); and (iii) indigenization, where ‘imported cultural forms take on local features’ (1995, p. 155). The evolution of hip hop in Hungary, however, can help clarify some of these different phases also embraced by Androutsopoulos and Scholz (2003): we can observe a progression from rapping by Hungarians to rapping in Hungarian to Hungarian rap. In the initial phase of transculturation, Hungarian hip-hop artists imitated African American hip-hop artists and rapped in English. Artists then moved into a hybridization phase, highlighted by the translation of lyrics from popular and influential American hip-hop songs into Hungarian, notably Ganxsta Zolee’s translation of ‘The Message’ by Grandmaster Flash. In the mid-1990s original lyrics began to appear in Hungarian, as the genre passed into the final phase of indigenization (Miklódy, 2004, pp. 194–195; Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003, pp. 467–468). The progression of group and MC names followed a similar pattern, beginning with names that were in English and/or reflected African American hip-hop culture of the time and gradually became more and more Hungarian: from early names such as Boyz in Da Getto, to Ganxsta Zolee és a kartel (‘Gangsta Zolee and the Cartel’ – Zoli being a typical Hungarian first name) to Fekete Vonat (‘Black Train’), which is

not only completely in Hungarian, but also carries a specific cultural reference (see Section 4 below). Though this was not necessarily a uniform naming pattern across the country, we can observe a significant shift from English to Hungarian names throughout the period from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s. The type of music sampled and the song topics also followed a similar path as more and more Hungarian folk and popular music was integrated with rap, and lyrics began to draw on life experiences in Hungary rather than abroad (Miklódy, 2004, pp. 195–196).

Miklódy notes two major parallels between Hungarian and American hip hop, the first being a division between ‘underground’ and ‘mainstream’ rap, currents which have sprung up in similar ways in both the United States and Hungary, where membership in the mainstream can result in a loss of authenticity (2004, p. 196).⁵ The second parallel is more interesting for our current purposes, as it concerns the socioeconomic origins and influences on hip-hop content. Miklódy views hip hop as ‘acts of symbolic resistance against the pressures of a capitalist ideology’ (2004, p. 196). The African American struggle against ‘ideological racism and discrimination in capitalist America’ is reflected in and provides fuel for rap lyrics and hip-hop culture. Miklódy compares these conditions to Hungary, where rappers address ‘the dire social, cultural, and human consequences of a newly established, rough, capitalist, economic system’ (2004, pp. 196–197). She describes a sort of ‘push-and-pull’ between Hungarian rap artists both distancing and aligning themselves with African American hip hop, mixing local references and distinct styles of dress with references to ghettos and ‘the socioeconomic and cultural roots of black rap’ (2004, p. 191). On the other hand, she also notes artists that specifically localize their work to Hungary (Animal Cannibals: ‘From the middle of Central-Europe, it’s Budapest speaking’) and even make a clear distinction between themselves and American hip hop, with lyrics such as K. A. O. S.: ‘This is Hungary and not America,’ and ‘This is Szolnok Country and not Chicago,’ or Animal Cannibals: ‘This country is not New Jack City’ (Miklódy, 2004, p. 191).

Fekete Vonat was notably left out of Miklódy’s (2004) article, despite the fact that the group had already released three albums, including one that had gone platinum, by that time.⁶ I would argue that an additional socioeconomic parallel can be drawn between African American and Hungarian *Roma* hip hop, which has also been born out of a culture that experiences not only economic hardship but also deep-seated racism and discrimination. These conditions have clearly inspired much of the work of Fekete Vonat, as we shall see in Section 4.

3. THE ROMA IN HUNGARY

Central and Eastern Europe have included extensive Roma populations ever since the Middle Ages, when large numbers of Roma were forced eastward out of Western Europe (Imre, 2007, p. 272). Their status differs from other minority groups: ‘neither a regional minority nor an immigrant minority; [the Roma] are [...] one of the indigenous ethnic groups of Europe’ (Halwachs, 2003, p. 192). Roma minorities demonstrate varying degrees of assimilation across Europe. Even ‘assimilated’ groups preserve traces of Roma culture, in particular ‘their binary conception of the world: the Roma and the non-Roma’ (Halwachs, 2003, p. 192).

The Roma people constitute a significant minority in Hungary, a population estimated at around 500,000. They have faced massive, widespread discrimination and racism since the Hapsburg rule, discrimination which continues on a daily basis in Hungary today (Imre, 2007, pp. 271–272). Improvements have been made – particularly as a condition of Hungary’s 2004 accession to the European Union: official Roma institutions have been established, and some Romani language media have emerged both through private and state-run media channels. A daily 2-hour program is now broadcast on state-run radio as well as a weekly show on television (Matras, 2005, p. 15). In addition, in 2001 the first Roma radio station in Hungary, Rádió C, went on the air. It features both Hungarian and Romani language programming that centers around Roma culture and issues.

Despite these improvements, the Roma continue to suffer large-scale racism, in the form of violent attacks and police indifference to (and sometimes sanction of) such attacks; lack of access to education, with children often segregated into Roma classes that are treated as remedial classes; high unemployment rates, which have risen sharply since the overthrow of communism; and discrimination in housing and public services. Although activists and organizations are working hard to improve these conditions, the Roma face racism from the general Hungarian population that is ‘reinforced by media representations and state policies’ (Imre, 2007, p. 271) and have generally been ‘kept out of the respectable professions that defined citizenship’ portrayed instead as ‘only good at playing music and dancing’ (Imre, 2007, p. 272).

Roma music and hip hop seem to be a natural match, as the Roma have a strong tradition of incorporating the folk music of various other ethnic groups ‘while maintaining a strong connection to Roma identities’ (Imre, 2007, p. 272). In fact, much of the popular traditional

music that tourists associate with Hungary often contains more Roma influence than features of original Magyar music (Imre, 2007, p. 272).

3.1. ROMANI

The Romani language has been spoken in Europe for centuries, ‘the only Indo-Aryan language [...] that has been spoken exclusively in Europe since the Middle Ages’ (Matras, 2005, p. 1). Although the number of Romani speakers in Europe has not been reliably established, conservative estimates put this at (at least) 3.5 million, constituting ‘probably the second-largest minority language (after Catalan) in the European Union since its enlargement in May 2004, with the prospect of becoming the largest minority language once Romania and Bulgaria join’ (Matras, 2005, p. 2).⁷

Romani can be described as a ‘non-territorial language’ and shows a great deal of dialect diversity with respect to the geographical distribution of its speakers (Halwachs, 2003, p. 196). Communication between speakers of these dialects is impeded due to factors not directly linked to significant structural differences among them. The factors that affect cross-dialectal communication stem primarily from the fact that ‘all Romani speakers are bilingual’ and tend to code-switch or code-mix between Romani and their other respective mother tongues. Romani is a dominated language; borrowings from the dominant language are extensive (Halwachs, 2003, p. 196). Another factor that affects cross-dialectal communication is a lack of communication between the speakers of the various dialects. Until more recent exchanges among Roma intellectuals and activists were initiated, communication in Romani was limited to within the family and the community, with little contact between Roma groups from different regions or countries (Matras, 2005, pp. 4–5). Romani remains linked to specific domains, used primarily as an in-group or intimate language (Matras, 2005, p. 196). Speakers therefore do not have experience communicating with those who use different varieties of the language. In this type of situation, there are no standard forms to fall back on, as are available for speakers of, for instance, American and Australian English or Mexican and Costa Rican Spanish. Halwachs (2003) characterizes Romani as ‘a heterogeneous cluster of varieties without any homogenizing standard’ (2003, p. 192).

That is not to say there have been no attempts at codification and standardization of Romani, particularly as ‘a symbol of political unity [and] as a token of loyalty to a centralised

policy of cultural emancipation' (Matras, 2005, p. 11). These attempts at standardization have not garnered the support they need. In the linguistic choices Fekete Vonat makes in their music, we will see a similar pattern, where although Romani is used as an in-group marker, it is not exclusively used as a means of asserting Roma identity. The most notable impediment to the establishment of a standard is the primacy of a local over a more widespread global community. Roma activists seek to work first of all for their local communities; it is their support they seek above others'. Political unity is an important goal for Roma activists across Europe, yet the lack of a standard language is not considered 'as an obstacle to unity' (Matras, 2005, p. 11). In a similar vein, Fekete Vonat's lyrics indicate that they also do not see Romani as a necessary vehicle for the expression of their political and social concerns. In fact, they use Hungarian to get those messages across, whereas Romani is reserved for directly addressing Roma, for intimate, in-group communication.

The use of Romani in media across Europe is typically more symbolic rather than representative of a major shift from a state language to Romani.⁸ These emblematic uses include journals, magazines, albums, or songs with Romani titles, but content in the official language of the country in question. Their function is twofold: marking a space as Roma, and simply demonstrating that 'written culture' in Romani is possible, that Romani is a legitimate language alongside the state language, and by extension the Roma people are legitimate as well (Matras, 2005, p. 12).

Not all Roma communities have maintained the language as a marker of identity: 'some Roma groups have given up Romani without [...] losing their ethnic awareness' (Halwachs, 2003, pp. 196–197). For non-Roma, however, Romani is a highly salient identity marker; according to Halwachs it is perceived as 'the Roma's primary cultural identity factor' (2003, p. 203).

4. FEKETE VONAT

The name Fekete Vonat means ‘Black Train’, referring to the trains that Roma workers took between their homes and places of work in Budapest during the communist period. The group formed in the late 1990s, and disbanded in 2001. One member, L. L. Junior, continues to enjoy success as a performer and celebrity in Hungary. Fekete Vonat seems to be the only breakthrough Roma hip-hop group in Hungary. The website www.allmusic.hu has a category for *Roma Rap*, however the only artists listed are Fekete Vonat and L. L. Junior. They also enjoyed a measure of international success; their Romani-language single ‘**Bilako**’ (‘**Without Her**’) made it onto French charts. The group was also cited in a 2001 CNN report on global hip hop.⁹

Their (inter)national success with both Roma and non-Roma audiences did not necessarily represent a victory for Roma equality in Hungary; their recording label, EMI Hungary, refused to release any songs containing Romani on the group’s third album under contract with them (Imre, 2007, p. 274). The group recorded a fourth album in 2004 under a new label. The description on the website www.allmusic.hu makes a point of noting that there are gypsy-language songs on the album (in fact, there is only one).¹⁰

The three members of Fekete Vonat identify themselves as Roma and are bilingual in Hungarian and Romani. Their lyrics are primarily in Hungarian, a tendency in keeping with the general trends across Europe, where ‘the language of rap lyrics in Europe is almost categorically native speech or, with regard to artists of migrant descent, the dominant language of the society the rappers live and work in’ (Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003, p. 473), but also reflective of the everyday linguistic practices of the artists in question: in interviews they have said they consider Hungarian to be their L1. Fekete Vonat’s body of work thus far contains three notable exceptions: two songs from the album *A város másik oldalán* (‘On the Other Side of Town’) and one from *Még várj* that are entirely in Romani, one being the aforementioned international single ‘**Bilako**’, and a fourth song that contains a few instances of codeswitching between Romani and Hungarian. The topics of these songs are very different; the songs in Romani are more light-hearted, and always address other Roma directly, whereas their most political songs are rapped in Hungarian.

Although Fekete Vonat addresses the political and social conditions for Roma in Hungary, they are not a purely political group. They rap about their career, hanging out, brother/sister-hood (in Hungarian, these two concepts can be expressed by the same word,

literally ‘siblinghood’) and love, as well as issues regarding discrimination and racism directed against Hungarian Roma.

I examined the lyrics of 39 songs by Fekete Vonat from four albums and independent releases, focusing on their most successful release: *A város másik oldalán* (‘On the Other Side of Town’) from 2001. Lyrics were obtained from the published album jacket and from the Hungarian online lyric database www.dalszoveg.hu. Romani lyrics were translated by a native Romani speaker fluent in both Hungarian and English, and Hungarian lyrics were translated by the author in consultation with native Hungarian speakers. In the examples, Romani lyrics appear in bold, as do their English glosses. Lyrics in Hungarian appear in italics in the original. Titles of songs appear in quotes.

4.1. FEKETE VONAT AND HIP-HOP IDENTITY

Fekete Vonat emerged out of circumstances similar to African Americans’ – in terms of poverty, discrimination and racism – and their more politically charged songs evoke the aspects of their identity common to the GHHN. In the song ‘Flamenco Rap’, they describe their Roma music as *az igazi fekete zaj* (‘the real Black noise’) and refer to the Roma’s dark skin:

- (1) *hé barna kislány csókolom a szád* ‘Hey little brown girl, I am kissing your lips’
‘Flamenco Rap’

Similarly, in ‘*Mondd miért*’ (‘Say why’):

- (2) *Barna bőröm ez én vagyok* ‘Brown skin is what I am
Megváltozni nem fogok I will not change’
‘*Mondd miért*’

These references to skin color indicate that Fekete Vonat do racialize their identity to a certain degree. At the same time, though, they also ground their lyrics in their own experiences as Roma, rather than aligning it with African Americans, stating that what they do is fresh, as in the

following excerpt from their track *'Reggeltől estig olaszosan'* ('From morning till night, going commando').

(3) <i>Tudod ilyen a stílusunk</i>	'You know this is how our style is
<i>Mi nem az amerikai filmekből lopunk</i>	We don't steal from American movies
<i>És büszkék vagyunk rá hogy romák vagyunk</i>	We're proud to be Roma'

'Reggeltől estig olaszosan'

Topography plays an important role in the identity Fekete Vonat expresses through their music as a way of establishing their own specific urban identity. Whether this identity is constructed deliberately as a means of claiming membership in the GHHN or simply stems from the group's personal experiences in Budapest is unclear; however the urban experience is central to many of their lyrics. The song *'Reggeltől estig olaszosan'*, for example, depicts a day cruising around Budapest, meeting up with other Roma youth in specific Budapest neighborhoods.

Neighborhoods all around the city are simply identified by name without additional description or reference to who lives there; the song portrays the city as the rappers' playground. Fekete Vonat's songs are very much rooted in Budapest, with constant references to the neighborhoods they are from and frequent, in particular the 8th district, also known as *Józsefváros*, known for its significant Roma populations for well over a century. The neighborhood is often characterized as a slum, although gentrification projects have been implemented over the past few years (Hodgson, 2005, p. 7).

The title song of their third album, *'Harlemi éjszakák'* ('Harlem Nights'), refers to their neighborhood as 'Harlem'. However, this is not a creative use of this nickname by Fekete Vonat as a way of drawing a parallel with the ghettos of New York; rather, it is a well-established nickname for the neighborhood already widely in use.¹¹ Although Fekete Vonat could be playing on this traditional association of *Józsefváros* with Harlem, there are no other lyrics in the song to suggest that this reference is intended by the artists to draw a parallel with African Americans. In addition, the slums that Fekete Vonat describes are not the typical violent or dangerous 'ghetto' often found in American gangsta rap. Rather, what is described is a neighborhood where children and adults learn to be strong and get by in the face of adversity rather than in the face of violence. The historical use of the name 'Harlem' for this

neighborhood does, nevertheless, indicate that the general public associates the Roma with being Black. Fekete Vonat does not seem to need the additional boost of casting themselves as Black, contrary to other Hungarian acts, such as Ganxsta Zolee and Klikk who incorporate more stereotypical gangsta rap ghetto imagery and direct references to African American culture. Such references are absent from Fekete Vonat's work.

Instead, Fekete Vonat addresses a number of specific problems that the Roma face in Hungary in '*Mondd miért*' ('Say why'), their strongest denouncement of racism against the Roma in Hungary. They describe the general disdain that most Roma experience in Hungary:

- (4) *Miért kerülnek az emberek* 'Why do people avoid/shun (us)
Gúnyos szemek tekintete Looking with scornful eyes'

'Mondd miért'

They also express pride in their ethnicity, through reference to skin color (see extract (2) above). They continue with the more institutionalized racism that they face, such as limited access to education and lack of security:

- (5) *Gyermekeink nevessenek* 'Our children should laugh
Iskolába mehessenek They should go to school
Biztonságban vígan éljenek They should live cheerfully in security'

'Mondd miért'

By painting a picture of the Roma experience as one of social injustice, Fekete Vonat makes clear the parallels with the African American experience for all to see without for that matter needing to draw these parallels explicitly. It is perhaps for this reason that Fekete Vonat does not need to rely too heavily on the race metaphor via explicit references to African Americans in order to portray themselves as authentic members of the GHHN. Instead, they use references to skin color, bringing in a hint of the race metaphor as a way of categorizing the ethnic distinction between the Roma and the general Hungarian population.

4.2. ROMA IDENTITY AND CODE CHOICE

We have seen that the dominant language tends to serve as the default in European hip hop, but why? In Fekete Vonat's work the message and the intended audience seem to stand out as the deciding factors in language choice. All of Fekete Vonat's songs that address social and political issues are in Hungarian. By not addressing themselves exclusively to other Roma (through the medium of Romani) in their more political songs, their lyrics appeal to Hungarians to understand the plight of the Roma and change their attitudes towards them.

When Fekete Vonat *does* rap in Romani, or code-switch between Romani and Hungarian, they are addressing the Roma more directly. These songs are more light-hearted and have virtually no political overtones. In 'Bilako' ('Without Her'), they directly address other Roma:

(6) **Haj romale, T'aven tume baxhtale!** **'Hey Roma people, may you be greeted!**

O Kalo Zibano akanak gilyabarel **The Black Train is singing now**

tumenge variso, Shunen athe: **something for you, listen up'**

'Bilako'

The rest of the song is a light-hearted love song about meeting a girl and wanting to take her home and be with her.

In 'Numa Romanes II' ('Only in Romani II'), they also directly address other Roma as the in-group, and non-Roma as the out-group:

(7) **Shunen athe, avel e vorba tumenge,** **'Listen up, this message is going out to you**

le romendar devorta le rakhlenge **From Roma to the non-Roma**

Ame gilyabarasa thaj tume khelen **We will sing and you will dance**

Mukhav le rakhlen vi von shaj shunen **I will let non-Roma listen as well'**

Although they are actually addressing non-Roma in Romani, this case is interesting as they say ‘we [Roma] will sing and you [non-Roma] will dance’, so the non-Roma do not need to understand the Romani lyrics. These lyrics also sound like a declaration of power, in that they suggest the Roma will make the non-Roma dance, and also that these artists will give non-Roma permission to participate. Interestingly, this declaration of power over the non-Roma is rapped only in Romani, therefore making it more an instance of ‘symbolic language use’ (Androutsopoulos, forthcoming) reserved for in-group communication.

Our only examples of code-switching between the two languages come from another love song, Flamenco Rap. The rapper is speaking to a Roma girl, identified as dark-skinned, as we saw in example (1) above. In (8), he wants to know whether she understands Romani, but reassures her that it is not a shortcoming if she does not:

- (8) *nem tudom romnyi mennyire érted* ‘I don’t know **wife** how much you understand’
de megkérdem tőled sar zhanes ‘but I am asking you **if you know Romani?**
romanes?
ha nem nát nem nincs semmi baj ‘If not, then not, no problem’

‘Flamenco Rap’

This second declaration is made only in Hungarian, while the question is asked in a mixture of the two languages. This song reflects the fact that for the Roma in Hungary, speaking Romani can, but does not have to, be an essential defining feature of being Roma.

In a 1998 online interview, Fekete Vonat was asked explicitly about their code choices and what gives their music an identity as *Roma Rap*.¹² They described their Romani lyrics as the result of messing around and mixing Romani words into Hungarian lyrics and integrating Roma folklore into their songs. Junior noted that Hungarian is typically the jumping off point, adding that translations into Romani do not always yield rhythmically pleasing results. They saw rap as a tool for expressing the problems they and their fellow Roma experience and saw a market for

that type of rap, pointing out that if they were not able to sell their music, they would not have obtained a recording contract. They also did not view their *Roma Rap* as an exclusively Roma product – noting that they would like the participation of other Roma on future albums, in addition to their previous non-Roma collaborators.

4.3. FILTERING AND MARKETABILITY: THE RECORD LABEL SCANDAL

A 2001 press release from EMI Hungary stated that songs entirely in Romani would have to be accompanied by a recorded Hungarian version in order to avoid provoking ‘resentment in the average listener’.¹³ This surprising decision – as Fekete Vonat’s previous use of Romani did not seem to hurt sales – led the group to break their contract with the label. Interestingly, it is the medium, and not the message, that was deemed potentially offensive. As noted above, Fekete Vonat’s most politically charged songs were all released in Hungarian, thus accessible to the ‘average listener’. No objections were raised, however, to the content of the messages – just to their form.

Such a move indicates that code-choice in hip hop, or indeed any form of public discourse, is not always a matter of artistic freedom; at various levels, marketability and mutual intelligibility are definitely taken into consideration. Fekete Vonat was not asked to make their lyrics inauthentic by using standard Hungarian, but they were required to abandon a language that carries with it particular cultural significance, one deemed undesirable. This experience highlights the need to keep in mind that language in hip hop is a collaborative effort in which decisions are made at a number of different – and not necessarily cooperative – levels. The perception by EMI Hungary that Romani lyrics would lead to feelings of hostility among potential audiences underscores the perception among the general population – if not among the Roma themselves – that the Romani language is a strong aspect of Roma identity. Simply not understanding popular music lyrics in a foreign language is certainly not the heart of the matter: music in English, German, Serbian, and a number of other languages is massively popular in Hungary, especially when it comes to hip hop. The recording label’s problem seemed to be more with what the language choice indexes, rather than with the idea of selling music in a language foreign to the majority of the population.

5. CODE CHOICE AND AUDIENCE DESIGN

We have seen that Fekete Vonat uses language to appeal to local Hungarian and/or Roma populations, depending on the subject matter. The Hungarian group Realistic Crew, on the other hand, acknowledges that they compose lyrics in English in order to gain an international audience:

‘It’s really strange to me,’ says Dalma Berger, the singer . . . ‘My lyrics are important for me, and I want people to understand. If I write in Hungarian, only Hungarians can understand. Why would this music be more interesting if we sing in Hungarian than in English?’ (Batey, 2008)

This perspective provides further evidence of audience design as the basis for language choice, and consequently may explain the trend of the dominant language of a country serving as the matrix language of hip hop. The dominant language of Fekete Vonat’s intended audience is Hungarian, while Realistic Crew appears to desire an identity as a more international group, choosing English as their primary language.

Switching between varieties of a language or between two languages is more common than not around the world. As long as the majority of the population is familiar with, or has at least accepted the codes in question, code-switching may not serve as a deterrent to or restrict the artist’s potential audience. Mitchell notes that although word play, varieties, or codes can be employed as ‘resistance vernacular’ strategies, if they are not widely used or understood within the target community ‘their limited accessibility in both linguistic and marketing terms largely condemns them to a heavily circumscribed local context of reception’ (Mitchell, 2000, p. 52). The social indexicality of linguistic forms, and, by implication, of entire codes also plays a role. Even if certain immigrant groups are devalued in various European cultures, in many countries their languages still have the exotic quality of being from a far-off land, and this exotic quality can be put to artistic use. Romani and the Roma do not have this same exotic aspect of being *foreign*: in Hungary they are simply *other*, an other that is not valued. We see, however, that the pattern of rapping in the dominant language also holds true for Roma rap in Hungary, following the same general tendency as immigrant languages across Europe.

In their examination of North African hip hop, Davies and Bentahila (2006) found that code-switching can be used to achieve two opposing ends: ‘it may be a device for closing off discourse to outsiders, localizing it firmly with a specific community’ or ‘it may be a means of

opening up the text, offering points of entry to various audiences and resisting too rigid a specification of whom the text belongs to and whom it is addressed to' (2006, p. 390). In Fekete Vonat's case, they seem to make their language choices to perform the former: the songs entirely in Romani are clearly intended to address their fellow Roma or, as in the case of our example that contains code-switching, they are intended to represent the form a conversation among Roma would take.

The juxtaposition of experiences and productions by Fekete Vonat and Realistic Crew above suggests that the intended audience plays the primary role in language choice, a consideration that affects not only how lyrics are written, but also which lyrics ultimately get released. Fekete Vonat seeks to appeal to a wider Hungarian audience in order to address the conditions for Roma in Hungary, as evidenced by their choice of the dominant language to deliver social messages, and this goal can partially account for their use of Hungarian. We must not neglect, however, that market forces affect and very often determine language choice – especially when the choice is between languages with very different indexicalities, whether it be on a local or international scale.

6. CONCLUSION

The global hip-hop sphere provides an interesting domain in which to examine identity construction through language both because of the prominent role of language in hip-hop culture and because we can compare the linguistic content of lyrics with additional sources that confirm the identity artists seek to establish. The interview with Realistic Crew revealed their desire to be an internationally accessible group, which they accomplish linguistically through the use of English rather than Hungarian in their lyrics. On the other hand, the 2001 EMI Hungary press release indicated that the use of Romani was perceived by the record label as indexing an undesirable identity, and their actions highlight the need to take into consideration the multiple filters an artist's work may pass through before it reaches the public.

As we return to Alim's (2009) three questions cited in section 1, we find that Fekete Vonat has appropriated hip hop in a way that highlights the shared experiences between Hungarian Roma and the GHHN with respect to socioeconomic conditions and racism and by evoking the race metaphor through references to skin color. Fekete Vonat manipulates their linguistic resources, choosing Romani or Hungarian (or mixing the two) as a way of identifying their target audience and highlighting different identities with respect to the subject matter at hand. Their strategies of using both languages to index different identities or address different audiences have clearly met with resistance that stems from the clash of recording labels' concerns for marketability and the (perceived) intolerance for the Roma among the general Hungarian population. A comparison with Roma communities in Hungary and abroad would be useful in examining how the popularity of global hip hop has affected Roma identity as well as how code-switching between Romani and majority languages is employed beyond the realm of hip hop in Hungary and across Europe.

On a broader scale, we have seen that global hip hop exhibits a universality that goes beyond characterizing artists as *Black*, but also that, if only as a metaphor, 'blackness' remains an integral part of authenticity in hip hop. Although as observers we may discover that race is not a defining feature of different hip-hop communities around the world, we cannot totally disregard its influence; it does remain a salient point of reference for theorists and fans alike, and the primary property of authenticity. The notion of a race metaphor in hip hop does not mean that all artists try to portray themselves as Black in order to gain authenticity, but simply that race is a salient reference point around which most hip-hop artists seem to construct their

identity. Further research on hip-hop identity construction around the world should take into account perceptions of race, and potentially ethnicity, even when they may not seem to be the most relevant criteria for establishing authenticity, to further enhance our understanding of the unfolding dialogue between the local and the global that lies at the heart of global hip hop

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¹ The precise definitions of rap and hip hop themselves are subject to an extensive, sometimes heated, debate. Samy Alim makes the following distinction: ‘hip hop means the whole culture of the movement. When you talk about rap you have to understand that rap is part of the hip hop Culture’ (2006, p. 4). ‘Hip hop’ is generally considered to comprise an entire lifestyle – fashion, dancing and art as well as politics and worldviews – while ‘rap’ designates a specific lyrical musical style: ‘the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over musical beats’ (Alim, 2004, p. 388 and 2009, p. 2). The equation of the two terms is a consequence of rap’s centrality in hip-hop culture as its most recognizable element (Alim, 2004, p. 338). As Androutsopoulos (2009, p. 43) also points out, rap has become the aspect of hip hop most commonly associated with the genre and is often considered the most representative of it. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms ‘rap’ and ‘hip hop’ interchangeably when referring to the music, as many of the authors cited have done, leaving the final verdict on the distinction up to the performers, producers, record labels and fans.

² “‘Serious’ rap – a unique U.S. inner-city fusion of funk, technified reggae, teen-to-teen “hardcore” rock, and the early 1970s “poetry of the black experience” [...] – has [...] always had its real roots in the Neighborhood, the black gang-banger Underground, like trees over skeptics. Black music, of and for blacks’ (Costello and Wallace, 1990, p. 21).

³ The ethnic group of interest will be referred to as *Roma*, rather than the often pejorative English term *gypsy*, and their language as *Romani*. Sometimes referred to as *gypsy languages*, the term *Romani* has been used in academia since the 1800s as a neutral, non-pejorative term. Although the designation *cigány* (‘gypsy’) in Hungary can encompass groups in addition to the *Roma*, such as the *Boyash*, because the band in question self-identify as *Roma* and claim *Romani* as one of their languages, I will use these terms throughout this paper.

⁴ For a discussion on the multiple origins and influences on the emergence of hip hop, see Pennycook and Mitchell (2009).

⁵ For similar distinctions drawn within the Cypriot and Egyptian hip-hop scenes, see Stylianou (forthcoming), and Williams (forthcoming), respectively.

⁶ <http://www.mahasz.hu/m/?menu=arany_es_platinalemez&menu2=adatbazis>, accessed 30 September 2009.

⁷ Romania and Bulgaria have since joined the EU in January 2007.

⁸ For an application of the distinction between base and symbolic language use in hip-hop lyrics, see Androutsopoulos (forthcoming).

⁹ The full text of the report can be viewed at:

<<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/SHOWBIZ/Music/01/15/wb.hiphop/index.html>>, accessed 30 September 2009.

¹⁰ <http://www.allmusic.hu/index.php?SID=&oldal=albumlista&h_id=3447>, accessed 30 September 2009.

¹¹ <http://www.c3.hu/othercontent/linkbudapest/site9901/archives/menes_bio.htm>, <<http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00003/00024/varga.html>>, accessed 30 September 2009>, <<http://www.balaton-zeitung.info/Hohe-Kriminalitaetin-Budapester-City>>, accessed 30 September 2009.

¹² <<http://www.amarodrom.hu/archivum/98/vonat.html>>, accessed 30 September 2009.

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