



“GOOD TIMES FOR A CHANGE”

SONG LYRICS AS SITES OF MEMORY IN THE SMITHS AND SLOWTHAI

Name: Lola Abbas
Student number: 6229409
BA Thesis Language- and Culture Studies
University of Utrecht

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First reader: Dr. Ruth Clemens
Second reader: Prof. Dr. Ann Rigney

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“There Ain’t Nothing Great About Britain!”

At the 2019 Hyundai Mercury Prize Awards Show, British rapper slowthai¹ quite literally turned heads during the performance of his song “Doorman”: upon entering the stage, slowthai carried a grim model of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s decapitated head, swinging it around while shouting “Fuck Boris!” before throwing it over his shoulder. After his tumultuous entrée and equally tumultuous performance, slowthai reinforced his statement by picking the head up from the floor and shouting “Fuck Boris Johnson! Fuck everybody! And there ain’t nothing great about Britain!” (Krol). He thereby referred to his debut album titled *Nothing Great About Britain* released earlier that year. The act made headlines, with some labelling the performance as a brave political statement; others went as far as to call it an act of terrorism, as reported by tabloid newspaper *The Sun* (Duggan). Slowthai responded to the criticism on Twitter by saying “[L]ast night I held a mirror up to this country and some people don’t like the reflection. [...] This ‘act’ was a metaphor for what this government is doing to our country, except what I did was present it in plain sight” (slowthai qtd. in Krol). It remains to be seen how this act will persevere in the ongoing cultural memory of Brexit.

The UK has a lasting legacy when it comes to popular music, politics, and cultural memory: the country has a rich history of bands openly criticizing systems of government and voicing their discontent with the fabric of British society, with many British pop and rock artists forming sites of memory for the period from which they originate and the concurrent political circumstances.² One is former rock/post-punk band The Smiths, active during the politically charged 1980s. During this period, in which then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher implemented far-reaching reforms, The Smiths did not hesitate to express their disagreement with her vision for the UK. Instead, they continuously voiced their longing for times of the past

¹ As slowthai stylizes his name without a capital letter, I have chosen to do the same in this thesis to stay close to the artists’ intention.

² Political engagement in the current British music scene is not limited to slowthai; for an overview of contemporary British alternative artists that reflect their political opinion in their music, see Beaumont, 2017.

in their song lyrics, often recalling an atmosphere that appealed to a working class that felt neglected by Thatcher's policies. This is for example seen in the song lyrics of "Please, Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want":

Haven't had a dream in a long time

[...]

So for once in my life

Let me get what I want

Lord knows, it would be the first time. (The Smiths)

The despair and melancholy portrayed in these song lyrics perfectly embody the overall message in The Smiths' music: happiness is always one step out of reach, and the better days are to be found in the past.

Although The Smiths and slowthai operate in different areas of the musical field and – as I will demonstrate – utilise different textual techniques to get their message across, their points of view regarding the political situations of their time share many similarities. Both acts do not shy away from articulating their unsalted opinion about their home country, and the people in power that represent it, in their song lyrics. The core of my analysis is therefore how the song lyrics of both The Smiths and slowthai serve as manifestos of dissent, and how this results in the construction of 'sites of memory': their lyrics serve as a device which remember and mediate a version of Britain's past. I will support my argument using theories of cultural memory by Ann Rigney, Pierre Nora and Astrid Erll. Additionally, the content of The Smiths' songs builds a nostalgic image of an imaginary past Britain, at the same time as the songs themselves now form sites of memory for the times in which they were written, therefore constituting a multidimensionality of remembering. Based on the song lyrics of The Smiths' *The Queen Is Dead* and slowthai's *Nothing Great About Britain*, I will argue that by painting a picture that highlights the struggles of the working class and shows an underside of Britain

which counters the dominant imaginary, both The Smiths and slowthai – albeit in different ways – shape how we remember the state of Britain in the respective time periods.

With this research, I relate to the broader discussion about the role of music in the field of literature. This relatively new area in the mainstream literary field addresses questions concerning the literary value of music and song lyrics, and their ability to simultaneously shape and be shaped by the opinion of their audience.³ Considering the long-established status and influence of popular music and artists in our everyday life, popular song lyrics should be integrated into the field of literary analysis and treated as serious objects of analysis; precisely because as popular mass media, they can give insight into the cultural lives of ‘ordinary’ people and the way we define ourselves through music. As the current political climate has ignited numerous protest movements and dissent against systems of government, the relevance of this research is evident.

³ A notable occasion in which the increasing attention to the literary value of popular music has been highlighted, is the awarding of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature to rock musician Bob Dylan – “dramatically redefin[ing] the boundaries of literature” (Sisario et al.)

Cultural Memory

To argue that the song lyrics of The Smiths and slowthai function as sites of memory, we must first look at the field of cultural memory theory. Cultural memory as a discipline came into existence only in the last three decades. According to Ann Rigney, this was partially as an alternative to the idea of ‘proper’ history, signifying academic historiography or “the history written by professional historians on the basis of systematic research” (“Portable Monuments” 363). As the visibility of non-academic forms of historiography has increased, a “reconsideration of the nature of history” (“PM” 363) has taken and is currently taking place, shedding light on the need for different terms for the practice of “improper history” (“PM” 364). In this light, the rising popularity of the concept of “memory” can be understood. Cultural memory is the process through which “shared images of the past are actively produced and circulated” (“PM” 366), through media as literature, memorials or film, but importantly also through songs. The public expression of these memories as such contains the power to transfer memories to people from different places or ages, allowing them to live these memories vicariously.

Although Rigney states that literature is especially well suited to tell the stories left out of “public history” (a characteristic that easily applies to song lyrics as well) (“PM” 374), she emphasises that cultural memory is not by virtue more authentic than “proper” history: instead, it is an ongoing, constructive process, involving “amnesia and distortion as well as acts of recall” (“PM” 365). This is an important nuance when analysing cultural memory texts (in the broad sense), for these memory artefacts are personal and therefore situated in the context of i.a. race, class, and era. The field of cultural memory is thus “caught up with struggles for the power of definition and for a voice in the public sphere: like other fields, it is fraught by struggles for hegemony and the contestation of dominant narratives” (“Cultural memory studies” 69). As The Smiths and slowthai go against the dominant narrative of Britain in their song lyrics, this nuance is important in analysing their lyrics as sites of memory.

Lieux de Mémoire

Within the field of cultural memory, Pierre Nora is credited with having developed the concept of *lieux de mémoire* – or ‘sites of memory’ – between 1984 and 1992. Originally seeking to study national feeling through analysing “the places in which the collective heritage of France was crystallised” (xv), Nora came to realise that he had to shift his emphasis from *site* to *memory*. Whereas his research first focused on the actual memorials in which collective memory was rooted, he reformulated his definition of *lieux de mémoire* to:

any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case, the French community). (xvii)

Nora thereby aimed to demonstrate “a history of France through memory” (xviii), with the goal of showing “how each element reflects the whole and is involved in the entire national identity” (xx). Nora’s focus on the national is a dually relevant lens for The Smiths and Slowthai, as these artists embed themselves in British cultural identity while simultaneously criticizing their native soil.

In her article “Travelling Memory”, Astrid Erll contests Nora’s nation-focused approach when studying sites of memory, arguing that memory should be seen as transcultural instead. The “container-culture” Erll has noted within the field of memory studies, which takes the combination of territorial, ethnic, and national collectivity as main framework, fails to consider “the inner complexity of cultural formations, their vertical and horizontal divisions” (7-8). According to Erll, cultural memory should be conceived as “continually moving across and beyond [...] territorial and social borders” (10). She therefore argues for the substitution of the term ‘sites’ of memory with the more appropriate ‘travels’ of memory. Not only because “in the production of cultural memory, people, media, mnemonic forms, contents, and practices are in constant, unceasing motion” (12), but also because memory must be continually exchanged

between individuals to stay alive – it must be mediated and remediated, interpreted and reinterpreted.

Although the analysis of song lyrics within the field of cultural memory is a recent phenomenon, this is not the first such analysis. James E. Roberson also approaches song lyrics as sites of memory: in his article “Memory and Music in Okinawa: The Cultural Politics of War and Peace” (2009), he looks at songs that act as “signposts along Okinawan’s journeys through the landscapes and imaginaries of war and peace” (683). The “war and peace” referred to here is the 1945 Battle of Okinawa and its aftermath. Roberson argues that the discussed songs are a mode of remembering the past and must be seen “as part of ongoing contemporary internal debates about Okinawa’s ‘difficult past’ of participation in Japanese assimilationist, militarist, and imperialist projects” (690). While Roberson presents an interesting case study, there is no overview of the literary field of song lyrics in popular music. In fact, there is a surprising gap in the field when it comes to research on cultural memory along these lines. As such, the importance of studies as these is evident.

In my research, I adopt a combined approach of both Nora and Erll’s definition of sites of memory. I agree with Erll in her description of sites of memory as transcultural and not confinable to a single group such as the nation; therefore, I will reflect her approach in my research of The Smiths’ and slowthai’s song lyrics. However, while their song lyrics originate from a situated perspective, both The Smiths and slowthai do make a claim about the nation as a whole, thus proving Nora’s concept to be applicable as well. I therefore see both approaches as relevant to my case studies.

“Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty”

The Manchester-based rock/post-punk band The Smiths took the UK by storm in the aftermath of the British punk era. During their relatively short lifespan from 1982 to 1987, The Smiths quickly rose to fame with singles such as “What Difference Does It Make?” and “This Charming Man,” with their four studio albums all reaching the top three of the UK Album Chart. Their songs are characterized by bright, jangly melodies accompanied by often cynical and melancholic lyrics, with themes ranging from existential misery and unattainable love to expressions of dissent with the state of Britain. This latter quality helps The Smiths’ song lyrics serve as sites of memory, for they are a way of remediating 1980s Britain. Furthermore, as The Smiths repeatedly articulate their longing for a past Britain in their lyrics, the content of their lyrics simultaneously serves as a site of memory for a more distant past. To begin, I will situate The Smith’s music within the socio-political context of their time.

Thatcherite Britain

The socio-political context of The Smiths’ music can be traced back to economic developments in prior decades. During the 1960s the UK fell into an extended recession, bringing about a high unemployment rate. The alleged lack of remedial measures caused a growing mistrust in the then-governing Labour Party, paving the way for Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher to win the 1979 election. Thatcher’s drastic reform measures aroused substantial upheaval, particularly among working class citizens in traditional industries. Her deindustrializing, neoliberal policies caused the already existing rift between the industrial North and the more economically developed South to grow wider – an issue reportedly still not overcome in the affected areas (“1984”) – while unemployment numbers initially rose even further. Dissent manifested itself for example through the 1984 Miners’ Strike, branded by the BBC as “the most bitter industrial dispute in British history” (“1984”). Concurrently, decades of colonialism that led to the so-called Troubles, in which Northern Ireland’s membership of

the UK was contested, lasted throughout the 1980s. Radical actions by independent groups, political parties and the government terrorised the country and instilled fear among UK citizens.

The Queen Is Dead

Amid the turmoil of the 1980s, The Smiths released their album *The Queen Is Dead* in 1986.⁴ The album was labelled a “state of the nation address” by critics and shows The Smiths voice their dissent with British society. On *The Queen Is Dead*, The Smiths were not direct in their political engagement; their lyrics can best be defined as recalcitrant or ‘anti-everything.’ Reynolds states: “The Smiths’ rebellion was always more like resistance through withdrawal, through subsiding into enervation” (19). The implicitness of their political engagement, however, does not detract from the quality of their lyrics as manifestos of dissent. Instead, The Smiths voiced their dissent against Thatcherite and modernising Britain by adopting a nostalgic stance in their lyrics (Brooker 38). Nostalgia, like cultural memory, is by virtue fraught with processes of amnesia and distortion (“PM” 365): it entails a romanticization of an imagined past, “a misguided and romantic longing for a place which [...] never existed in the first place” (Natali 20). So, while Thatcherism entailed a surge towards modernisation, The Smiths sought refuge in an imaginary past Britain in their lyrics. As such, their lyrics propagate an implicit but certainly present anti-Thatcherism, allowing them to serve as “counter-memory” (“PM” 365).

In their nostalgic melancholy, The Smiths align themselves with the working-class culture of the “beleaguered” industrial North. The disadvantage experienced by this demographic permeates their lyrics in multiple mutually intertwined ways: through cultural collage, geographical references, and working-class alignment. Firstly, on *The Queen Is Dead* The Smiths compose a lyrical collage by assembling pictures of ‘Englishness,’ thereby placing their lyrics as sites of memory in the context of other cultural memory artefacts. This is

⁴ The working title of the album was originally *Margaret on the Guillotine*, after the then reigning Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, but The Smiths later changed it to *The Queen Is Dead*. Morrissey did later include a song called “Margaret on the Guillotine” on his solo album *Viva Hate* (1988).

exemplified in “Cemetery Gates,”⁵ which illustrates the miserabilism that makes The Smiths a site of memory for 1980s Britain. Morrissey sings: “A dreaded sunny day, so let’s go where we’re happy” – later changing to “let’s go where we’re wanted” – “And I meet you at the cemetery gates.” By juxtaposing “sunny” with “dreaded,” he assigns an ironic melancholy to the lyric, which by means of its location already attests to a melancholic nostalgia. In the lyrics “Keats and Yeats are on your side / While Wilde is on mine,” Morrissey places himself among the romantic poets he references. He specifically aligns himself with Oscar Wilde, who – like Morrissey – in his texts employed the quintessentially romantic feeling of *Weltschmerz* that is also visible in “Cemetery Gates.” As such, Morrissey creates a collage of British cultural memory to express his feeling of estrangement in current British society and his longing to a romanticized past.

The multidimensionality of their songs as memory sites is further exemplified in the intro of “The Queen Is Dead,” which features a sample of “Take Me Back To Dear Old Blighty,” a patriotic WWI song about the longing of three soldiers to their “Dear Old Blighty” (meaning Britain). The Smiths adapted this sample from kitchen sink drama *The L-shaped Room* (1962): this early 1960s British genre often centred around angry, young, working-class protagonists who were disillusioned with modern society.⁶ The intro of “The Queen Is Dead” thus serves as a memory site in itself, as it laments a Britain of past times. By drawing on these artefacts of cultural memory, The Smiths add a multidimensionality to their lyrics as sites of memory: the cultural allusions in their lyrics remember an earlier time, while their lyrics remediate 1980s Britain today. The Smiths’ lyrics as such serve as an act of political dissent, as they critique Thatcher’s modernising views for Britain through an escape to a romanticized past.

⁵ Morrissey reportedly admitted that the title was accidentally spelt wrong, as he had always had trouble with the spelling of ‘cemetery’.

⁶ For a more detailed analysis on The Smiths’ relation to kitchen sink realism, see Mello (2016).

Secondly, in a geographical sense, the places evoked in The Smiths' lyrics "were the symbolic icons of the landscape of the industrial North of England" (Cowell 67). They often serve as signifiers for Morrissey's miserabilism, as is illustrated in "The Queen Is Dead." In the lyrics, Morrissey questions the state of his native soil as he wonders, "Has the world changed or have I changed?". Stating "[t]he Queen is dead, boys / And it's so lonely on a limb," he equates the dead or outdated British monarchy to the demise of society. The UK, "tied to [its] mother's apron," is "lonely on a limb" or lost without any guidance as the monarchy has lost its function. This demise is exemplified through the "nine-year-old tough who peddles drugs." Morrissey further critiques the current state of Britain as he sings of taking a walk with the Queen "past the pub that saps your body / and the church who'll snatch your money." These institutions, engrained in British society, that once provided solace and support to British citizens, now drain them of their wealth and vitality. As such, these lyrics "conflate memories of the past with journeys in and through landscapes" (Cowell 73), thereby creating a nostalgic image of a romanticized past Britain.

Thirdly, The Smiths aligned themselves with working-class culture in their lyrics. For example in "Bigmouth Strikes Again," as Morrissey reinforces his lone stance in society: stating "Now I know how Joan of Arc felt," Morrissey melodramatically likens his fate and the world's judgement of him to that of the French heroic martyr. Joan of Arc – the peasant visionary who fought the English in attempt to restore French nationality, only to be betrayed by her king and a biased church – was burnt at the stake, eventually becoming a national symbol of resistance in the cultural memory of France. As the self-proclaimed martyr of the British working class, by referencing this iconic memory site Morrissey thus draws an analogy between the struggle of the working class in the 1980s and Joan of Arc's mission to restore her fatherland to its earlier glory. The betrayal she must have felt "As the flames rose / To her Roman nose" is not unfamiliar to Morrissey, who felt the British authoritarian systems of government had

abandoned him and his visions of Britain. The Smiths' affinity with the working class permeates their entire politics, as both their geographical and their cultural references take inspiration from working-class culture. The Smiths' lyrics therefore serve as sites of memory that paint the picture of a working class let down by their systems of government, who long to be taken back to their "Dear Old Blighty."

“Raised in Britain? No You Isn’t”

More recently, the British music scene has seen the rise of grime/punk rapper slowthai. The rapper, whose real name is Tyron Frampton, is of Irish and Barbadian descent and grew up on a council estate in Northampton. He is known for his personal and controversial song lyrics that describe his experiences with the less dominant image of Britain. On his debut album *Nothing Great About Britain* (2019), slowthai sheds light on his hometown Northampton, a regional town in the East Midlands that is considerably less affluent than cosmopolitan cities such as London; he articulates his experience with racism and prejudice as a multiracial person in Britain; and he voices his dissent with British society and politics. Due to these themes, slowthai’s song lyrics provide an alternative narrative of the state of Britain, as opposed to the cosmopolitan and prosperous image of the UK that is often portrayed in mainstream media, thus serving as sites of memory.

Brexit Britain

The Britain slowthai dissents with is a continuation of developments from previous eras. As previously stated, the cultural and economic differences between the North and the South never fully ceased to exist. Similarly, there is a wide rift between the urban and the regional: to this day a sense of ‘London versus the rest of Britain’ is present in UK society.⁷ As such, it is not hard to see how the 2016 Brexit referendum laid bare the divisions running through UK societies in terms of age, class, education, and geography. Two primary concerns for Leave-voters were immigration and sovereignty, showing how the Leave vote ultimately is a retreat to xenophobia and nationalism.⁸ Following the referendum outcome, the UK has seen a spike in racial and religious hate-crime reports, shown to be significantly related to anti-immigration

⁷ See, for example, the BBC series “Mind the Gap: London v the Rest” (2014), in which Evan Davis explores the economic forces that polarise Britain.

⁸ Strikingly, areas that were most vocal about the UK’s immigrant “problem” – i.e. were highest in ‘Leave’ votes – are the areas in which migrants have settled the least over the years, as immigration levels are highest in cosmopolitan cities such as London, Manchester and Birmingham (Black 59). The divide between the urban and the rural is thus highlighted through this research.

attitudes propagated by the Leave campaign (Albornoz et al. 25). The Brexit vote is argued to have legitimised outward xenophobia due to a revelation of the true extent of anti-immigrant sentiment (Albornoz et al. 4). Additionally, Jeremy Black has noted a generally declining faith in politics and the government, and a decline in the “confidence of nationhood” (184): many Brits identify more with a subsector (such as place, ethnicity or religion) and less with the idea of ‘Britishness’ as a whole. This shows that Britain is tangled up in complex identity issues, which Brexit paradoxically intensifies while hoping to cessate.

Nothing Great About Britain

On *Nothing Great About Britain*, slowthai offers a narrative that is thoroughly infused with references to his experience of growing up in Britain as a working class and mixed heritage citizen. He thereby places himself in a broader trend of British rappers reclaiming the narrative of British identity or “talking back” to dominant discourses (Williams 1). Williams explains the political engagement in 21st century British rap music as resulting from multiple causes: firstly, the turbulent political history of Britain in the past two decades (7). Secondly, the role of hip-hop as “giving voice to the voiceless” (8), thus inherently tied up with minority groups. UK rap music therefore serves as a response to the dominant British narrative that is stained with postcolonial melancholia: “a psychological condition mourning the loss of Empire in an unhealthy manner” (Williams 5) – which is reflected in the Leave vote.⁹

Slowthai’s political dissent is shown in several ways: predominantly by creating a collage of British identity, through which the fractures and divides of the UK are highlighted. By means of numerous references to quintessentially British cultural artefacts, countered with images from regional, multicultural working-class culture, a “mainstream, culturally dominant form of English nationalism, tacitly white and often class-based, becomes the foil to present a

⁹ In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how the concept of postcolonial melancholy also applies to The Smiths.

version of England that better represents the personal situatedness of the rapper” (Williams 24).

This is seen in “Nothing Great About Britain”:

Bottle of Bucky in Buckingham Palace
 There’s coppers from Scotland all the way down to Dagenham
 [...]

 Walking ‘cross the Thames
 Firing slingshots ‘cause its nee-nor, nee-nor
 Then we’re in cuffs, POME [Prisoners Of Mother England]
 I’m a product, yeah, they made me
 I wear chains like my granddad did in slavery. (slowthai)

In these lyrics, slowthai juxtaposes well-known, prestigious British artefacts such as Buckingham Palace and the Thames with cultural matters from the ‘other’ Britain, thereby reconceptualizing the existing mainstream idea of Britain. He mocks the high status of the Buckingham Palace by connecting it to “Bucky” or Buckfast Tonic Wine: this caffeinated wine – which has been linked to antisocial behaviour and crime (Macdonell) – is associated with archetypes of working-class identity, to such an extent that it has become ironically cool to drink it. As such, Buckfast has been appropriated or ‘gentrified’ by the middle-class elite. Slowthai uses alliteration to bring the two extremes of Buckfast and Buckingham Palace together, connecting two elements of British culture that seem to be on opposite sides of the spectrum. Furthermore, he juxtaposes London’s chic image with the omnipresence of police – indicated through the onomatopoeia “nee-nor nee-nor,” resembling sirens – and the remnants of Britain’s colonial past. By offering such an abundance of cultural references, slowthai creates a collage of Britishness that portrays both the popular images of British culture as well as the underexposed reality of multicultural working-class identity. As such, slowthai gives an overview of the cultural cohesion in Britain despite the fractures within it. He thereby

reinscribes a feeling of unified ‘Britishness’ into Britain’s cultural memory; something that – according to Black – is currently absent in UK society.

In “Grow Up,” slowthai highlights his regional origin as he says: “Raised in Midlands, don’t know the half of.” He accuses an imagined ‘you’ of ignorance regarding the “real” Britain: “Raised in Britain? No, you isn’t / Soft like kitten, I’m tough like cement.” Here, juxtaposition is again used to question the true colour of British identity: the presumably wealthier addressee who “[does not] know the half of” growing up in the Midlands – a British working-class idiom indicating something is worse than it seems – is accused of being “soft like [a] kitten,” therefore not entitled to claim British heritage. Slowthai himself on the other hand is “tough like cement” as he was raised in regional Northampton, thereby owning the right to claim true British identity. The imagery evoked here reinforces the relation between ‘true’ British identity and class: while kittens are associated with a more luxurious, uncomplicated lifestyle, thereby relating to the upper-class; cement is associated with cold, industrial, raw ‘toughness’ – therefore indicating the working-class. Slowthai thus lays a claim on what he perceives to be ‘real Britain’ and ‘real’ British identity, an origin tied up with a certain amount of hardship. As such, slowthai negates the popular image of Britain as consisting of luxury, tea and biscuits,¹⁰ and argues that ‘true’ British identity is found in the region.

In his lyrics, slowthai frequently uses irony to reflect his opinions of Britain. Irony, existing in the space “*between* (and including) the said and the unsaid” (Hutcheon 12), is according to Hutcheon inherently political as it is always tied up with notions of “hierarchy and subordination, judgment and perhaps even moral superiority” (Hutcheon 17). In “Rainbow,” slowthai uses irony to draw the connection between social class and race, thereby questioning the unity of the United Kingdom. In the lyrics “Call me coon, I Looney Tune / Bust your nose

¹⁰ Interestingly, *Nothing Great About Britain* features a song called “T N Biscuits”, in which slowthai raps about things that have little to do with tea nor biscuits. Instead, he speaks of drug dealing and getting involved in physical confrontations.

with a silver spoon,” slowthai warns that anyone who calls him “coon” (a slur for Black people) can expect slowthai to act out and have their “nose busted with a silver spoon.” He thereby alludes to the saying ‘to be born with a silver spoon in your mouth,’ meaning to be born wealthy and with a high social position. He thus draws an analogy between being privileged in terms of class and privileged in terms of race (i.e. white privilege), two factors that often coincide in the UK and elsewhere. Although the image of attacking someone with a silver spoon is humorous, there is a serious undertone to the message as it lays bare the system of white privilege present in the UK. As slowthai states in the outro: “Red, white and blue / Union Jack united who?”, he again points out the divisions in UK society using irony, as he questions the alleged unity the Union Jack represents.

As such, slowthai’s lyrics reclaim hegemony over Britain’s official narrative, as he mocks the upheld status of Buckingham Palace and undermines the unity of the Union Jack. Slowthai’s use of irony in his lyrics contributes to their functioning as sites of memory: as irony is always an interplay between the “ironist” and the interpreter (Hutcheon 11), it demands continuous interpretation and reinterpretation by its audience, thereby serving as transcultural memory. Slowthai’s song lyrics thus complicate the unilateral representation of Britain, as they reinscribe a multicultural, regional and working-class perspective into its narrative. This quality of his lyrics helps them to serve as sites of memory: through his song lyrics, one can revisit an alternative, more multifaceted representation of British society that goes against the homogenous, idealized image of Britain.

“Union Jack United Who?”

As *The Queen Is Dead* and *Nothing Great About Britain* show, there is an important comparison to be made between song lyrics as manifestos of dissent in 1980s Thatcherite Britain and contemporary Brexit Britain. The most obvious similarity is that both The Smiths and slowthai critique the society they live in and carry out that critique in their song lyrics. In some respects, they do so in similar ways: both artists align themselves with the working class and the local as a way of opposing the establishment. For The Smiths, this means Thatcher and her neoliberal policies that incited a surge of modernisation, thereby disadvantaging the industrial North. For slowthai, this means Brexit Britain, in which the fractures between regional and urban, working-class and upper-class, and national and foreign have been highlighted. Both artists also make use of an abundance of quintessentially British cultural references that they either reject or align themselves with, thereby creating a collage of British identity and culture. As such, they add to, remediate, and reinterpret the pre-existing cultural memory of Britain by embedding themselves into its narrative.

Both artists however voice their dissent in different ways. The Smiths subside into nostalgia, as they praise an imagined past “Blighty” through their references to kitchen sink drama and romantic poets. The recalcitrant, melancholic attitude in their lyrics attests to their anti-Thatcherism and their critique of modern British society. Slowthai’s lyrics on the other hand carry out a more proactive, ironic approach, as they reclaim Britain’s narrative and inscribe it with a multicultural, regional, working-class perspective. This difference is partly due to genre and historical era; however, the aspect of race also plays a part in their different attitudes. Where slowthai’s politics feature indispensable aspects of race and white privilege, in The Smiths’ lyrics race is a telling absence. For this reason, where slowthai’s lyrics advocate for a radical change from the past, The Smiths’ longing for a past Britain ultimately falls under the “postcolonial melancholy” Britain suffers from (Williams 5). When reading their song lyrics

as sites of memory, one must thus keep in mind that their version of history is, too, situated in race, class, and era.

In this respect, Erlil's definition of 'transcultural memory' applies: The Smiths' and slowthai's lyrics are "continually moving across and beyond [...] territorial and social borders" (10). Especially because their lyrics transcend national borders, as people all over the world listen to their songs; as such, the cultural memory their songs produce is mediated and remediated, interpreted and reinterpreted. However, The Smiths and slowthai both appeal to national identity and history in their song lyrics: although their lyrics are situated in race, class, and era, and are based on their personal situations, they do make a claim about the shortcomings of the nation as a whole. To study their lyrics as sites of memory, Nora's nation-focused approach of sites of memory is therefore also appropriate. Through listening to The Smiths and slowthai, one essentially becomes acquainted with "a history of [Britain] through memory" (xviii).

“Good Times for a Change”

As I have shown in this thesis, the song lyrics of The Smiths’ *The Queen Is Dead* and slowthai’s *Nothing Great About Britain* can serve as valuable sites of memory for the state of Britain in the 1980s and the present day, respectively. I have argued that by voicing their political and societal dissent through their song lyrics, both acts offer an alternative to the mainstream historical narrative. The Smiths voice their dissent with Thatcherite, modernising Britain through a nostalgic dwelling on the past, aligning themselves with working-class culture by means of their references and sampling. Slowthai on the other hand has created a collage of British identity in his lyrics by including numerous references to both popular British cultural artefacts and aspects of the ‘other’ Britain, pointing out how regional working-class life differs from what is depicted in mainstream media. Through frequent use of juxtaposition, slowthai offers an overview of the cultural cohesion in Britain despite the fractures and divisions within it. He thereby emphasizes the unifying factors that do make Britain a great place; “it’s the people, the communities, the small places that are forgotten, everyone that’s striving” (slowthai qtd. in Lynskey). Both artists thus disagree with the way their country is governed, instead expressing their alignment with the disenfranchised working class in Britain. In slowthai’s case, the multiculturalism of this working class is repeatedly addressed and emphasized; in The Smiths’ lyrics, racial awareness is a telling absence, as their lyrics allude to the archetypal white angry young man. In reading song lyrics as sites of memory, it is thus important to acknowledge that these texts are situated in among others race, class, and time; and that although they can offer us insight into Britain’s history of certain eras, they do not provide an objective or ‘truer’ narrative.

Nevertheless, I have shown in this thesis that the study of song lyrics as cultural memory can be a fruitful way to look at “shared images of the past” (“PM” 366). Considering the current gap in the literary field in terms of analysing song lyrics as sites of memory, this thesis opens up avenues for further research on this topic. Furthermore, as this thesis is limited to song lyrics

only, incorporating aspects of the musical field such as music videos or social media output can offer possibilities for further research. To promote *Nothing Great About Britain*, slowthai for example employed billboards carrying confronting statistics about British political matters (“billboard campaign”). Moreover, music has proven able to ignite significant change in the political field. In the 2017 general election, grime rappers’ support of the Labour Party contributed to a 72% voter turnout among young people, significantly impacting the election outcome (Charles). Song lyrics do not exist in a vacuum: shaped by the past, they in turn shape the present and future. It is therefore evident that we need to reconsider the place of song lyrics within literary analysis. As The Smiths would put it: “Good times for a change.”

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