

Reading Rap with Fanon and Fanon with Rap

The Potential of Transcultural Recognition

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Already in the early twentieth century, Frantz Fanon advanced the decolonisation of psychiatric praxis (see Vergès and Razanajao et al) and his writings have been receiving renewed and intensifying attention in recent years. Evidence of an increasing engagement can be found in, for instance, the re-publication of his best-known texts *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008 and 2017) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004) in new translations and with new introductions,¹ while publications considering his life, writings and ideas have contributed to a body of Fanonian thought. Homi Bhabha (1993; 2004), Paul Gilroy (2000; 2005; 2010) and Achille Mbembe (2011; 2013), to mention only a few, have contributed decisively to this reconstruction, elaboration and dissemination of Fanon's ideas.² In his W.E.B. Du Bois lectures, Gilroy gives an explanation for the renewed interest. He argues that Fanon's "insights reveal him, perhaps unexpectedly, to be our contemporary. Whatever resonance his writing may have had in the past, it speaks powerfully to the political circumstances of this era" (*Darker than Blue* 155). Gilroy specifically highlights Fanon's relevance in relation to the USA in the twenty-first century. Russell A. Potter, for instance, discusses Fanon in relation to rap music's response to detrimental urban environments in the USA. In

1 In the French language, Achille Mbembe edited and prefaced Fanon's newly released *Œuvres* in 2011. In 2013, after the book was out of print for several decades, the publishing house Turia + Kant reissued the German edition of *Black Skin, White Masks*.

2 The body of texts on Fanonian thought is vast, widespread and continues to grow. As it is impossible to do justice to this thriving field by mentioning all of these here, I only refer to scholars of Fanonian thought that are quoted in the present essay.

this context, Potter argues that “Fanon’s revolutionary program has taken on a sudden new relevance” (87).

At the same time Gilroy argues in reference to rap music that “[t]he counter-cultural voice of black Atlantic popular music has faded out” (*Darker than Blue* 121 and 124; see also *Against Race* 179-182). More specifically, he analyses popular music’s critical potential in “[m]aking the past audible in the present” (*Darker than Blue* 127) and laments that this kind of “historic system now also appears to be in retreat” (127). Gilroy’s argument contradicts earlier critics who highlight rap music’s remarkable quality as a medium of (music-) historical citation. Potter, for instance, highlights “[h]ip-hop’s continual citation of the sonic and verbal archives” (26).³ Rap music thus establishes and enables a continued, complex sonic engagement with the past.

The relation to the past is an important yet conflicted aspect in Frantz Fanon’s reflections on one of the central concerns of his writings, colonial neurosis. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes that “there is a determined *Erlebnis*⁴ at the origin of every neurosis” (123). The *Erlebnis* he refers to is colonization. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he explains that “[t]he colonized world is a world divided in two” (3). This world produces alienated Blacks on the one side and alienated Whites on the other (see Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 12) so that both exist “along neurotic lines” (42). In the opening of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argues that “the juxtaposition of the black and white races has resulted in a massive psycho-existential complex. By analysing it we aim to destroy it” (xvi). As the reference to “complex” indicates and the subsequent psychoanalytical analyses demonstrate, he seeks explanation for the pathological state in past events. Searching for a possible remedy to this state, he nonetheless writes: “Whether you like it or not, the past can in no way be my guide in the actual

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- 3 Potter furthermore explains that “rap DJs have continued their raids not only on African-American musical traditions, but on every form of discourse, ranging from news-casts, talk-shows, movie dialogue, sound effects, television themes and answering messages” (42). See also Richard Shusterman (passim esp. 623), Tricia Rose (*Black Noise* 79) and Cheryl Keyes (25 and 147).
 - 4 Early twentieth-century German philosophy saw an extensive debate over the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. This discussion involved, among others, Wilhelm Dilthey, Walter Benjamin and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Fanon describes colonization as an *Erlebnis* instead of an *Erfahrung*, because the traumatising events do not add up to an understanding but rather dismember experience and fracture everyday life. The problem with transferring *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* into English is that both translate as ‘experience’ and thus blur the distinction.

state of things” (200). He demands to stop being “a slave to the past” as “the real *leap* consists of introducing invention into life” (200, 204, emphasis in the original). According to Fanon therefore the solution is not remembering but inventing. With this claim he runs into an apparent paradox as he demands to focus solely on the future, while the treatment of neuroses, as with psychiatric praxis in general, is grounded in the past (see Kruks 132).

On a general level, this essay highlights the actuality of Fanon and the political relevance of rap music by pointing out a possible dialogue between Fanon’s reflections on colonial neurosis and discussions in contemporary rap lyrics. More specifically, it seeks to solve the apparent contradiction – between focusing on the past and leaping into the future – by reading Fanon in conjunction with the rap song “Street Corner” released in 2006 by Masta Killa featuring Inspectah Deck and the GZA. Firstly, I will argue that the genre of reality rap is particularly revealing in reference to what Fanon calls colonial neurosis. Secondly, rap music will be shown to potentially point beyond a state of neurosis: analysing Masta Killa’s “Street Corner,” I will exemplarily demonstrate how this process functions in form and in content. The discussion will show that in twenty-first-century rap music colonial neurosis in the Fanonian tradition continues to play an important role as both relate to the past and demand recognition in the present.

REPRESENTING A STATE OF NEUROSIS THROUGH RAP MUSIC

One fundamental argument Fanon introduces in *Black Skin, White Masks* is the conjunction of the psychic with the social environment in the constitution of the subject. As Fanon puts it: “Alongside phylogeny and ontogeny, there is also sociogeny” (xv). This means that additionally to the evolutionary development of humans and the development of an individual subject, the social environment needs to be considered in order to understand pathological formations. The consequence is crucial as it historicizes theories and methods of psychoanalysis (see Lebeau 120): Pathologies have to be understood in their time and place, in their social and political environment. When Fanon analyses the source of colonial neurosis, therefore, he turns to its social and spatial organization. He writes: “The colonial world is a compartmentalized world” (*The Wretched* 3). If for Fanon the notion of colonial neurosis is related to geographical separation and social segregation and if (a certain genre of) rap music is able to represent such

structures, it can be hypothesized that such a genre harbours the potential to present a state of colonial neurosis.

To begin with, rap music emerged in a time and place of increased segregation. In *Black Noise* (1994), Tricia Rose describes the emergence of rap music as one aspect of the hip hop movement in the 1970s and '80s in New York City. In this period, New York and other urban centres across the USA transformed into post-industrial spaces. Summarising the living conditions, Rose writes that “[s]ince this period, low-income housing has continued to disappear and blacks and Hispanics are still much more likely to live in overcrowded, dilapidated, and seriously undermaintained spaces” (28). In these areas, economic, political and social factors “exacerbated the already widening gap between classes and races” (27). Furthermore, “[e]ven though urban America has always been socially and economically divided,” Rose argues, “these divisions have taken on a new dimension” (28).

Aggravated segregation created the “shantytown” (Potter 86), or ghetto, as a specifically circumscribed space, which is shunned by those outside and stigmatises those inside.⁵ It is important to recognise that outside forces crucially produced detrimental conditions inside the ghetto: white flight to the suburbs, municipal financial cutbacks and reduction of social services.⁶ The ghetto is excluded from the surrounding environment, yet simultaneously governed by it. In this way, the ghetto exemplifies what Giorgio Agamben calls the camp. He writes that “[t]he camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (168-169, emphasis in the original). He argues that the spatial arrangement of the camp derives from the temporal state of exception. In this state of exception, a hegemonic power decides to exclude a population from the rule of law and, nevertheless, rules it, that is dominates it, outside the law. According to Agamben, a population thus specified becomes *homo sacer*, or bare life, which can be killed but cannot be mourned; it is left to die without compassion. In “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe agrees with Agamben yet adds that the

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- 5 This social and cultural segregation nonetheless also attracts outsiders to venture inside, just as insiders travel outside. The history of rap music contributes significant evidences of these dynamics (see Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* 145).
 - 6 Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton argue that these developments did not take place unintentionally and anonymously through abstract market forces, but were deliberately created through federal policy (see 2). Michelle Alexander goes a step further in arguing that ghetto citizens are also kept from positively transforming the ghettos by being “trapped in a closed circuit of perpetual marginality, circulating between ghetto and prison” (196).

colony and the apartheid regime constitute a “concentration of biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege” (22). This leads Mbembe to understand “the efficacy of the colony as a formation of terror” (23). Mbembe calls this colonial strategy necropolitics. Potter highlights parallels between the colony and the ghetto:

Just as in any colonial city, urban African-Americans have found themselves in a virtual shantytown, only this time near the center rather than on the periphery of the postmodern city. Again, just as in colonized nations, black Americans have been subject to aerial fly-bys, frequent and arbitrary police raids, lengthy imprisonments, and at times of open revolt (such as the Los Angeles rebellion) occupying troops. In this context, Fanon’s revolutionary program has taken on a sudden new relevance. (86-87)

Rap music emerged in this environment and struggle. Comparable social relations and material conditions in the colonial world and the post-industrial ghetto – as both emerge as geographically separate, socially segregated and racially hierarchical spaces – may produce comparable pathologies.

Fanon autobiographically explores the aetiology of what he calls colonial neurosis. In his two main texts, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes a process of objectification leading to a mental state of alienation. He recalls an encounter with a small boy who exclaims to his mother: “Look! A Negro!” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 91). Fanon describes his immediate response: “Disoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who had no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an object” (92). This *Erlebnis* enforces the dissociation of “himself,” separating “him” from “self” to alienate the mind from the body, turning what was his self into an Other. “The result,” writes Ronald A. T. Judy, “is the dissolution of the ego, the split, or double consciousness of the *nègre*” (68, emphasis in the original; see also Lebeau 115). The documentation and discussion suggests that this *Erlebnis* continues to influence Fanon’s thoughts, experiences and actions. Fanon is haunted by the memory of the White man as another Other.⁷ This recollection

7 While colonised and coloniser may be affected differently, the process of othering also imprisons the boy; the coloniser is haunted (see Bhabha, “Remembering Fanon” 120). Following Fanon’s reflections on the Manichean structure suggests that the split Judy mentions repeats itself in varying ways and degrees: in Fanon, between Fanon and the small boy, in the small boy and possibly beyond. One may wonder how the event affected future actions of Fanon, the child or the child’s mother, possibly by im-

indicates why Fanon defines colonisation as an *Erlebnis* and not an *Erfahrung*. Severed *Erlebnisse* fail to create *Erfahrung*; a succession of events that do not add up to (constructively informing) experience. Against his gesture of relinquishing the past, in this case Fanon recalls the past to understand his present condition. This potential of remembering the past to transform the present also constitutes a central feature of some rap songs.

The musicologist Adam Krims identifies what he labels “reality rap” as a sub-genre of rap music which is concerned with “an epistemological/ontological project to map the realities of (usually black) inner-city life” (70; see also Keyes 90). Krims’ definition focuses on concrete living environments and their philosophical implications. The preceding discussion of Fanon, Agamben and Mbembe highlights that concrete environments give expression to more abstract economic, political and social factors. Krims’ definition can thus be revised in the sense that reality rap not necessarily describes inner-city life or the ghetto, but more generally processes of stigmatization, objectification and alienation.⁸ Instances of this genre can be found in record releases as early as 1979 (only one year after the first rap record’s release) in Brother D with Collective Effort’s “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise?”, Grandmaster Flash’s critically acclaimed “The Message” in 1982 and Wu-Tang Clan’s “C.R.E.A.M.” in 1993. While reality rap is economically speaking not the most successful rap genre, it bears the potential of revealing and transcending processes causing colonial neurosis.⁹

TOWARD TRANSCENDING COLONIAL NEUROSIS

To understand how pathologising circumstances can be transcended, it is helpful to analyse their aetiology. According to Fanon, traces of neurosis can be found in the compartmentalization of “[t]he colonial world” which, he writes, “is a Mani-

aging and creating further ‘Others.’ (For a useful and critical discussion of the Other, see Young 36-39.)

- 8 If rap music presents a state of colonial neurosis, this does not necessarily mean that this state is mimetically reproducing a rapper’s experience, but rather that the rap song’s features enable the audience to reflect on the emergence, present and possible future of colonial neurosis.
- 9 The following discussion focuses on the genre of reality rap. It goes without saying that the long history and diverse genres of rap music produced many more varieties than the specific project of reality rap.

chaeen world” (*The Wretched* 6). The sectors of the coloniser on the one hand and the colonised on the other “follow the dictates of mutual exclusion” (4). Fanon claims that “[b]y penetrating its geographical configuration and classification we shall be able to delineate the backbone on which the *decolonized* society is reorganized” (3, emphasis added). He not only regards the social and geographical structure as fundamental to the colonial world, but also anticipates that unsettling this order challenges the colonial structure. At the same time, Fanon claims that “[w]e cannot go resolutely forward unless we first realize our alienation” (163). His strategy of decolonisation thus combines an analysis of objective circumstances and subjective experiences. Consequently, segregation of the colonial world can be analysed in relation to environments and subjects. Put into relation, alienation on the individual level can be understood as objectification on the social level. To end individual alienation, objectification on the social level has to be overcome (and vice versa). Transcending social and geographical borders sonically, that is, through sound such as rap music, may enable identification and alliances across borders.

The emergence of rap music in the late 1970s and early 1980s caused considerable irritations. Rap was (and still is) scandalised for displaying racism, violence, misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism etc.¹⁰ In response to public outcry, the ‘parental advisory’ notification was introduced in 1985 and henceforth displayed on CD covers, on posters and in video clips. Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois point out that ironically “this renegade attitude contributed to rap’s commercial success” (xxxviii). In other words, the irritations furthered circulation, which in turn increased irritations and so on. In 1989, against the backdrop of these scandalising indictments, Nelson George argues that the controversial content simply displays rap music’s “ultra-urban, unromantic, hyperrealistic, neo-nationalist, antiassimilationist, aggressive Afrocentric impulse” (40). According to George, rap music does not paper over social cracks but rather airs them in public. While averse discourse uses rap music as a scapegoat, blaming it for instigating moral and legal transgressions, sympathisers of rap music, like George and Rose (*Black Noise* and *Hip Hop Wars*), argue that it enables the fundamentally necessary representation of critical issues.¹¹ Public discourse evi-

10 See, for instance, concerning racism (Chang “Race, Class, Conflict and Empowerment”), violence (Rose, *Black Noise* 1), misogyny (150), homophobia (151), anti-Semitism (Chang, *Can’t Stop* 284).

11 Tricia Rose furthermore argues that accusations against rap music take place in an “uneven and sometimes racist way in which sexist [and other] offences are prosecuted, stigmatized, and reported” (*Black Noise* 150). Most importantly, specific instances

dences that not only moral and legal but also geographical boundaries are being crossed. Irrespective of positive or negative judgements, the ongoing political, juridical and cultural negotiations of rap music highlight that rap music has transcended and continues to transcend political, social and cultural borders.¹²

Rap music's transgressive potential has historically been a significant feature. Reality rap is often created in communities that are abandoned by national and municipal policy and is employed by community members as well as spokespersons to address national and even international audiences (see Keyes 157-185, see Chang *Can't Stop* 224-229). This publicity enables discussion as well as critique of segregation, discrimination and so forth. Rose argues that rap music coincidentally "produced internal and external dialogues that affirmed the experiences and identities of the participants and at the same time offered critiques of larger society that were directed to both the hip hop community and society in general" (*Black Noise* 60). Alongside engagements within the community and majority culture, other marginalised communities are also addressed for potential transcultural alliances. As rap music "invites identification across forbidden lines," Potter ascribes to it a "liberatory potential" (10). Rap music's commercial success surpasses geographical, ethnic, or cultural settings. Its success thrives on its transcultural dissemination and communication as it functions as a globally circulating medium enabling dialogue, identification and alliances.¹³ In a parallel manner, Mbembe elaborates Fanon and argues that even if decolonisation "mobilized local actors in a circumscribed country or a national territory, each time they forged from the beginning a solidarity on a planetary and transnational scale" (*Critique* 248).¹⁴ In the process of rap music's creation, dissemination and reception, connections are made possible with other marginalised

of offensive lyrics cannot account for the whole genre of music (see 150). Therefore, it is necessary to analyse performances of rap music individually and evaluate them accordingly. This necessity, furthermore, exists in both ways, for the accusations as well as the vindications by George and Rose. For the present case of Masta Killa's "Street Corner," see also footnote 27.

- 12 See, for instance, Sujatha Fernandes's recollection of feeling addressed by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" in a working-class beachside neighbourhood of Sydney, Australia (xi).
- 13 See, for instance, also Fernandes as well as Porfilio and Viola.
- 14 Translation by the author. In the original Mbembe writes: "Même lorsqu'elles mobilisaient des acteurs locaux, dans un pays ou sur un territoire national bien circonscrit, elles étaient chaque fois au point de départ de solidarités forgées sur une échelle planétaire et transnationale" (*Critique* 248).

communities as well as with majority communities. These connections bear the potential to destabilise the assumed Manichaean structures identified and criticised by Fanon – of us versus them, for instance, – as they transcend artificially erected boundaries.

Fanon theorises the encounter and engagement of the coloniser and the colonised through G.W.F. Hegel's concept of recognition. On the final pages of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explains how objectification and consequently alienation can be overcome. The state of "thingness" (170) can only be left behind in the discovery of humanity. He claims: "I am fighting for the birth of a human world, in other words, a world of reciprocal recognition" (193). Fanon suggests that the conflict between coloniser and colonised, between master and slave, can be overcome through reciprocal recognition, as a move beyond othering and the colony's Manichaean structures.¹⁵ It is exactly at this point that ontogenesis and sociogenesis converge. The subject strives for recognition in society, which in turn is constituted by individual subjects. The act of recognition is not only a symbolic process, but it entails individual, legal and social aspects.¹⁶ Importantly, Fanon moves beyond Hegel by extending his reflections to transracial,

15 At the same time, rap music itself inhabits a position of power that possibly functions as a means to marginalise, exclude or oppress (see, for instance, Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 348-349). While the songs exhibit dialogic encounters in terms of musical, dubbed and lyrical patterns, the commodification of these dialogic instances not only enables, but also stifles the endeavour of reciprocal recognition. It reintroduces reification – the audience pays for its sonic experience while rappers are remunerated for their performances – and money potentially takes centre stage as the means of exchange instead of rap music. The problem, then, is less the communication through money, than that money may become the central thing exchanged; stifling in turn communication. Here it is of course important to differentiate between different forms of musical exchanges, such as record sales, online circulation and live performances.

16 Corresponding to Fanon's argument of subjective and objective conditions, Axel Honneth productively discusses recognition in its individual *and* institutional realisations (see *Reification* 60) and thus invalidates critiques that only focus on the symbolic level (see García Düttmann 32). Furthermore, Fanon's analysis of the *Ereignis* of being recognised through the exclamation "Look! A Negro!" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 91) highlights that recognition is not always necessarily positive (see Foucault 246). This ambiguity necessitates an analysis of what it means to recognise someone's humanity. Unfortunately this task exceeds the scope of the present analysis. For further investigations of the concept of recognition, see, for instance, Honneth (*The Struggle for Recognition; Die Idee des Sozialismus*) as well as Fraser and Honneth.

transnational and transcultural engagements.¹⁷ While the medium of rap music may initially enable symbolic recognition, its contents harbour the potential to include more far-reaching implications. Some instances of reality rap perform and demand recognition for rappers, marginalised communities and aggravating social conditions.

DECOLONISING IN FORM AND CONTENT – MASTA KILLA’S “STREET CORNER”

Masta Killa is the ninth member of the Wu-Tang Clan from Staten Island, New York City (see Bradley and DuBois 532-533). The song “Street Corner” also features two of the Wu-Tang Clan’s senior artists, Inspectah Deck and GZA the Genius. The following analysis attempts to answer three questions: Firstly, do the lyrics indicate colonial neurosis?¹⁸ Secondly, does the song point toward a possibility to transcend colonial neurosis? Thirdly, does it enable us to reread Fanon?

When Inspectah Deck describes daily life in “Street Corner” as an “every day war,” he gestures towards the neurotic conditions of surviving in a metaphorical combat zone.¹⁹ Parallel to Fanon’s reflections, the lyrics describe this combat zone through objective circumstances and subjective experiences. The objective circumstances are indicated metaphorically, when Inspectah Deck says: “The ‘hoods are prisons inside / the only difference is the doors don’t

17 Since Fanon extensively reflects on the conditions, implications, and potentials of a transcultural encounter from the “small boy” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 91) to “humanity” (78 and 204), his writings contradict Henry Louis Gates Jr’s important but finally reductive analysis (see Gates 470).

18 A more detailed analysis could also treat the subject of colonial neurosis in reference to musical patterns. Poetic significations of objectification can also be found on this level (see Wegner “Kompetitiv Multidirektionale Erinnerung im Medium der Rap Musik”), yet unfortunately exceed the current analysis.

19 The song’s official lyrics have not been published, online lyrics are often faulty and therefore all lyrics were transcribed by the author.

With the names Masta Killa, Inspectah Deck and GZA the rappers employ pseudonyms for their rap performances. It can be assumed that these pseudonyms refer less to their private identities than to these public rap performances. Consequently in this text the pseudonyms are related directly to the artistic personas in their respective lyrics, rather than to their private selves.

slide.” The word ‘hood’ is derived from ‘neighbourhood’ in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), where it signifies “one’s own neighbourhood” (*Oxford Dictionaries*), often “a poor neighbourhood” (*Cambridge Dictionary Online*), or more explicitly “the ghetto” (*urbandictionary.com*). The fact that the term ‘hood’ emerged in AAVE in the 1970s furthermore highlights the community, time and place in which such an abode gained relevance. Inspectah Deck highlights a crucial conflict: The poor, dilapidated place he calls his own is created and controlled from the outside. Yet it seems questionable to call a prison one’s own if one lives inside of it, while one is dominated, regulated and incarcerated from outside. The “hoods are prisons inside,” because there is no possibility to make a satisfactory living or escape the environment due to “the ghetto’s invisible walls” (Alexander 124).

Inspectah Deck also explores subjective experiences facilitating colonial neurosis. He indicates the hoods’ basic tension when he says that he tried “to stay civilized,” signalling good intentions, while he received the obverse from outside, as “my whole life, they told me I was good for nothing.” Social setting and individual experience reveal a detrimental and dominant violence. The experience of psychological suffering is indicated by his remark that “I blame the struggle nearly drove me insane.” In this psychological struggle, Inspectah Deck finds preliminary relief by building a community of likeminded people: “Thought I lost my head, till my brethren told me the same.” The lyrics move beyond individual experience, undermine the idea that the pathology is ontogenetic and suggest that the basic tension is sociogenically founded. Fanon argues that “colonialism has not simply depersonalized the colonized. The very structure of society has been depersonalized on a collective level” (*The Wretched* 219). Due to these circumstances, a community’s mutual assistance offers only limited relief. The solution is not permanent as detrimental violence continues to impose itself from outside the community.

The lyrics signify outside force with distancing markers, such as indefinite third-person plural pronouns and the demonstrative pronoun “those.” Contrary to the prevalent use of pronouns marking the in-group such as ‘I,’ ‘you,’ ‘we,’ and ‘these,’ ‘they’ or ‘those’ signify an outside. Such markers appear three times throughout the song, once by each rapper. This outside is simultaneously signified and screened off; it makes itself felt in the community, while remaining oblique, detached and removed.²⁰ The opposite forces are signified, for instance,

20 The last rapper to speak, GZA, particularly underscores this tension. The contrast between an inside and outside territory are further highlighted by television programmes that cross the ghetto borders and thereby make these felt more insistently. Narrating

by the indefinite third-person plural pronoun ‘they.’²¹ This force remains unfathomable, unrestrained and unpredictable. GZA says: “It’s a known fact, they will attack, ‘cause it’s like that, / and, depending on the kind of impact, the strike back.” According to GZA, it is a fact that an attack against the community will happen, that it does happen but when and how is unknown. The ghetto community sees to it that the attack will be encountered, matched and fended off. The only knowns are the occurrence of the event itself and the response to the event as such. The state of permanent insecurity and impending violence creates an immeasurable, indelible psychic and physical challenge reminiscent of the situation of the Black subject who, as Fanon writes, “is constantly tense, on hold, between life and death” (*The Wretched* 219), in a state of colonial neurosis.

“Street Corner” opens with an audio sample that signifies the song’s position in music history and suggests a commentary on African-American life in the USA. The opening features sections of Gil Scott-Heron’s song “Brother,” released in 1970 on *Small Talk at 125th and Lennox*. Scott-Heron was a central figure of the Black Arts Movement, which is regarded as an important trailblazer for rap music in terms of minimisation of musical patterns and lyrical performances “using breath cadences, alliteration, repetition and expletives for emphasis” (Keyes 34). The sample quotes Scott-Heron and, thus, establishes his (music-) historical importance. Scott-Heron’s songs, poems and commentaries furthermore express a turning point for African Americans in the USA. Following the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the waning ties with Jewish intellectuals, the orientation of Black communities shifted recognisably from hope for individual, legal and social recognition to pessimism and Afrocentrism (see Salzman; Greenberg). Gil Scott-Heron was an important

life in the hood, he states: “In a broke neighbourhood, where the kids often dream / about a lavish life that is mostly seen on the screen.” The children show affection towards and involvement in a way of life they only receive through televised images. Cultural values are transmitted, but their actual fulfilment is not admitted. This screen reproduces the hood’s inside as the lived but unseen and the hood’s outside as the seen but unlived. It nurtures desires and fears.

- 21 The opposite forces remain unspecified in the lyrics, while one may speculate that these forces include police violence, racial killings and other oppressive measures and the attack may happen in form of racial profiling, lack of social services etc., both ultimately remain unfathomable. This strategic openness possibly also indicates the circumstance that the opposition is not determined (by race, class, or gender, for instance) apart from individual and social engagement. In other words, certain actions, such as political, social, or economic decisions, define the opposition.

mouthpiece of the movement and the song “Brother” represents a landmark statement in this reorientation. Yet, Scott-Heron’s introductory statement is not quoted in total. While Masta Killa’s “Street Corner,” like the original source “Brother,” refers to “alleged brother[s]” standing at street corners “dressed in blue, or green, red and black,” it omits several relevant elements. Firstly, the discussion “who’s blacker than you are and who’s blacker than she is”²² is omitted, possibly because Scott-Heron dismisses it immediately following the introduction when he says: “We deal in too many externals, brother!” Secondly, the street corner’s location “Harlem” is omitted, transposing the song from a local setting to a more general appeal. Thirdly and most importantly, “Street Corner” mutes the Afrocentric movement of the 70s and 80s by occluding references to dashikis in the original line “dressed in blue and black dashikis or green, red and black dashikis.”²³ The song thereby recalls past and present-day conflicts while downplaying earlier demands for repatriation. In other words, the omission of references to the Afrocentric movement expresses irrevocable entanglement with a globalised world. Rapping from and to street corners, the song is located paradigmatically in what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the “liminality of the Western nation” (*Location of Culture* 241), where subjects “speak betwixt and between times and places” (227) as carriers and agents of what the song calls the coming revolution.

Eventually the song aims to transcend the betwixt experience of the ghetto suggesting to break through the conditions of colonial neurosis, indicated by the proclamation of a coming revolution. The song sets out from a state of arrested development, which Inspectah Deck voices when he finishes his contribution with “[f]rom the slave ships to today’s bricks, same shit.” This line refers to the beginning of colonisation, abduction and enslavement from the African continent, and relates it to present material conditions in the United States: brown brick houses. These houses once stood for the ideal of upward movement, but have turned into the congealed evidence of failed progress.²⁴ The chorus portrays a central conflict as Masta Killa describes the community’s life: “It’s me and you

22 Lyrics transcribed by the author.

23 Dashikis are clothes inspired by African fashion worn by Afrocentric US Americans, Caribbeans and beyond in this period and until today. These were also likely to sport the colours black, green and red as in the Kenyan and partly the Ghanaian as well as the Ethiopian national flags.

24 For a detailed depiction of shattered dreams of progress represented in the brown brick buildings of Harlem and Brooklyn, NYC, see, for instance, Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (2006).

son forever in the struggle” and demands fellow rappers, those at the street corners and, importantly, also the audience, to “take care, take a stance for a better tomorrow!”²⁵ This appears paradoxical since, if the struggle were “forever,” how could there be “a better tomorrow,” and what reason would there be to take a stance, if progress were impossible? The song demands collective agency, while the direct audience address – “me and you” – further expands and strengthens the collective. The song “Street Corner” acknowledges the danger that progress will never come, but it indicates the possibility to bring about change through collective effort. In requiring the audience to “take care [and] take a stance,” it invites identification and alliances across borders.

For building collectives, the past becomes a source of significant memories. The third instance in which a distancing marker, this time the demonstrative pronoun ‘those,’ is employed, is when Masta Killa explains: “We took words that were nourishing, encouraging / A nation to awaken those who are sleeping.” This nation is also built out of those who still have to awaken to the fact that the *status quo* is indelible but intolerable. In order to overcome this state, Masta Killa remembers the past as a contingent event – the enslavement of Black people – in its historical complexity:

Transatlantic import:

Slaves been bought. Secret relations between Blacks and Jews
might set a fuse off in the head. Many dead,
lynch hung, swung from trees.
Brothers in the struggle together, eat from one pot,
hold each other down to the sneaker. Nothing come between us!

By referring to “[s]ecret relations between Blacks and Jews,” Masta Killa recalls the involvement of Jewish traders in the transatlantic slave trade *and* the productive cooperation of African Americans and Jewish Americans in the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, including the joint denouncement of lynching.²⁶ This relationship’s complexity and ambiguity is substituted by the comment on “[b]rothers in struggle.” It argues that a fraternal alliance reaches from basic is-

25 Since the phrase is uttered in an imperative clause without a subject, the listener is likely to identify as the command’s addressee.

26 For a more detailed discussion of the song’s reference to the long and complex history of Black-Jewish interaction, with its simultaneous evocation and revocation of the Nation of Islam’s 1991 publication *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, see Wegner “Kompetitiv Multidirektionale Erinnerung im Medium der Rap Musik.”

sues, like eating, to more demanding ones of supporting each other to the very end of the struggle for liberation.²⁷ Furthermore, the description is phrased as an imperative; solidarity is enabled through joint action. In the words of Paul Gilroy, then, solidarity is not predetermined by blood or land but “has to be won” (*Darker than Blue* 92).

The song connects the recollection of the distant past with an analysis of present challenges. Masta Killa’s “Street Corner” recalls failed and successful past alliances between marginalised communities to outline the fundamentals of solidarity. Accordingly the song recalls the disruptive *Erlebnis* of the transatlantic slave trade and suggests that this originary event has solidified into permanent social and spatial structures, such as the ghetto. The state of colonial neurosis is traced beyond everyday experiences to events in the past. Revealing this genealogy enables insights for the present: The past reveals failed and successful alliances, indicating a potential for changes in the present. The song’s lyrics thus reconstruct a diachronic history and a synchronic community, both of which reveal an open futurity. The song thereby parallels Fanon’s formal movement, but it also differs in several respects: Firstly, the song focuses on the community rather than an individual. Secondly, it recalls the distant past of the slave trade rather than the near past of individual experiences. Thirdly, it centres on African-American communities in the US rather than a Martinican exile or the ‘Third World.’ Like Fanon, the song demands a revolution: Anticolonial revolutions have changed numerous communities, countries and continents, yet the song suggests that the structures which Fanon described as the “Manichaean world” (*The Wretched* 6) still exist. The rapper’s reflections enable the identification of failed and successful transcultural alliances and thereby reveal future potentials that “might set a fuse off in the head.”

27 Masta Killa ends his section with the statement that money and women are often the causes for “cliques” to end, which he finds “sickenin.” Therefore, not only money, but also women are referred to as sources of collective failure. The misogynous statement inevitably weakens the song’s critical potential. While its complex system of remembrance and recognition invites alliances of mutual support, the selection, marginalisation and exclusion of women necessarily weakens and inhibits the song’s transformative potential. This slip is particularly astonishing and frustrating considering the fact that GZA in the same song emphasises the increased exposure and suffering of women in the daily struggle of the ghettos.

RECOGNISING A POTENTIAL IN THE PAST

Fanon and Masta Killa bear witness to and point beyond colonial neurosis. Fanon remembers an encounter with a small boy as an *Erlebnis* of subjective fragmentation indicative of the complex structures of colonisation. Inspectah Deck, Masta Killa and GZA remember the transatlantic slave trade and civil rights struggles as crucial encounters that challenge the structures of social fragmentation and, especially in a US context, the lingering politics of segregation embodied by the hood. Fanon remembers past violence to think through individual psychological effects in the present, while the rappers remember past hopes to resist and point beyond present systemic violence. Each instance demonstrates that the present is historically contingent. All four of them point toward a potentially different future by envisioning “culture[s] of freedom sourced from deep within the experience of objecthood” (Gilroy, *Darker than Blue* 72).

Reading rap with Fanon suggests that colonial neurosis exceeds the commonly acknowledged spheres of colonisation.²⁸ Furthermore, it enables to analyse a dialectic of objectification and alienation in (Western) urban centres. Lastly, my reading demonstrates the medium’s potential to communicate across geographies, ethnicities and cultures to envision alliances, resistance and, importantly, change. Reading Fanon with rap, conversely, highlights the potential of continuing, extending and extrapolating Fanonian thought. It suggests that the moment after, or outside, colonisation is not necessarily immune to colonial neurosis. Fanon recognises this when he writes that “the new man is not an a posteriori creation of this [postcolonial] nation, but coexists with it, matures with it, and triumphs with it” (*The Wretched* 233). It gives further evidence that mass media which, as Fanon demonstrated, represent, extend and maintain colonial structures (see *Black Skin* 17), can also be used for critical communication across borders. Lastly, reading Fanon with rap suggests that alienation and objectification may be overcome by remembering and establishing transcultural alliances. While not every song of reality rap may be as explicit on these topics, “Street Corner” evokes transcultural recognition to open a perspective beyond the *status quo*.

Remembering the past is crucial to question the present. As much as Fanon remembers the past in his analysis, “Street Corner” utilizes memories: Due to its musical and lyrical features it enables “a process of musical and cultural archeology” (Rose 79). In *Critique de la raison nègre*, Achille Mbembe argues that

28 An argument that is also put forward by Kruks (see 127) and Gilroy (see *Darker than Blue* 161).

memories are permanently endangered by colonial violence. This violence, he writes, “attacks time, one of the most important frameworks of subjectivity, it threatens the colonised to lose all their use of all memory traces” (237).²⁹ The loss of memory is, thus, a means of colonial control. “This repression,” Judy writes, “is a constitutive function of the colonial economy; it is the primary violence that makes the colonial scene determine its psychopathologies. Accordingly, the colonized’s neuroses stem from unremembered reminiscences of the experience of events” (69). Remembering, then, means to rescue an idea of the past that allows to interrogate the present (see Benjamin 391). Facing this challenge, Gilroy argues that “[t]he pursuit of an alternative future necessitates the cultivation of counter-memory” (*Darker than Blue* 139).³⁰ It is in this vein that rap recalls, continues and extends Fanonian thought.

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29 Translation by the author. In the original, Mbembe writes that colonial violence “s’attaquant au temps, l’un des cadres mentaux privilégiés de toute subjectivité, elle faisait courir aux colonisés le risqué de perdre l’usage de toutes traces mnésiques” (237).

30 For a detailed discussion of the concept of countermemory, see Wegner “Rethinking Countermemory: Black-Jewish Negotiations in Rap Music.”

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