Gilroy, Paul. After Empire: Melancholia or convivial culture?

This document is a selection of different texts from Paul Gilroy's book After Empire: Melancholia or convivial culture?

This is intended as an educational resource for A Level Media Students.
INTRODUCTION: ON LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE

The problems have multiplied where the idea of culture has been abused by being simplified, instrumentalized, or trivialized, and particularly through being coupled with notions of identity and belonging that are overly fixed or too easily naturalized as exclusively national phenomena. Recalibrating approaches to culture and identity so that they are less easily reified and consequently less amenable to these misappropriations seems a worthwhile short-term ambition that is compatible with the long-term aims of a reworked and politicized multiculturalism. Indeed, it is doubly welcome because it requires the renunciation of the cheap appeals to absolute national and ethnic difference that are currently fashionable.

THE RIGHT TO BE HUMAN

The disinclination to address these dynamics has now become a significant problem. It has entered directly into the life of postcolonial Europe in a number of ways. In the case of Britain, which I will address in more detail later on, a refusal to think about racism as something that structures the life of the postimperial polity is associated with what has become a morbid fixation with the fluctuating substance of national culture and identity. In a revealing pattern established by Winston Churchill's influential triangulation of the post-1945 world, the core of British particularity is deemed to be under disastrous attack from three different directions: Americanization, Europeanization, and a nonspecific subsumption by immigrants, settlers, and invaders of both colonial and postcolonial varieties. Behind these multiple anxieties lies the great transformation that quickly reduced the world's preeminent power to a political and economic operation of more modest dimensions. We must become interested in how the literary and cultural as well as governmental dynamics of the country have responded to that process of change and what it can tell us about the place of racism in contemporary political culture.

Strong resistance against the idea that racism can shape historical and cultural relationships has come from across the spectrum of respectable political opinion. This sort of response is not, of course, confined to Britain.
In Britain these arguments are tied to an obsessive repetition of key themes—invansion, war, contamination, loss of identity—and the resulting mixture suggests that an anxious, melancholic mood has become part of the cultural infrastructure of the place, an immovable ontological counterpart to the nation-defining ramparts of the white cliffs of Dover.

Authoritarian modes of belonging to the national collective supply the norm, and with the constraints and strengths of national identity and the national state system plainly visible, anyone who objects to the conduct of their government is likely to be identified as an enemy within and bluntly advised to go and live elsewhere. Attempts to criticize a national state while simultaneously living under its protective umbrella become hypocrisy rather than the principled pursuit of consistency. To make matters even worse, we are informed that the end of the national state was prematurely announced during mistaken earlier phases of globalization. We are then reminded that the principle of duty must, above all, be a national one and that our dwindling rights cannot be separated from obligations that will be defined, if we are fortunate, by an ideal of patriotic citizenship in which being for those who are like oneself does not necessarily mean being opposed to those whose equivalent ties and comparable affiliations lie elsewhere.

The militarization of social life promotes an automatic solidarity in which soldier-citizens who carry or practice the defining culture of their national state become indistinguishable to the point of being interchangeable.
Tales of heroism by the brave pilots of Spitfires and Hurricanes were important to my postwar childhood. Their anti-Nazi action established one dimension of my moral universe. Yet, when the World War II airplanes thundered overhead during the pageantry that attended the Queen Mother’s burial in 2002, it was impossible not to wonder why that particular mythic moment of national becoming and community has been able to endure and retain such a special grip on Britain’s culture and self-understanding. Why are those martial images—the Battle of Britain, the Blitz, and the war against Hitler—still circulating and, more importantly, still defining the nation’s finest hour? How is it that their potency can be undiminished by the passage of time, and why do they alone provide the touchstone for the desirable forms of togetherness that are used continually to evaluate the chaotic, multicultural present and find it lacking?
Any worthwhile explanation for Britain’s postmodern nationalism has to be complex enough to answer those questions. It must also be able to acknowledge that exceptionally powerful feelings of comfort and compensation are produced by the prospect of even a partial restoration of the country’s long-vanished homogeneity. Repairing that aching loss is usually signified by the recovery or preservation of endangered whiteness—and the exhilarating triumph over chaos and strangeness which that victory entails. If this partial explanation is to become valid, it will have to account for how Britain’s nationalism has interfaced with its racism and its xenophobia, but there is another interpretative challenge here. We need to know how the warm glow that results from the nation’s wholesome militarism has combined pleasurably with the unchallenging moral architecture of a Manichaeian world in which a number of dualistic pairings—black and white, savage and civilized, nature and culture, bad and good—can all be tidily superimposed upon one another. We will have to consider the pleasures that result from the experience of being happy, glorious, and victorious in a setting where the nation’s characteristic ethnic blend of luck, pluck, and resilience can be identified and affirmed. Revisiting the feeling of victory in war supplies the best evidence that Britain’s endangered civilization is in progressive motion toward its historic completion.

These distinctive combinations of sentiment and affect result in the anti-Nazi war being invoked even now. This is done so that Brits can know who we are as well as who we were and then become certain that we are still good while our uncivilized enemies are irredeemiably evil. However, it is not obvious how and why the country’s downbeat martial values still make sense to generations for whom the war itself is more myth and fantasy than memory. Political citations of World War II in pursuit of other more recent ends—the reconquest of the Falklands or the overthrow of Saddam Hussein—have stretched official anti-Fascist history so thin that it cannot possibly accomplish all the important cultural work it is increasingly relied upon to do. An uncertain generation for whom all knowledge of the conflict arrives on very long loops, usually via Hollywood, is still required to use expensively manufactured surrogate memory of World War II as the favored means to find and even to restore an ebbing sense of what it is to be English. Under these conditions, it has become instructive to ask why that war above all can connect people to the fading core of a culture and a history that is confronting a loss of certainty about its own distinctive content and its noble world mission. After all, the United Kingdom has been in plenty of other wars since the great triumph of 1945.
power of the great anti-Nazi war seems to have increased even as its veterans have died out. On the other hand, the mysterious evacuation of Britain’s postcolonial conflicts from national consciousness has become a significant cultural and historical event in its own right. Those forgotten wars have left significant marks on the body politic, but the memory of them appears to have been collapsed into the overarching figuration of Britain at war against the Nazis, under attack, yet stalwart and ultimately triumphant. That image, produced with apparent spontaneity from below and sometimes engineered politically from above by crown and government, has underpinned the country’s unstable post-1945 settlement. It is addressed to what has become a perennial crisis of national identity, which lately reached a notable point of transition and decision in popular resistance to joining the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the debate over the terms upon which that special but dubious alliance with George Bush’s superpower should now proceed.

CULTURES OF MELANCHOLIA AND THE PATHOLOGY OF GREATNESS

I think that there is something neurotic about Britain’s continued citation of the anti-Nazi war. Making it a privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding reveals a desire to find a way back to the point where the national culture—operating on a more manageable scale of community and social life—was, irrespective of the suffering involved in the conflict, both comprehensible and habitable. That memory of the country at war against foes who are simply, tidily, and uncomplicatedly evil has recently acquired the status of an ethnic myth. It explains not only how the nation remade itself through war and victory but can also be understood as a rejection or deferral of its present problems. That process is driven by the need to get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings. Neither the appeal of homogeneity nor the antipathy toward immigrants and strangers who represent the involution of national culture can be separated from that underlying hunger for reorientation. Turning back in this direction is also a turning away from the perceived dangers of pluralism and from the irreversible fact of multiculture.

The immediate roots of this situation reside in the way that Britain snatched a wider cultural and psychological defeat from the jaws of its
victory over Hitlerism in 1945. I want to show that since then the life of the nation has been dominated by an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the Empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige. That inability has been intertwined with the apprehension of successive political and economic crises, with the gradual breakup of the United Kingdom, with the arrival of substantial numbers of postcolonial citizen-migrants, and with the shock and anxiety that followed from a loss of any sense that the national collective was bound by a coherent and distinctive culture. Once the history of the Empire became a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity, its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside. Rather than work through those feelings, that unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten. The resulting silence feeds an additional catastrophe: the error of imagining that postcolonial people are only unwanted alien intruders without any substantive historical, political, or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects.

These extraordinary failures have obstructed the arterial system of Britain’s political body in many ways. They deserve the proper name “postimperial melancholia” in order simultaneously to underline this syndrome’s links with the past and its pathological character. This is a complex ailment with multiple symptoms that build upon and divert earlier patterns of imperial melancholy from which they make a decisive break. An older, more dignified sadness that was born in the nineteenth century should be sharply distinguished from the guilt-ridden loathing and depression that have come to characterize Britain’s xenophobic responses to the strangers who have intruded upon it more recently.

Matthew Arnold helped to create the special “ethnic” space between Hebraism and Hellenism from which the country’s Victorian racial destiny could be divined. By staging his famous poetic reflections on Britain’s modern predicament at the frontier of Dover Beach, where today’s asylum seekers still fear to tread, he made it clear that proximity to the alien presence of the French had helped to concentrate his mind with regard to the country’s historic responsibilities as well as its relationship to the classical world that had supplied the template for its global imperium. The historic mission to civilize and uplift the world was England’s unavoidable destiny, but he sensed that it would bring
neither comfort nor happiness. That imperial mission re-created the national community in a modern form but then drew it immediately into a terrible web of war and suffering, polluting its beautiful dreams, confusing and destabilizing it. For Arnold, the unchanging cliffs of England were glimmering and vast when compared to an ephemeral gleam of light visible on the nearby French coast. The distinctive island ecology of land and sea were operating on a geological tempo to which he gives the reader access. With the right dosage of Hellenic inspiration, the landscape/seascape could not only produce a deep geo-piety but also speak uniquely to the country’s modern predicament and, of course, to the difficult position of the poet who bore a resigned witness to it. His apprehensions were aligned with those of the larger social body, but, as he heard and felt the shingle start to move beneath his feet, he opted to turn away from those public concerns and seek consolation in the private and intimate places where romantic love and fidelity could offset the worst effects of warfare, turbulence, and vanished certitude. The accompanying inward turn was a defensive gesture, and it was morally justifiable only when it promoted a self-conscious struggle with the historic sources of the tendency to become sad and pensive in the face of the Empire’s demanding geopolitical responsibilities.

We can say that Arnold’s articulate melancholy was shaped by the culture of that Empire in its emergent phase. It combined with and was complemented by the older melancholy of the poor, the expropriated, the empressed and the abjected which is still remembered in the folk music of England. An altogether different pattern became visible once the imperial system shifted into undeniable decline. Victorian melancholy started to yield to melancholia as soon as the natives and savages began to appear and make demands for recognition in the Empire’s metropolitan core. The change was complete when the limits of the political project involved in subordinating colonial peoples were communicated to their apprehensive racial betters by baffling ingratitude and a stubborn appetite for independence. At home, a novel conception of where the boundaries of British culture would fall was contoured by a new arrangement in which immigration, war, and national identity began to challenge class hierarchy as the most significant themes from which the national identity would be assembled. Until very recently,
even the horrible shock of the World War I, which engulfed thousands and thousands of colonial soldiers, was recovered and preserved in an exclusionary form as a wholly private or domestic matter from which nonwhites were shut out by the force of the class conflicts that bound authentic Britons to each other in the manmade storm of military absurdity that made their divided lives expendable.

The end of external hostilities demanded a new map of the nation’s internal fractures and divisions. The conflict between Celts and Anglo-Saxons was no longer adequate to the task of managing the inflow of aliens and their disruptive presence in the cities. Paul Foot drew attention long ago to the xenophobic populism swirling around the passage of the 1919 Aliens Act. He cites a powerful speech made in the House of Commons by Josiah Wedgwood, who set standards that today’s Labour members of parliament have clearly been unable to maintain:

Generally speaking, aliens are always hated by the people of this country. Usually speaking, there has been a mob which has been opposed to them, but that mob has always had leaders in high places. The Flemings were persecuted and hunted, and the Lombards were hunted down by the London mob. Then it was the turn of the French Protestants. I think that the same feelings holds good on this subject today. You always have a mob of uneducated people who will hunt down foreigners, and you always have people who will make use of the passions of this mob in order to get their own ends politically.1

The lingering effects of this traditional xenophobia are registered not only in the antipathy toward alien settlers of all kinds but also in the country’s intense political and emotional responses to its residual colonial responsibilities in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Diego Garcia, and elsewhere. Britain’s ambivalence about its empire is especially evident in its reactions to the fragments of brutal colonial history that emerge occasionally to unsettle the remembrance of the imperial project by undermining its moral legitimacy and damaging the national self-esteem. The terrifying folk knowledge of what is actually involved in being on the receiving end of imperial power has also been preserved and finds expression elsewhere—above all, in the country’s intermittent fears of itself becoming a colonial dependency of the United States. This apprehension was expressed most vividly by Peter Kilfoyle, M.P., during
the summer of 2003 when the disastrous character of the invasion of Iraq was becoming apparent. He pointed out that “the defence secretary Geoff Hoon, has acknowledged that we are to be to the US armed forces what the sepoys were to the British Indian Army.”

Each of the historical examples I have mentioned in passing can supply a detailed case study in support of my larger arguments. For example, the revelations about the brutal conduct of the war against “Mau Mau” insurgents in Kenya that emerged on the fiftieth anniversary of the declaration of the eight-year “emergency” in that country warrant close attention in their own right, but they are also typical of the drip of embarrassing and uncomfortable information about imperial and colonial governance that has begun to leak into the public debate and challenge the country’s instinctive sense that its imperial ambitions were always good and its political methods for realizing them, morally and legally defensible. This particular example involved allegations of brutality, torture, and killing, which may compare favorably to the dismal record of other European powers elsewhere in Africa but nonetheless raised a host of issues about the abuse of human rights and the characteristic manner in which colonial wars were conducted. The shock involved in trying to accept that British colonial administrators and soldiers, as well as the officials who controlled them from Whitehall, could have been routinely involved in such horrible practices did not exhaust the nation’s feelings of discomfort and shame at the conduct of its empire. Indeed, sticking with the Kenyan case, those responses have been extended and amplified by various post-colonial conflicts. They have recently been compounded by another layer of trauma that is directly relevant to the theme of this chapter. Though their disturbing claims have been clouded by accusations of fraud, Kenyan women from several generations have launched a legal action against the British Ministry of Defence, which alleges that they were subjected to sexual assault by U.K. troops stationed in the area to conduct “training exercises.” Though the women involved were, unlike the insurgents of the earlier period, Masai rather than Kikuyu, these allegations suggest governmental continuities between colonial and postcolonial administrations that are united by a view of the natives as infrahuman creatures to be preyed upon for sexual gratification. The women’s controversial claims also included the additional charge that
the British Army had, over a thirty-year period, refused to investigate repeated allegations of rape.

My argument is not principally concerned with the details involved in these or various other similar legal actions, or indeed with the methodological and moral shifts that follow from approaching Britain’s imperial history through its victims’ decisions to seek financial compensation for their injuries by legal means. I am interested instead in the way that British political culture has had to adapt in order to make sense of the catalogue of horror that extends into the present from Morant Bay and Lucknow via Londonderry and Dol Dol. I want us to consider the political and psychological reactions which attend the discovery that imperial administration was, against all the ethnic mythology that projects empire as essentially a form of sport, necessarily a violent, dirty, and immoral business. We need to know how that deeply disturbing realization has been managed and, in particular, to consider what consequences follow from the need to maintain the moral preeminence and progressive momentum that define colonial power as the redemptive extension of civilization into barbarity and chaos?

It is not only that the greatness of the British nation is evidently still at stake in the contested history of its difficult relationships with its colonial subjects. Repressed and buried knowledge of the cruelty and injustice that recur in diverse accounts of imperial administration can only be denied at a considerable moral and psychological cost. That knowledge creates a discomfiting complicity. Both are active in shaping the hostile responses to strangers and settlers and in constructing the intractable political problems that flow from understanding immigration as being akin to war and invasion. The hidden, shameful store of imperial horrors has been an unacknowledged presence in British political and cultural life during the second half of the twentieth century. It is not too dramatic to say that the quality of the country’s multicultural future depends on what is now done with it. The history of empire directs attention to the practical mechanisms of racial hierarchy and the ideology of white supremacy, but that is not its only value to contemporary debates. Once those encounters have begun and a revised account of the nature of imperial statecraft has been folded into critical reflections on national life, the possibility of healing and reconciliation come into view.
The immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there; that basic fact of global history is not usually deniable. And yet its grudging recognition provides a stimulus for forms of hostility rooted in the associated realization that today’s unwanted settlers carry all the ambivalence of empire with them. They project it into the unhappy consciousness of their fearful and anxious hosts and neighbors. Indeed, the incomers may be unwanted and feared precisely because they are the unwitting bearers of the imperial and colonial past.

An important displacement mechanism becomes evident here. The arrival of these incomers, even when they were protected by their tenure of formal citizenship, was, as I have already said, understood to be an act of invasive warfare. That structure of feeling governs the continuing antipathy toward all would-be settlers. Later groups of immigrants may not, of course, be connected with the history of empire and colony in any way whatsoever. However, they experience the misfortune of being caught up in a pattern of hostility and conflict that belongs emphatically to its lingering aftermath. Once they recognize the salience of racial categories to their perilous predicament, it should not be surprising if these people try to follow the well-trodden path pioneered by the most vulnerable and marginal members of the host community. They too will seek salvation by trying to embrace and inflate the ebbing privileges of whiteness. That racialized identification is presumably the best way to prove they are not really immigrants at all but somehow already belong to the home-space in ways that the black and brown people against whom they have to compete in the labor market will never be recognized as doing.
be said too often that this is not, at source, a matter of "race," even though, for many people, it is understood and lived as such. It is the workings of racism that produce the order of racial truths and not the other way around.

The consolidation of postcolonial melancholia suggests an even more disturbing possibility, namely that many people in Britain have actually come to need "race" and perhaps to welcome its certainties as one sure way to keep their bearings in a world they experience as increasingly confusing. For them, there can be no working through this problem because the melancholic pattern has become the mechanism that sustains the unstable edifice of increasingly brittle and empty national identity. The nation's intermittent racial tragedies become part of an eventful history. They punctuate the boredom of chronic national decline with a functional anguish. The loss of empire—and the additional loss of certainty about the limits of national and racial identity that result from it—have begun, ironically, to sustain people, providing them with both pleasure and distraction. The historical approach tentatively pioneered here tries to seek out a less regular narrative rhythm than strict, even oscillation between identification with the victims of racism, a guilty dislike of them and the changes they have made to the country, and tormented self-disgust at the prospect of being implicated either in the problems they import or in their colonial and postcolonial sufferings.
Anti-racists are now obliged to judge where acceptable national feeling ends and xenophobic racism commences. We must find new courage to reflect on the history of political nationalism that has been entangled with the ideas of race, culture, and civilization and to understand how Europe’s imperial and colonial dominance brought racisms and nationalisms together in ways that still affect present conditions. The hard work of postcolonial culture building encompasses several additional confrontations: The first of these is aimed at the realization of a more worthwhile liberalism. This variant might, for example, prepare to be profaned by systematic reflections upon its own colonial habits and implications. It might also be able to confront the impulses which specify racial, ethnic, and national divisions in subtle patterns that are as potent as they are inferential. The second conflict involves an assault upon the pragmatic formulae that place both racism and antiracism outside of the political field, leaving them to be essentially private issues, matters of taste, preference, and, ultimately, of consumer or lifestyle choice. A third confrontation would perhaps culminate in a revised account of European modernisms and their complex relationship with colonial and imperial experiences at home and abroad. A fourth would be directed toward understanding the impact of black literature, culture, art, and music on European life, and in particular seeing how during the latter half of the twentieth century an appetite for various African American cultures was part of how Europe recomposed itself in the aftermath of Fascism.

These interpretative puzzles have been rendered more difficult to solve because the ground on which the ramshackle edifice of political antiracism was erected—largely, we should remember, by incomers and their supporters—has dwindled. That notable contribution to Europe’s civic well-being and political health passes unremarked upon by those who babble instead about the endless conflict between local solidarity and alien diversity. Hasn’t antiracism demanded more solid and supple forms of democracy? Couldn’t a dynamic and worthwhile solidarity be articulated around the noble desire for racism to have no place in Europe’s democratic political cultures?