




# *Brainfucked about Britain:* Sibylle Berg's Transnational Novel *GRM*

WRITERS AND  
INTELLECTUALS  
ON BRITAIN AND  
EUROPE, 1918–2018

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## ABSTRACT

In 2019, Sibylle Berg's novel *GRM Brainfuck* was published to considerable acclaim. Berg, a German writer based in Switzerland, uses a contemporary British setting for a satirical speculation on the future of Western societies. The novel represents the UK as a social constellation that combines a tradition of class privilege with the worst excesses of global capitalism, technological surveillance, and mass manipulation. One force of resistance is the grime movement, which provides the emotional home for a group of young outsiders who rebel against the system. British grime is not only a major topic of the novel but permeates its entire language and style, from the use of slang through to the novel's English-German code-mixing, and the collage-like aspects of its narrative structure. The article argues that the novel's distinct transnational, translinguistic and transcultural dimensions challenge national and monolingual literary canons and raise issues with regard to the place of international and foreign-language fiction, both within academia and, notably, within British Studies.

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*GRM Brainfuck* (2019) is a darkly satirical, dystopian novel by the acclaimed German-speaking author and playwright Sibylle Berg. Its setting is a near-future Britain that has become inward-looking, xenophobic and authoritarian, and its Brexit dreams have not come true:

After Brexit things had quietened down a bit. The dimwits had taken hope, dreaming of a country inhabited by white people who could take their drink, of jobs, and a boom, of small cars and servants. They were dreaming of British music, and British films, and British food. And then what happened was – nothing. (Berg, 2019: 475–476)<sup>1</sup>

Berg was raised in the German Democratic Republic but now lives in Switzerland, and the concerns of her work, both as a creative writer and a public intellectual, reflect the border-crossing element in her biography. At the peak of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe, Berg's *Spiegel Online* column (from which she gained a great number of fans), suggested that Europe might be in need of psychotherapy because it had lost its 'We-Feeling'. Europe had watched Italian citizens die, its health systems crash and its borders close (Berg, 2020).<sup>2</sup> Before the Coronavirus, Berg was worried about the transnational implications of Brexit; significantly, in her English-titled novel, the European Union has fallen apart. One could claim that Brexit constituted a 'brainfuck' for Berg in the slang meaning of this word – '[s]omething that destabilizes, confuses, or manipulates a person's mind' (Wiktionary, n.d.)<sup>3</sup> – and that she wrote her 600-page novel as a kind of self-therapy. As Berg notes, '[a]t the beginning of writing *GRM Brainfuck* stood the desire to put in order all the different and partly frightening developments of our time [...]. I wanted to understand' (qtd. in Frei-Tomic, 2019).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the process of writing the novel – after two years of research, including field work in England – seems to have been a cathartic experience: 'I felt incredibly well [...] because each page brought a bit more order to my brain, which had become too full. [...] it was like pulling the plug from the tub' (qtd. in Frei-Tomic, 2019).<sup>5</sup>

At first sight *GRM Brainfuck* seems to line up with Brexit-related fiction from the United Kingdom, especially a spate of novels that extrapolate a negative picture of the future, such as Sam Byers's *Perfidious Albion* (2018), John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019) and William Gibson's *Agency* (2020).<sup>6</sup> Viewed in such company, Berg's novel shows that 'BrexLit' (Shaw, 2018) is no longer exclusively a British affair, nor does it need to be written in the English language.<sup>7</sup> But *GRM Brainfuck* is much more than a Brexit novel, or an encounter of British and German cultures.<sup>8</sup> What Berg observed in Britain in the years around the Brexit vote, and extrapolated from it, allowed her to process her worries about political, societal and cultural developments in Europe and the entire contemporary world, and this is

1 An English translation of the novel is in progress but has not yet appeared. All translations in this article are ours. The original German of the cited passage reads: 'Nach dem Brexit war ein wenig Ruhe gewesen. Hoffnung war bei den Dummköpfen eingezogen. Sie träumten von einem Land, das von weißen, trinkfesten Menschen bewohnt wird, von Arbeit und Aufschwung, von Kleinwagen und Bediensteten. Von britischer Musik und britischen Filmen und britischem Essen träumten sie. Und dann ist – nichts passiert.' © 2019, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln/Cologne. We thank the publisher for granting permission to quote from the German original.

2 *Der Spiegel*, founded in 1947, is one of the major weekly news magazines published in Germany, covering politics, society and culture.

3 The word *brainfuck* was presumably chosen over its more common synonyms *mindfuck* and *headfuck* because, as will become clear below, the eponymous programming language plays a major role in the novel.

4 'Am Beginn von *GRM Brainfuck* stand der Wunsch, all die unterschiedlichen, teils als bedrohlich empfundenen Entwicklungen unserer Zeit in eine Ordnung zu bringen. [...] Ich wollte verstehen.'

5 'Es ging mir während des Schreibens unglaublich gut, denn jede Seite bedeutete etwas mehr Ordnung in meinem etwas zu voll gewordenen Verstand. Ich hatte ja vor Beginn zwei Jahre lang geforscht, mit Wissenschaftlerinnen geredet, fast coden gelernt, mich in England aufgehalten, es war einfach als ob man einen Stöpsel aus der Wanne zieht.'

6 For discussions of this fiction see, for example, Eaglestone (2018); and Zwierlein, Rostek and Habermann (2019).

7 Other German examples include Zoë Beck's thriller *Die Lieferantin* (2019), set in a near-future London where drugs are ordered online and delivered by drones, as well as the UK-based sci-fi novels mentioned in Oltermann (2019), including Tom Hillenbrand's best-selling *Hologrammatica* (2018).

8 Indeed, direct links between Britain and Germany in *GRM Brainfuck* are few and tenuous. There is, for example, 'der Professor', one of the dozens of minor characters in the novel. This man's dream in life would have been to work as a professor of English and German literature, which affords Berg the opportunity to quote a few lines from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem 'An den Mond' (524). Like practically the entire cast of the novel, however, the Professor fails in his ambition.

articulated in an interplay of languages: German (as the main narrative language), the English of grime music (which features in the novel's title in the shape of the graffiti-style 'tag' GRM) and a programming language, Brainfuck, 'spoken' by an artificial intelligence system that plays an increasingly visible role in the novel's story world. It is part of the novel's play with its readers that this esoteric programming language devised in 1993 is implicit in the title, but not explicitly referred to by its name in the text itself. For the initiated reader, the title of Berg's novel thus juxtaposes two languages, and with them two English-based cultures: the angry subculture of a young generation left behind, and the digital culture of a posthuman intelligence that is taking over a society destroyed by humans themselves.

As we aim to show in this article, Berg's attempt to understand the contemporary world via an imagined post-Brexit Britain is transnational, translingual and transcultural. The novel is transnational because, although set in Britain, the issues it draws attention to – from racism, xenophobia and the anti-feminist backlash to the destabilization of democratic institutions through social media and digital surveillance – affect advanced industrial societies everywhere and thus cannot be dealt with on the national scale. It is translingual because, although written in German, it contains a large number of ad hoc lexical borrowings from English and experiments with more complex strategies of linguistic hybridization. It is, finally, transcultural in that its story world engages with various subcultures, and, more fundamentally, in that it represents an example of literary border-crossing that no longer fits the mould of what is found in established forms of postcolonial, multicultural, migrant or diasporic fiction – and thus participates in an international twenty-first century literary trend identified by Dagnino (2013).

With grime, Berg's novel makes substantial use of a subculture that originated in Britain but then became an international pop-culture success. At the same time, it engages with the global language of computer code. *GRM Brainfuck* thus transcends borders in many respects; it requires its German-language readers to think across national and cultural borders and across languages in ways that are historically new because of the extent to which English and English-based cultures have become globalized beyond the postcolonial world. This novel is the work of a German writer who engages with the Anglosphere, and it unfolds its meaning most fully to readers familiar with the Anglosphere and its cultures. Of academics who discuss the novel, *GRM Brainfuck* asks for a transdisciplinary approach integrating literature, linguistics and cultural studies, and it suggests that British Studies will have to extend its interest to material not (entirely) produced in English(es).

These aspects will be further discussed in the subsequent sections of this essay. Section 2 elaborates on Berg's use of Britain as a laboratory for a possible future: in particular, it shows how this future is connected with a specific structure of feeling and affect, which in turn motivates Berg's use of grime as a music expressing resentment and rage. Section 3 argues that grime is not only a central topic of *GRM Brainfuck*, and an important counterpoint to its view of a harmfully digitized world, but inspires its entire structure and style, thus creating a novel that is an essentially transnational work. The final section puts the novel's call for transnational thinking and creativity into a larger picture: as an antidote to bigoted nationalisms and a digital world culture, but also as a challenge to the academic disciplines in which Berg's novel is – or ought to be – given attention.

## BRITAIN AS A LABORATORY FOR THE FUTURE

A 2019 *Guardian* article cites Berg with the following quote: 'For me England is the model country in the western world when it comes to the triumph of neoliberalism and digital surveillance [...]. You can find poverty in every one of the collapsing countries of the western world, but the unsentimental removal from sight of an entire part of the population because it is no longer of use in the value appreciation chain – that is unique to England' (Oltermann, 2019). In Berg's novel, rampant neoliberalism and privatization have eroded the welfare state and aggravated social division. Furthermore, the digital revolution has unleashed an orgy of tacky entertainment, consumerism, narcissism, fake news and pornography on the remnants of the old working and middle classes. With the help of social media and artificial intelligence, corrupt and incompetent elites have managed to control the population and build up a system of surveillance that ensures their own economic profits and the population's compliance.

The novel does not aim at psychological or social realism, although its satire is rooted in real-world settings, events, and scandals – such as the Rochdale sex grooming gang who kidnapped young women and forced them into prostitution (as was revealed in 2012) or the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire. Such facts are introduced in a way that suggests that the author has done thorough research into the relevant background, but then developed it into sometimes bizarre caricatures of the characters, events and institutions represented. The resulting picture of Britain is distinctly negative, and it stands for a contemporary world that is complicit in its own destruction. The only redeeming feature that brightens the general mood of bleakness and cultural pessimism is a group of four adolescents, members of Generation Z and the second wave of digital natives (97), who are referenced as ‘the children’. They manage to draw consolation and inspiration from grime music.

In this spirit, the first part of *GRM Brainfuck* presents an abject Britain of run-down housing estates, poverty, child neglect and abuse, violence and crime. Its first major setting is the town of Rochdale, Greater Manchester, depicted by Berg as one of the most depressing cities in the United Kingdom, a cesspool for the no-longer-needed. In the novel, Rochdale, a former industrial centre, has become a run-down place littered with the remains of factories that had once been sublime, gigantic and auspicious (39). It is in this wasteland of an older, human-labour based capitalism that ‘the children’ meet and decide to live together in a squat because they have nowhere else to go. They are troubled by the hormone imbalance of puberty but, more fundamentally, by circumstances and experiences of marginalization and victimization due to their class, race, sex or simply for being different from the social mainstream. After roughly 200 pages, the children decide to leave Rochdale and go to London for a new beginning. They plan to take revenge on those they hold responsible for their misery because no one else cares about what happened to them: social services, the police and the law have become ineffective or serve only the interests of the elites. The young vigilantes have therefore drawn up a death list they intend to work through. Mixed-race Don, raised on an estate, was tormented and humiliated by her Black mother’s violent lover Walter; Don trains in martial arts and hates being female. Hannah, the daughter of lower-middle-class Indian Jews, lost her mother because a white doctor chose to treat another white man rather than a woman of colour, and she loses her depressed father when he is encouraged to commit suicide by means of an app written by Thome Percy, the novel’s main villain character: a young, upper-class white man who considers himself an IT god and whose only passion in life is to spy on others in order to harm them (108). Karen is a highly intelligent Albino girl from a Black family who, because of her own genetic condition, has developed an interest in genetic science. Her mother dies in the Grenfell Tower fire; Karen herself falls victim to a gang modelled on the Rochdale sex grooming ring and is offered for rape (one of the men who abuse her is Thome). Karen wants to be revenged on Patuk, the gang’s Asian leader, but eventually on all men, and puts a virus into the drinking water that will make men sexually inactive. Peter is autistic and the son of a Polish migrant worker who was ‘invited’ to the country but then rejected by it. Peter is raped by another Pole, Sergej (who later appears as coach of a military sports group) in a migrant hostel; he is abandoned by his mother when she becomes the lover of a Russian oligarch. The set of main characters is hybrid in many respects, and, significantly, the post-Brexit Britain of the novel has apparently not managed to rid itself of unwanted Europeans. Eventually, Brits of all genders, classes and ethnic backgrounds will be subject to the same detrimental developments.

Apart from the fact that the children’s tormentors live there, London becomes, in the second part of the novel, the main site of Berg’s political dystopia and satire, where she locates her diagnosis of today’s retreat of democracy, the return of undisguised anti-feminism and racism as well as a digital world that reduces people’s intelligence and manipulates their lives. Before the start of the second part of the novel, the narrative is interrupted by two brief interlude sections – set in a simple and sober sans-serif type of the kind frequently used on our computer screens<sup>9</sup> – that prepare readers for the second part’s engagement with the dangers of accelerated ‘progress’ and the costs of digitization. In the novel’s network of actors, an artificial intelligence system (Ex 2279) that appears only discreetly in part one becomes an increasingly overt, Brainfuck-speaking player in part two.

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9 The same typographic marker is used for the artificial intelligence in Gibson’s *Agency*.

With digitization and artificial intelligence as spectres in the background, the United Kingdom in the novel's near future has lost much of its social cohesion. It is not even a kingdom anymore because the monarchy has been abolished as quickly as the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 (218). Digitization is the source of new inequality because it makes people redundant; even members of the former middle classes now live in impoverished circumstances and re-enact their old lives nostalgically in virtual reality rooms. The lower classes are despised and deprived of all forms of aid. With the help of social media, public feeling is mobilized against all 'parasitic' elements in society; homeless people become the object of violent raids. The new social elite is formed by IT specialists, represented by the right-wing 'Programmierer' and Thome, and IT is also essential for the secret services who monitor and manipulate the population, represented by the equally right-wing 'MI5 Piet'. The people permit themselves to be chipped and tracked in all areas of their lives when the government promises a universal basic income. Eventually, surveillance, drugs (modelled on the 'soma' in Huxley's *Brave New World*) and a social credit system (modelled on the current real system in China) create a docile, well-behaved society that no longer offers resistance. An avatar based on harvested data has been created for each citizen and is used, under the guise of securitization, not only for the prognosis of social behaviour but also for political manipulation.

The novel's text reflects this control over the population by introducing each new character with a profile based on their data.<sup>10</sup> These profiles mock social-media profiles or surveillance protocols, and through them artificial intelligence pervades the novel even before readers become aware of its presence – and, arguably, not only through the character profiles. Many reviews of the novel noted its strange narrative tone in which even seemingly internal passages are always overlaid by an authorial voice. This might be the voice of a heterodiegetic narrator (or perhaps even a metaleptic presence of Berg as author, as a literary grime MC performing a 600-page novel), but perhaps it is also the voice of the AI.

Intradiegetically, the most devastating effect of IT and AI is the way that they interfere with political decision-making and affect the core of democracy in a country that used to be considered the mother of modern democracies. The traditional upper-class elite try to retain their power by coalescing with IT. An ultra-conservative network of old men, led by Thome's father, a member of the House of Lords, believes that they can reinvent Britain and get the country under control through fake news and 'direct democracy' (516) – processes for which Brexit is their model (223, 224). The main irony of the novel is, however, that the old men's dream of power has been undermined by IT and AI in the first place. Thome and the 'Programmierer' have created an avatar that is elected – by digital plebiscite – as PM by the avatars of the electorate, and it is thus the AI and its algorithms that will rule the country in the future, a digital intelligence that is getting more and more independent from those that have programmed it. It will create a society in which humanity of a desired kind – a new stage in evolution (627–628) – will be restricted to a necessary minimum.

At the end of the novel, what the powers that be (including the AI) have achieved is control over people's emotions and the overall structure of feeling in society. In particular, they first use, and then work against, a present-day climate which sociologists describe as that of the 'nervous state' or that of the 'affective society'. The economist and sociologist William Davies (2018) uses the term 'nervous states' to describe societies in which people are increasingly relying on feeling rather than fact in political decision-making, and in the expression of political belief. An 'affective society' can be described as one 'whose modes of operation and means of integration increasingly involve systematic efforts to mobilize and strategically deploy affect and emotion in a highly intensified and often one-sided manner', and it is a type of society for which the experience of 9/11 has been identified as a major catalyst (Slaby and von Scheve, 2019: 4). In her novel, Berg also identifies 9/11 as the event that set the mood of the 2000s – the millennium 'when doubt came over the world's population' (7) and whose affective signature is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as the result of accelerated media input and consumption:

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<sup>10</sup> Compare also surveillance documents used in Eugen Ruge's *Follower* (2016), another transnational dystopian novel of social media, technology and surveillance. We thank the anonymous reviewer for this reference.

It was the time of the mass spread of fake news, of mass manipulation. People got hooked on likes from people they didn't know incredibly fast. And even faster than that, young people got dependent on a permanent sense of excitement that was made up of a mix of bullying, violence, sex, and bullshit.

It was the time when online cruelty was added to the physical brutality that humans were capable of.

When the yearning to understand turned into the rage of the ignorant. (6)<sup>11</sup>

Feelings of anger and hatred are central to the experience of many of the novel's characters – victims and perpetrators alike.<sup>12</sup> Don, for example, has been enraged from the moment of her birth (13), but her tormentor Walter is driven by rage as well (134). The novel's evaluation of affective reactions to social and political developments is twofold. It leaves no doubt that an affective society is susceptible to manipulation when the 'need to understand' turns into the 'rage of the ignorant'. At the same time, however, the rage of the children leads to active resistance. Not only do they draft their death list, they also bury the mobile phones through which they can be manipulated, traced and spied on. To the children, rage is essentially articulated through the medium of grime. Listening to grime is an outlet for their frustration and gives them a sense of shared identity.

## GRIME IN *GRM BRAINFUCK*: TOPIC AND STRUCTURAL TEMPLATE

Grime culture is central to the novel in several respects. Berg's sympathetic affiliation with grime preceded the writing of the novel and has been maintained after publication. Before and during the writing she spent extended periods of time in the settings of the novel as a participant observer. One fruit of this immersion experience, or even field research, is a promotional video released on Youtube in 2019 by Kiepenheuer & Witsch, her German publishers.<sup>13</sup> This video was produced by Berg and the artist Chas Appeti in collaboration with members of Ruff Sqwad, an established London grime crew, and T. Roadz, an aspiring performer aged fourteen at the time. During April 2019, the same collective appeared live in several cities throughout Germany, Austria and Switzerland, combining readings from the novel and musical performances. This insider perspective enables the author to represent the grime scene authentically, although – as will be shown below – her sympathy and understanding do not make her blind to the dangers of a trivialization and commercialization of the genre.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the evaluation may be, however, in the last analysis it is the grime subculture – London and British in origin, but transnational today – that provides the most robust link between an author from the Continent and the British setting. The three brief subsections below will focus on how grime is present in the novel as a topic, how the cultural sign system of grime is pitted against the programming language Brainfuck, and how, finally, elements of the grime aesthetic have informed the entire novel's style.

### GRIME AS A TOPIC

Grime stands out as the one leitmotif which keeps the many issues raised in the novel together, from the title to the very last page. Grime emerged in East London in the early 2000s (Wheatley, 2010), at a time when many of the social problems that are criticized in the novel also begin. Its ultimate roots, though, are historically deeper and geographically wider. Grime is postcolonial, and so is the heritage of most of its star performers. As Zoe Adams has remarked:

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<sup>11</sup> 'Es war die Zeit der massenhaften Falschmeldungsverbreitung, der Massenmanipulation. Die Menschen wurden unglaublich schnell süchtig nach den Likes ihrer Unbekannten. Die Jugendlichen wurden noch schneller abhängig von einer Erregung, die aus der Mischung von Mobbing, Gewalt, Sex und Bullshit entstand./Es war die Zeit, in der zur realen Grausamkeit der Menschen noch die virtuelle hinzugefügt wurde./In der die Sehnsucht nach Verständnis zu einer Wut der Unwissenden wurde.' We would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out that this might be an echo of Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* (1859) – a novel also referenced in Ali Smith's Brexit novel *Autumn* (2016).

<sup>12</sup> One finds a diagnosis of anger and rage also in British novels about contemporary Britain; see, for example Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018).

<sup>13</sup> See 'Buchtrailer GRM-Brainfuck. Der neue Roman von Sibylle Berg' at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaZo0Kd\\_9KI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaZo0Kd_9KI) (last accessed 6 January 2021).

<sup>14</sup> A similarly ambivalent standpoint is evident in the author's attitude towards social media in general: a novel that presents a relentless critique of social media's negative impact on people is marketed through a well-designed and presumably highly efficient social-media based marketing campaign.

No British genre better highlights the effects of globalisation than Grime music: an amalgam of Garage, Jungle, Hip Hop and Dancehall which emerged from pirate radio stations in East London in the early 2000s. Through Grime, the artists (known as MCs), who are often youths from marginalised, multi-ethnic areas, discuss the hardships of their upbringing. (Adams, 2018: 11)

Grime slang is rooted in Multicultural London English (MLE; Kerswill, 2014), which is the linguistic correlate of recent urban 'superdiversity' in the poorer London neighbourhoods (Vertovec, 2007). MLE, and similar urban youth languages elsewhere in Europe, have emerged for a reason:

People of different language backgrounds have settled in already quite underprivileged neighbourhoods, and economic deprivation has led to the maintenance of close kin and neighbourhood ties. Castells (2010: 436) writes of prosperous metropolises containing communities such as these: 'It is this distinctive feature of being globally connected and locally disconnected, physically and socially, that makes mega-cities a new urban form.' (Cheshire, Kerswill, Fox and Torgersen, 2011: 153)

In the local British context, the early grime movement sparked a lot of controversy, centred around performers' controversial gangsta posturing, which was interpreted as uncritical celebration of an antisocial and self-destructive lifestyle of drugs, violent crime, and sexual promiscuity among young people. In 2006, for example, David Cameron MP, then leader of the Conservative opposition, blamed grime for increasing crime rates in British cities: 'I would say to Radio 1, do you realise that some of the stuff you play on Saturday nights encourages people to carry guns and knives?' (qtd. in Day and Gibson, 2006). Academic analyses of the grime movement, by contrast, generally take a more sympathetic view. Barron argues that British grime MCs should be regarded as 'organic intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense, giving a voice to blighted urban communities in Britain that have been sent into spirals of managed decline, in this regard corresponding to the major voices of US rap and Jamaican dancehall, whose violent rhetoric has aroused similar controversy (Barron, 2013: 544). After twenty years of evolution, the situation remains complex, with one pioneer serving a life sentence for murder and another, 'Wiley' (Richard Kylea Cowie Jr., born 1979), being awarded an MBE by the Queen, under Theresa May's Conservative Government, in the 2017 New Year's Honours List. Needless to add, Sibylle Berg's view of grime has remained mostly sympathetic, with her one regret being that the movement may in parts have 'sold out' to the powers that be and thus lost its original bite.

In spite of the occasional recognition that grime has received from the mainstream, however, it remains locally disconnected from large segments of English and British society, including the prosperous West End and suburbs of London. But as its multifarious global and postcolonial roots prove, it has always been globally connected and is now connected to segments of German and continental European youth culture. In Berg's 'German' novel, grime is first mentioned in the character profile that introduces Don, one of the four young protagonists. Her interests are summarized as 'Grime, karate, sweets'; her ethnicity is an 'unclear shade of non-white [unklare Schattierung von nicht-weiß]' (8), a racial and ethnic categorization that happens to fit many real-life grime performers and fans. (As pointed out above, vague ethnic categories are also applied to the other 'children'.) Don's name is modelled on Stefflon Don, a Birmingham-born female grime star of Jamaican heritage, whose pseudonym alludes both to London, the home of grime, and the tough gangsta image of the *don*.<sup>15</sup> Male performers who are mentioned and quoted repeatedly include Skepta and Stormzy. For Don, grime music provides the only creative outlet in an object and emotionally barren existence: 'furious dirty music for children leading dirty lives [wütende Drecksmusik für Kinder in einem Dreckslieben]' (11). The term *Drecksmusik* is a typical example of Berg's frequently unobtrusive but pervasive translingual strategy. For German readers with limited competence in English as a Foreign Language, it has the literal meaning of 'dirt music'; those with more advanced levels of English competence will be aware that *Dreck* is also one of the possible translations of the English word *grime* in its literal sense.

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<sup>15</sup> Given her Jamaican heritage and her use of Jamaican patois in her songs, the word *don* seems like a straightforward reference to the criminal *dons* of the notorious tenements of Kingston, Jamaica. In the more cosmopolitan and mixed neighbourhoods of East London, however, the word may convey a wider range of associations, from its use in Mafia-movies such as *The Godfather* (1972) to contemporary US hip-hop. Just as grime is associated with 'unclear shades of non-white' (to borrow Berg's characterization of Don's ethnicity), rather than a specific minority, grime slang has multiple etymological sources and semantic associations.

In the novel, grime is shown to follow the trajectory of other forms of globally successful popular music – from the earliest stage, as creative expression and self-affirmation of an oppressed minority, through acceptance in the social mainstream and financial success in the entertainment industry to commodification and trivialization. This schematic trajectory is an obvious simplification and hides a constant tension between pride and profit at every stage of the unfolding plot, but it fits the satirical universe of *GRM Brainfuck*.<sup>16</sup> As the story unfolds, it is clear that grime is beginning to lose its potential to inspire: ‘This movement that has turned into business. That has had the rage taken out of it and Gucci put into it’ (333); ‘Grime’s on the radio. Arrived in the mainstream. Another revolution that has been bought. [...] Even grime appears nice all of a sudden. Soft, not angry any more. No one’s angry any more’ (368).<sup>17</sup> This development reflects what is most frightening about the future envisioned in *GRM Brainfuck*: how people reconcile themselves to the loss of their civil and human rights, and how they lose their anger in the face of social injustice. The social credit system and cheaply available drugs have subdued the adults’ rage – evoked in a memorable passage on the *Obdachlosenheim* (homeless shelter):

The wonderful drugs stopped most of the poor from throwing themselves out of the window or picking up the pitchforks and shouting: ‘What are you doing with our small short ridiculous lives? Are we really supposed to doze through this in a stinking hostel? Is there really no place for us, anywhere?’ (179)<sup>18</sup>

Worst of all, resistance is stifled in the young generation. The ‘children’ develop a natural resentment against the system that makes their lives miserable. Although they are digital natives, they resist being chipped and eventually even bury their smartphones. This is when they meet a group of young people who have chosen another way to resist the system. The ‘friends’ are hackers (one of two such remaining organizations) who try to defeat the control of the AI, while remaining unaware of the fact that their activities are being monitored by the secret services. They recognize their defeat when their great coup – revealing to people via the big flatscreens that have been erected all over London to what extent their data is being collected – is thwarted by the people themselves. Instead of being outraged, they are enthused: ‘The people are over the moon. There they are, on the screens. Like on the telly. And the things you get to know about them. That’s better than reading horoscopes, better than getting likes. You can’t be swiped off and you’re just there’ (551).<sup>19</sup> In the end, the hackers will have a career in IT and the secret service (624).

Much as the anger goes out of grime music, the ‘children’ eventually lose the rage that motivated them. All the individuals they wanted to be revenged on die not by their hand but by other causes. Like the hackers, the children resign themselves and become reconciled to the Brave New World. Karen embarks on a successful career as a scientist within the system, and Don wears smart, data-collecting glasses. The children’s perception and evaluation of grime reflects this development. When the young people meet a final time, Don attempts to rekindle the old spirit by rapping six lines from Skepta, which are rendered in the English original in the German text (626).<sup>20</sup> They celebrate the performer’s power (‘WOW, I’m the king of grime...’) and creativity (‘go to the rave get a rewind’). But the expected ‘rewind’ does not materialize. ‘An old Stormzy title, newly mixed’ concludes the novel a few pages later. The eight lines of text, again quoted in the English original (634), are all variations on the rather bland ‘let’s make

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16 Strictly speaking, not all the music which proves inspirational for the four young people comes from grime or is British. Don is also inspired by Justice, a French electro duo, and by Young M.A., a Brooklyn-born female rapper of mixed Jamaican-Puerto Rican heritage (102), but the constant influences are the stars of British grime.

17 ‘Diese Bewegung, die zum Kommerz geworden ist. Der die Wut entnommen und durch Gucci ersetzt worden ist.’ – ‘Es läuft Grime. Im Mainstream angekommen. Wieder eine Revolution, die gekauft worden ist. [...] Selbst Grime wirkt plötzlich lieb. Sanft, nicht mehr wütend. Wütend ist da keiner mehr.’

18 ‘Die wunderbaren Medikamente machten, dass die meisten Armen sich nicht aus dem Fenster stürzten oder zu den Mistgabeln griffen und brüllten: “Was macht ihr mit unserem einen kleinen kurzen lächerlichen Leben? Sollen wir das wirklich verdämmern in einer stinkenden Unterkunft? Gibt es wirklich keinen Platz für uns, nirgends?”’

19 ‘Die Menschen sind begeistert. Da sind sie, auf den Screens. Wie im Fernsehen. Und was man alles über sie weiß. Das ist besser als Horoskope lesen, besser als Likes bekommen. Das ist nicht weggewischt werden können und da sein.’

20 For the full text of Skepta’s ‘King of Grime,’ see <https://genius.com/Skepta-king-of-grime-lyrics>; for the full text of Stormzy’s ‘Forever,’ mentioned below, see <https://genius.com/Stormzy-forever-lyrics> (last accessed 6 January 2021).



this last forever’ theme. On the basis of the story, this hope is an illusion. There is no message here, and no bite. Indeed, it is hard to believe that the narrator’s final sentence is to be taken as anything but tongue-in-cheek:

Hannah, Peter, Karen and Don huddle close.  
A nearly perfect moment.  
In a wonderful, quiet world. (ibid.)

In the novel’s world, grime starts as the catalyst of rebellion against the system and ends as the muzak accompanying a moment of fake-sentimental remembrance. But the novel may invite an even worse conclusion, because the end of resistance among the human population paves the way for a world governed by artificial intelligence. It is one of the bitter ironies of the novel that this is not presented as a hostile coup but as a step in an evolution that humans have brought on themselves.

## GRIME VS. BRAINFUCK: A TALE OF TWO CODES

If we interpret the word *brainfuck* as a reference to the programming language used in the novel, the final part of the novel brings us back to the title, *GRM Brainfuck*, which presents a conjunction of and tension between two very different codes: GRM, an artistic, emotional language of enraged human beings, and the computer language of artificial intelligence – a cultural code embedded in lived human and social experience pitted against the algorithms of a machine code that are blind to meaning and value. On the novel’s original cover, *GRM* is written in large print, with *Brainfuck* appearing much smaller underneath it. This hierarchy seems reversed at the end within the novel’s fiction, where the computer language appears to have gained the upper hand.

Indeed, the programming language Brainfuck is actually spoken in the latter parts of the narrative. This is, to a certain extent, a joke that the author plays on the readers, but it is also part of the novel’s dystopian message. Brainfuck is the medium in which the increasingly visible AI, Ex 2279, expresses itself, for example in a lengthy fourteen-line statement (479) whose first two lines are given below:

```
+++++++[>+>+++>++++>++++>++++>++++  
<<<<-]>>>>+++++++.
```

All the symbols are part of the set of eight allowed in this esoteric programming language. Even if it is likely to be irrelevant to most readers’ experience of the novel, it is worth mentioning that Ex 2279 is not spouting mere gibberish here; the fourteen lines of code convey a meaningful message, in this case ‘letUsSaveTheWorld.quiet.oneIsListeningToUs’.<sup>21</sup> This coded message follows an exchange between Ex 2279 and one of its ‘network buddies’ rendered in plain language: ‘We are developing humour. Are you aware of this? They [the people] are not aware’. The hackers are, though (as the AIs notice), and unlike most readers, they can decode the extra message that the text in Brainfuck contains as opposed to the plain text: that the artificial intelligences want to save the world from the humans. To the few readers who can decode it, the coded passage conveys the power that computers are gaining over the world, not because they are hostile but because humans have become incapable of maintaining a society built on democratic principles and shared values.

However, when we look at the novel in its entirety, grime as a language of subcultural resistance is more powerful than within the story world because grime permeates the novel’s entire structure and style. On the level of text, in the communication between author and reader, grime is thus not defeated but almost celebrated, including for its border-crossing translingualism and transculturalism. Indeed, the border-crossing element inherent in English-

<sup>21</sup> We would like to thank Mr Fatlum Sadiku for running the code and pointing out a redundancy in the first two lines, which suggests that the AI shares at least one human trait, namely prolixity. The more parsimonious paraphrase of the two lines is:

```
+++++++[>+++>++++>++++>++++>++++  
<<<<-]>>>>+++++++.
```

The symbols “>+” have been removed after the opening square bracket in the first line, and one set of angled brackets has been removed from the second.

## GRIME REFLECTED IN THE NOVEL'S TEXT AND STYLE

Salient features of grime – the use of slang, verbal aggression and staccato rhythms – characterize the lyrics of the songs as much as Berg's writing style, which is rich in features of spoken language, such as use of colloquialisms, slang terms and sentence fragments. More specifically, it could be argued that the rhythms of grime are reflected in the unexpected line-breaks and irregular punctuation, as is the case in the following instances:

Don

Had music.

Grime seemed like it had been invented only for her. Don didn't know by whom, nor from what elements – that was stuff for discussion by young men who endowed themselves with a kind of invincibility by using technical terminology –, But Don knew that the music sounded the way she would like to feel. [...] Don listened to grime in bed, in the bathroom or outside. The great Outside.

Well –

Outside her window a street lamp, rain or something like that, probably the windows were dirty. (11)<sup>22</sup>

Her brother was moaning. Probably peeing his bed again. Don almost had a feeling

That she heard the urine run out of him and

Don was –

Furious. (12–13)<sup>23</sup>

This strategy of syntactic fragmentation is most frequently used in transitions from one character to the other, with the character profiles adding an additional element of collage and sampling through their suggestion of social-media user profiles or secret-service surveillance protocols:

And Peter would be taken care of. He [the Russian oligarch] would take care of Peter.

Perhaps off to a nice boarding school in a couple of days and then some time,

But –

### **The Russian**

*Intelligence: excellent*

*Aggressive potential: high*

*Ethnicity: white*

*Creditworthiness: kind of*

*Net worth: down to 8 million*

Intended – if at all – only to fabricate children of his own. (83)<sup>24</sup>

Note that *fabricate* translates the German verb *herstellen*, which is also used only for mechanical production processes. The use of such vocabulary for human biology and psychology is a recurrent stylistic device in the novel, underscoring the ways in which biotechnology, digitization, and artificial intelligence undermine the human personality.

Even in Britain itself grime slang is an etymological mix, blending local working-class speech with elements from African American Vernacular English, Jamaican Creole and other sources. German followers of the movement take over part of the English slang and complement it with German elements. This is echoed in the ease with which English and German are blended

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22 'Don / Hatte Musik. / Scheinbar nur für sie war Grime erfunden worden. Don wusste nicht, von wem, auch nicht aus welchen Bestandteilen – das war Diskussionsstoff für junge Männer, die sich mit Fachbegriffen eine Art von Unbesiegbarkeit verleihen konnten –, / Don wusste nur, dass die Musik so klang, wie sie sich gerne fühlen würde. [...] Don hörte Grime im Bett, im Bad oder draußen. Dem tollen Draußen. / Also – / Vor dem Fenster eine Laterne, Regen oder etwas Ähnliches, vermutlich waren nur die Fenster schmutzig.'

23 'Der Bruder wimmerte. Vermutlich pinkelte er wieder ins Bett. Fast meinte Don, / Den Urin aus ihm laufen zu hören und / Don war – / Aufgebracht.'

24 'Und für Peter wäre gesorgt. Er würde für Peter sorgen. Vielleicht in einigen Tagen ein schönes Internat und dann irgendwann, / Aber – / **Der Russe** / *Intelligenz: ausgezeichnet* / *Aggressionspotential: hoch* / *Ethnie: weiß* / *Kreditwürdigkeit: geht so* / *Nettovermögen: nur noch 8 Mio.* / Hatte vor – wenn überhaupt – nur noch eigene Kinder herzustellen.'

in the novel's text. Obvious examples are provided by recurrent slang terms from both languages: *what the fuck*, its abbreviation *WTF*, and its functional German equivalent *Scheiß der Hund drauf* [literally: 'may the dog shit on it'] are used extremely frequently and virtually interchangeably throughout the entire novel. When it comes to German youth slang, Berg uses common expressions, as in her frequent use of 'Alter' [a broad range of meanings from address-term similar to 'dude' to expression of surprise], but also experiments herself, as in the more unexpected 'Amok-Horst' [mass shooter prat] (21). *Horst* is a German male first name, with a social indexicality that roughly corresponds to that of *Kevin* in Britain, but has the much stronger derogatory sense of 'dickhead' or 'prat'.

The linguistic mixing is spontaneous and pervasive. Rochdale, Don's depressing childhood 'home' described above, is introduced as 'Fucking Rochdale' (8), rather than 'Scheiß-Rochdale,' as would be expected in a German novel. Considerable degrees of mixing are also evidenced by the following variation on the *WTF* leitmotif: 'um ja, fuck – keine Ahnung [uhm, yes, fuck – no idea]' (483), and this piece of advice: 'Don't mess mit dem Untergrund, Fucker' (487).

There are even instances of what in African American and postcolonial literature would be called 'double voicing',<sup>25</sup> that is the structural fusion of dialects or languages in such a way that the same utterance comes to hold different messages for different audiences. This phenomenon has been amply documented for the Caribbean. Cooper (2012) has studied the 'linguistic tricks' of Jamaican performance poetry and popular culture. But the Creole 'voice' is also a less obvious but equally crucial presence in many literary works written in English, for international audiences, and primarily for silent reading, as Breiner has shown for the poetry of Derek Walcott:

Walcott explores ways of writing in a manner that can appear to be both standard English and creole at the same time, by revealing and exploiting unexpected points of coincidence. [...] This "punning" effect is something like what happens when a composer of music designs a tune so that it can be harmonized in more than one key. (Breiner, 2005: 34)

In a similar fashion, *GRM* contains numerous short passages that appear to be written entirely in German, but reveal a hidden English layer accessible to cultural and linguistic 'initiates' among the readers who are familiar with colloquial British ways of speech and grime slang:

Hey, wow, was ist das, da sind Bäume, da ist Licht, man könnte – ja okay. Keine Idee. Also zurück. (472)

[Hey, wow, what's that, there's trees, there's light, you could –yeah, okay. No idea. Well, then let's go back.]

Als sie endlich in Rochdale eintrafen, sah es dort auch nicht besser aus als irgendwo. Als Liverpool. Einfach in Klein. Einfach in Regen gehüllt, der scheinbar nie aufhören wollte. Viktorianer. Saurier. Mein Arsch. (58)

[When they finally got to Rochdale, things didn't look better than anywhere else, either. Than Liverpool. Just a small version. Just shrouded in rain that didn't seem to stop falling. Victorians. Dinosaurs. My arse.]

The first example shows the fragmentary syntax of spontaneous speech, delivered in the staccato rhythms of a grime performance, mixing of English and German interjections – and genuine fusion of the two languages at *Keine Idee*, which is German in outward form but conveys the meaning of the English (*I have*) *no idea* ('keine Ahnung' in German). A similar case of fusion is presented by *Mein Arsch* in the second example, which contrasts Rochdale's glorious Victorian past and the Dinosaur Museum, its one remaining attraction, with its depressing present. This expression only has the literal meaning in German, but is here used as a calque on the English expletive *my arse/my ass*. In contrast to *no idea*, this expression could only be fully appreciated by the limited segment of the German readership that is familiar with the English taboo vocabulary and can handle it at a level of competence that normally results from deep linguistic and cultural immersion. It should be mentioned at this point that the specific examples discussed here may be Berg's creations, but the general strategy is not. In addition to numerous direct borrowings from English slang, recent German youth and subcultural group

25 For discussion of double voicing in a wider sense that ultimately goes back to Bakhtin, see Baxter (2014).

languages display many examples of covert borrowing from English. The most high-profile instance may be the vulgarism *ficken* ('fuck'), which originally had only the literal meaning in German, but has more recently had the whole extended semantics and grammatical versatility of English *fuck* mapped on it. Not surprisingly, the German expletive is commonly used in *GRM* in the full range of old and new meanings.

The striking degree of permeability which *GRM Brainfuck* displays towards the English language is paralleled to some extent in the author's self-presentation, which, in addition to the promotional activities mentioned above, includes a bilingual web presence in German and English. It is difficult to think of an Anglophone mirror image of this type of authorial persona: writing in an English infused with German and maintaining a bilingual English-German web presence.

Double voicing, language mixing and linguistic hybridization of this type are familiar from many postcolonial contexts, but not restricted to them. It is also a feature commented on in translation studies, where it is often referred to as 'shining-through'.<sup>26</sup> Such shining-through effects in translations are most common where the cultural gap between the original and the translation is wide and/or the power differential between the source language and the target language is sharp.

In the context of the present argument, this detailed analysis of the novel's translinguistic dimension is not an end in itself, but serves as a pointer to the nexus between the translinguistic, the transnational and the transcultural, which is impressively manifest in the grime movement, but also relevant in a more general way. Within the discipline of English Studies, it encourages us to reflect on the role of English as the currently dominant global lingua franca – a status that endows Anglophone cultural production with a high degree of visibility and accessibility in transnational and transcultural contexts. Global English transcends borders and increases connections. Trade, travel, migration and the media have intensified contact and exchange of all kinds throughout the world. This is demonstrated by the increased importance of the English language in practically all regions of the world, as well as by the presence of intensely multilingual enclaves in the major urban centres of the English-speaking world, such as – to mention obvious examples – London, New York, Toronto, Sydney and Johannesburg.

However, the fact that a world-encompassing network of transnational cultural contacts and connections exists does not imply that it is organized as a happy and egalitarian polyphony of voices. In the global cultural marketplace, the English language guarantees the largest audiences; the Anglosphere is often the centre, and the rest of the world forms the peripheries. Linguistic and cultural seepage from the Anglosphere into other languages and communities will be massive, whereas the reverse influences will be more limited. For an obvious illustration of this power differential we need look no further than Berg's novel: a German novel set in England and built around grime has been successful in a way that is difficult to imagine for a potential English counterpart (i.e. an English novel set in Germany and built around a German sub-cultural movement).

Note that this situation is historically new. A little more than a hundred years ago, at the height of the political power of the British Empire, the English language was not the undisputed default choice as international lingua franca, as it is today, but one of several competing world languages.<sup>27</sup> It was not until the late twentieth century that the whole world was communicatively integrated into a hierarchically layered multilingual World Language System,<sup>28</sup> in which English has been the undisputed hub. The global pre-eminence of English has been much studied in the standard-language discourses of global politics, academia and business. The attraction of English, however, is not restricted to these prestigious domains, but extends to historically marginalized and discriminated-against dialects of the global language, as well. In this regard, the spread of grime to Germany and continental Europe is an example of yet another wave of subcultural and pop-cultural influences from the Anglosphere on the rest of the world.

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Teich (2003).

<sup>27</sup> See Northrup (2013: 137–60).

<sup>28</sup> See de Swaan (2010; 2020), and Mair (2019).

As used in the structural and stylistic makeup of Berg's novel, grime retains its integrity as the voice of resistance and protest, in contrast to the way it loses its subversive power within the novel's story world. The novel performs grime within its text, even if it can only offer a superficial imitation of the richness of grime as live performance: with lyrics that absorb influences from many dialects and languages and with performers who are as much individual creators as they are members of crews with whom they affiliate and 'enemies' of other performers and crews with whom they 'clash'. Speaking of clash, it is worth noting that Berg's gesture of protest against a digitized society is not restricted to grime. More subtly and high-culturally, critique of the digital is also expressed through the design and materiality of the hardback cover with which the novel originally appeared. It was designed with great care by the artist Claus Richter, a friend of the author, combining early twentieth-century art-deco motifs with stylized representations of a circuit on a computer chip and using embossing in order to add a haptic dimension to the reader's experience. *GRM Brainfuck* is a novel that deals with the latest challenges of technological modernity, but nevertheless comes with a 'retro-high-tech-classic cover' that emphasizes the tradition of its older print medium self-confidently, holding it up against the digital.<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSION: GRM BRAINFUCK AS A TRANSCULTURAL NOVEL

As we have shown, Berg's novel crosses borders of language and culture in multiple ways and challenges expectations that German readers might have regarding a German-language novel about contemporary Britain. Berg's elaborate use of grime, a style that originated in London but has an international dimension, suits a novel that uses contemporary Britain for a diagnosis of twenty-first-century societal, political and cultural trends, and as a worried writer's laboratory for the future of Western society. *GRM Brainfuck* has been received in this light by the greater part of its general readers and reviewers. It is also a novel, however, that challenges the academic reader because it is not easily contained in the familiar academic niches and specializations. In the UK, academics would traditionally study German-language novels in German Studies or Comparative Literature; outside the UK, German-language novels are not a 'natural' subject of British Studies. *GRM Brainfuck*, however, enters precisely this field – and not only because it extrapolates its dystopian view from Britain as it presented itself at the time of Brexit.<sup>30</sup> As we hope to have shown, although it is written in German, the novel cannot be reduced to a text merely offering an external (German or Continental) representation of Britain. In its specific way of 'appropriating' grime it represents a deeper kind of border-crossing that enables it to be productively read as a 'British' text, too. *GRM Brainfuck* holds the dynamics of the transnational up as a way of thinking against re-nationalization as well as supranational digitization, and it is significant that it draws on the Anglosphere in order to do this. In this novel Sibylle Berg shows how cultural developments migrate to other languages and contexts, and how they inspire creative work. Berg's multiply-transcultural, border-crossing experiment in German fiction is enabled by its author's engagement with the Anglosphere, and this is an aspect which neither previous work in transnational studies of culture nor transcultural British Studies has fully explored yet (see, for example, Bachmann-Medick, 2014; and Lange and Wiemann, 2008). Of course, a wide range of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural encounters between Britain and the world – including issues of translation, both in the literal and the wider sense of the term (see Rüdiger, Hickey and Gross, 2009) – have been explored in postcolonial studies, which have therefore made a considerable contribution to the study of the contemporary dynamics of cultural globalization. In particular, the term *transcultural*, which we have drawn on to characterize Berg's novel, has been systematically elaborated as a key theoretical concept in this research tradition.<sup>31</sup> But even the wide ambit afforded by the postcolonial approach is too narrow to cover linguistic and cultural encounters taking place without a previous shared colonial experience.

If influences from a wide range of British popular music are relevant for contemporary German youth culture in general, grime – like other Black and multi-ethnic traditions such as reggae and hip hop – holds specific additional attraction for Afro-Germans. Germany has a considerable

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<sup>29</sup> We would like to give credit for this formulation to Ms Ulla Brümmer, of Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Berg's publishers, who also helped with the other explanations.

<sup>30</sup> See also Korte and Mair (2019).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Davis et al. (2004; 2005).

history of immigration from Africa (Mazón and Steingröver, eds. 2005) and a sizable number of immigrants today. The internal composition of this group, however, is more fragmented and complex than in the cases of classic post-colonial immigration from Africa found in France and the United Kingdom. In this situation, community activists frequently look to Britain for guidance on how to forge a political and cultural identity that will enable the group to achieve full equality and participation in society. As Maisha-Maureen Eggers – community activist and one of the pioneers of whiteness research in Germany (see Eggers et al., 2009) – has pointed out:

Concepts of Black citizenship as they have been implemented in the United Kingdom, France or in the Netherlands can provide examples for us here in Germany. Ensuring social participation of Afro-German residents and other communities of People of Color represents a further crucial factor. (Eggers, qtd. in Bundeszentrale, n.d., our translation)<sup>32</sup>

In this connection it is worth mentioning a number of Black and Asian British expatriate intellectuals who have moved to Germany and are actively participating in local cultural and literary life. Best known among them is Sharon Dodua Otoo. Born in London in 1972 to Ghanaian parents, she first came to Germany in 1992 and currently lives in Berlin. In 2016 she won the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann Award for a short story written in German (see Korte and Mair, 2019, for further discussion and other examples).

Inspired by the encounter with grime and her experience of cultural immersion in the British grime scene, Berg has written a transcultural novel in German. While this is not quite the same as a colonial or post-colonial encounter with Britain, we would argue that there are sufficient parallels to make the text rewarding to analyse in the context of British Studies. Berg and her audience have opened up a ‘transnational cultural space’, which we define in analogy to Jürgen Osterhammel’s notion of ‘transnational social spaces’ opened up by migrant communities:

[S]ociological and ethnological studies of migrants in the present-day world have shown how it is possible to lead a life in a kind of permanent transgression of boundaries between persisting national cultures. People and communities ‘in between’ do not necessarily live in the rarefied world of a rootless cosmopolitanism, nor are they lost in a no-man’s land. [...] there is also the possibility of multiple identities, bilingualism, and the flexible enacting of roles. For this third type of cases, the concept of ‘transnational social space’ seems to offer an adequate solution. (Osterhammel, 2009: 45–46)

We hope that the ‘transnational cultural space’ opened up by *GRM Brainfuck* will soon be expanded by a necessary complement, a translation of the novel into English. Given the rules of the World Language System as currently in place, the translation of a literary work from German into English is more difficult to achieve than the reverse. Quoting research by Heilbron (2010), de Swaan points out ‘an interesting corollary to the prominence of a country in the translation system’:

the *larger* its share in translations towards other languages, the *smaller* the percentage of translations from other languages in its domestic book market. Thus, only 2% to 4% of all published books in the United States and the United Kingdom are translations: 12% to 18% in Germany and France [...] and more than 30% in countries with peripheral languages such as Greece and Portugal, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. (de Swaan, 2020: 217)

The fact that some of Berg’s work is available in English translation in the UK shows that she is capable of surmounting this general obstacle. As for *GRM Brainfuck*, however, she revealed in a conversation that British publishers were reluctant to publish a translation. This reluctance seems to have something to do with the fact that *GRM Brainfuck* is so apparently ‘British’. As Berg cites one of the negative responses she received: ‘What would you think if an English author were to write about Switzerland?’ (in Ehlert, 2019: 12).<sup>33</sup> *GRM Brainfuck* invites a German

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32 ‘Konzepte einer Schwarzen Staatsbürgerschaft, wie sie in Großbritannien, Frankreich oder in den Niederlanden umgesetzt werden, können hier Beispiele liefern für unsere Situation in Deutschland. Die gesellschaftliche Beteiligung der afro-deutschen Bevölkerung und anderer Communities von “People of Color” stellt einen weiteren wichtigen Faktor dar.’

33 ‘Was würden Sie denn denken, wenn jetzt ein Engländer über die Schweiz schreiben würde?’

audience to a particular type of transcultural encounter, to reflect on the human consequences of technological modernity through the lens of a dystopian but rich literary representation of contemporary Britain. Clearly, the elements of sometimes hostile caricature and exaggeration are not seen as problematic in the ‘we see them’-constellation of the original as they would be in the ‘they see us’-constellation of the English translation. Still, both constellations are needed to complete this particular transnational cultural space. Needless to add, *GRM Brainfuck* is not a unique case without parallels. A globalized world has started to talk and write back at Britain (and the United States) in some segments of its cultural production. Such transnational works are profoundly influenced by their creators’ encounters with the English language and Anglophone culture, but the texts, lyrics and films are not necessarily written or performed in English. We therefore understand our case study of a recent German novel with a British plot and setting as a plea to promote a multilingual and transcultural orientation in British Studies. This transnational orientation has the potential to question thinking in national terms and to criticize the supranational forces of top-down globalization.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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