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**Conviviality and Parallax in David Olusoga's *Black and British: A Forgotten History***

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## **Conviviality and Parallax in David Olusoga's *Black and British: A Forgotten History***

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### **Abstract**

Through examining the BBC television series, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, written and presented by the historian David Olusoga, and in extending Paul Gilroy's assertion that the everyday, banality of living with difference is now an ordinary part of British life, this article considers how Olusoga's historicization of the black British experience reflects a convivial rendering of UK multiculturalism. In particular, when used alongside Žižek's notion of parallax, it is argued that understandings of convivial culture can be supported by a historical importance that deliberately 'shocks' and, subsequently dislodges, popular interpretations of the UK's 'white past'. Notably, it is parallax which puts antagonism, strangeness and ambivalence at the heart of contemporary depictions of convivial Britain, with the UK's cultural differences located in the 'gaps' and tensions which characterize both its past and present. These differences should not be feared but, as a characteristic part of our convivial culture, should be supplemented with historical analyses that highlight but, also, undermine, the significance of cultural differences in the present. Consequently, it is suggested that if the spontaneity of conviviality is to encourage openness, then, understandings of multiculturalism need to go beyond reification in order to challenge our understandings of the past. Here, examples of 'alterity' are neither 'new' nor 'contemporary' but, instead, constitute a fundamental part of the nation's history: of the 'gap' made visible in transiting past and present.

### **Introduction**

In November 2016, the BBC aired its four-part documentary series, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*. Coinciding with the BBC's 'Black History Month', the series formed part of 'a season of programming celebrating the achievements of black people in the UK and exploring the rich culture and history of black Britain' (BBC 2016a). In doing so, the series aimed to explore Britain's past through a shared history, while also reflecting on what being British means 'today' (BBC 2016a). Across the four episodes, the historian and presenter,

David Olusoga, provided a global perspective that emphasised the multi-ethnic links between the United Kingdom (UK) and the wider world. Entwined with Olusoga's narrative were commemorative plaques that celebrated and acknowledged the experience and breadth of British history. As a result, the series offered an interpretation of British multiculturalism that demanded a confrontation with the past, not as 'post-nation' (Runnymede Trust 2000), but as a constitutive feature of the UK's multicultural present. This approach was widely commended in commentaries and reviews of the series, with many highlighting the series's (and accompanying book [Olusoga, 2016a]) ability to 'unearth' untold and unknown histories from Britain's multi-ethnic past (Baylis, 2016; Dabydeen, 2017; Grant, 2016; O'Grady, 2016; Ramaswamy, 2016; Rees, 2016). In view of this, this article will critically examine how the series reflected a form of conviviality that can be used to explore past and present examples of UK multiculturalism.

That is, with regard to Gilroy's (2004) assertion that the everyday, banality of living with difference is now an ordinary part of British life, and without ignoring the importance of the UK's colonial past in Gilroy's work (1993), it is clear that developing an understanding of the past that is open to cultural diversity is a well-recited claim of reports on, and, analyses of, UK multiculturalism (Cantle, 2005; Modood, 2007). In addition, there has also been long-standing calls for considering the importance of Britain's imperial past and the need 'to revise the national story' (Fortier, 2005: 564) in accordance with British multiculturalism (Runnymede Trust, 2000). Of greater importance, however, is that such revisions have been used to promote a 'Multicultural heritage' that is 'embed[ed] [in] essentialised ideas of cultural difference, whether through exoticising "other" cultures or homogenising and sentimentalising "local" white English heritages' (Littler, 2005: 10).

In contrast, this article will highlight how Olusoga's *Black and British: A Forgotten History* offered a parallax account of Britain's past and present that can be used to extend the application of conviviality beyond the 'everyday'. While the term parallax is used by Žižek, 'to name an irreducible difference in perspective that is not programmed for nor determined to result in some kind of final mediation or dialectical resolution' (Gunkel, 2012: 7), in this article, it will be applied to analyses of (multi)cultural difference and to the study of this 'difference' as a constitutive feature of British multiculturalism. Indeed, rather than proving a 'dialectical resolution' to cultural differences (Gunkel, 2012: 7), Olusoga's narrative will be noted for

positing a far more nuanced appreciation of the UK's multi-ethnic past and its post-imperial, multicultural present.

### **De-historicising and de-politicising the past: the UK's 'white past, multicultural present' and the segregation of black British history**

Hastie and Rimmington (2014) highlight that, while acknowledging historical examples of racism, forms of white privilege can serve to downplay its significance in contemporary contexts so that the socio-historical elements of 'race' are removed and a 'multicultural present', built on an uncomplicated cultural harmony, is promoted. Here, 'racialisation has to do with homogenising groups, de-historicising and not seeing their struggles, reducing their distinctiveness and viewing them as bearers of particular kinds of cultural norms' (Garner, 2012: 451). Accordingly, whereas ethnic minorities are acknowledged, decorated and 'rolled-out', there is no critical engagement in the role of these communities and the stories they add. Furthermore, 'whilst the British *present* is now frequently thought of as being multicultural, only too often is the British past, and British heritage, still imagined as being white' (Littler and Naidoo, 2004: 330 [italics in original]). This logic posits that non-white Britons need to continually justify their cultural presence within the UK, resulting in a 'white past, multicultural present' alignment (Littler, 2005; Littler and Naidoo, 2004, 2005).

This is echoed in the case of black history, which is 'often regarded as a segregated, ghettoised narrative that runs in its own shallow channel alongside the mainstream, only very occasionally becoming a tributary into that broader narrative' (Olusoga, 2016a: 27). Reflected in the propensity for 'heroic biographies', particularly in accounts of black individuals, such approaches:

can at times displace and obscure history rather than explain or deepen it. This is because the life stories of the men and women who make up the pantheon of black heroes are not wide enough, even when viewed together, to encompass the global scale and variety of black history (Olusoga, 2015).

This obscurification of history is not only reflected in the biographical accounts that focus on black individuals, but also in the ways in which black history maintains a separated status in

accounts of Britain's past (Olusoga, 2016a). Here, the 'tokenistic' depiction of black British history as 'an optional extra' and/or 'a bolt-on addition' works to uphold multiculturalism as a present-centered phenomenon (Black, 2016; Lentin and Titley, 2011; Littler and Naidoo, 2004, 2005). When change does occur, it is often considered in the *present*, a process that:

involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its historical emergence and from a recognition of the powers that produce and contour it. No matter its particular form and mechanics, depoliticization always eschews power and history in the representation of its subject (Brown, 2006: 15 cited in Lentin and Titley, 2011: 56-57).

One example of this depoliticization is the way in which 'The Windrush story' is used as a mythic beginning for black British history, cementing the opinion that the black British experience is a relatively recent event (Black, 2016; Littler and Naidoo, 2004, 2005). By framing black history as 'exclusively a history of black settlement in Britain' (Olusoga, 2016a: 523), the experience of black Britons is separated from accounts of 'British history'.

These criticisms bear a semblance with Gilroy's (2004: 136) assertion that 'There is no governmental interest in the forms of conviviality and intermixture that appear to have evolved spontaneously and organically from the interventions of anti-racists and the ordinary multiculturalism of the postcolonial metropolis'. Instead, his notion of conviviality:

refer[s] to the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multi-culture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere. ... It does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance. Instead, it suggests a different setting for their empty, interpersonal rituals, which, ... have started to mean different things in the absence of any strong belief in absolute or integral races. (Gilroy, 2004: xi)

Certainly, it is important that such analyses do not simply outline conviviality as a form of normative behaviour (Hattam and Zembylas, 2010). At the same time, convivial analyses should not fall foul to forms of national integration which promote national homogeneity through static understandings of cultural difference and ethnic categorization. In both

instances, a ‘white past, multicultural present’ alignment is promoted, complicating the inclusion of black history into a pre-ordained ‘white’ narrative (Littler and Naidoo, 2004, 2005).

Accordingly, whereas Valluvan (2016: 208) points to how conviviality can lead to insights that reveal ‘the remaking of difference’s everyday resonance’, this article argues that such insights can be supported by a conception of difference that maintains a *historical resonance*. To this end, conviviality is not just a ‘tool’ for historical analysis (Freitag, 2014), but an understanding of cultural difference that puts asymmetry at the center of national history. Indeed, a form of analysis, which ‘is appreciative of the asymmetrical aspects of living with difference in the “colonial present”’ (Nayak, 2017 see Gregory [2004] for further information on the ‘colonial present’).

More importantly, this approach can challenge popular accounts of the nation’s past and culture. Often, when accounts of the past are challenged, it is the ‘national culture’ which is deemed to be undermined by the impact of immigration and global uncertainty, resulting in heightened tensions, cultural segregation and the denunciation of multiculturalism (as opposed to a lack of housing, social care and health services). In fact, such rhetoric was reignited during the 2016 UK European Union Referendum (Black, 2018). Politicians, such as, Peter Griffiths, Enoch Powell, Norman Tebbit and, more recently, Nigel Farage, present a lineage of British politicians who have sought to control discussions on ‘race’ and immigration within a subtext of fear (Gupta, 2013).

For Gilroy (2004: 164), what is often ignored is how ‘Imperial mentalities were brought back home long before the immigrants arrived and altered economic, social, and cultural relations in the core of Europe’s colonial systems’. To this end, he argues that it is a ‘*shift in stand-point* [which] makes those imperial dynamics much more significant in the constitution of national states than they have been allowed to be before’ (Gilroy, 2004: 164 [italics added]). While remaining in view of Gilroy’s (2004: 159) convivial culture, it is evident that acknowledgement of the UK’s imperial past requires a ‘shift in stand-point’ from which ‘a new, anti-racist cartography of Europe [can address ...] the quality and character of the continent’s postcolonial predicament’. Moreover, it is a *shift* which is required when crossing the ‘gap’ between a perceived ‘white past’ and a widely acknowledged ‘multicultural present’ (Littler and Naidoo, 2004, 2005). Here, the challenge is to identify this ‘gap’ and to understand its effects as constitutive of the cultural differences that reside in accounts of national culture

(De Groot, 2011). Echoing Valluvan's (2016: 208) concern that 'It is not enough to demonstrate that interaction across difference is commonplace', this article contends that such 'interaction across difference' needs to be historically located and supported. Indeed, the following sections will examine how such interaction can be administered through a parallax reading of the past.

### **Parallax, conviviality and transiting past and present**

The notion of parallax refers to the different positions that an object can occupy when viewed from two different perspectives. Importantly for Žižek, 'the parallax refers to a "gap" that emerges between two seemingly contradictory propositions' (Elerick, 2014: 209), so that these perspectives are 'not symmetrical' but are grounded in an 'irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives' (Žižek, 2006: 29). As a result, 'we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in the void of what we could not see from the first perspective' (Žižek, 2006: 29). This void, referred to as a parallax gap, is a 'minimal difference'; indeed, 'a "pure" difference which cannot be grounded in positive substantial properties' (Žižek, 2006: 18). This approach is helpful because it highlights how 'The problem with much contemporary thought, ... is that what properly must be recognized as oppositions, as Kantian antinomies, are taken to be mere polarities that can be resolved in a Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis' (Mellard, 2010: 369). What is significant, therefore, is that 'The gap [... between oppositions] is not meant to be filled or even fixed; rather, the goal is to be able to view both antinomies as indicative of how society at large might work' (Elerick, 2014: 209). To this extent, parallax promotes a form of 'double-mindedness', so that:

Double-mindedness admits a process of turning back and forth that from one perspective is symptomatic of hypocrisy or indecision and from another is a sign of complex thought, or, in Slavoj Žižek's terms, an appropriate response to a parallax gap (Simek, 2014: 119).

Again, Gilroy's (1993) work is not immune to the notion of 'double' as it is explored in his historization of black culture. Gilroy (1993, 2006) draws upon W.E.B. DuBois's 'double consciousness', which, for DuBois (2007: 8), denoted the challenges in reconciling the black



experience through the eyes of a racist white society; indeed, an experience which reflected a ‘two-ness’ grounded in conflict. Whereas Gilroy (1993) draws upon this ‘two-ness’ as a constitutive feature of black internationalism, in tackling the ‘issues of multiculturalism today’ it is deemed unhelpful (Gilroy, 2006: 440). However, when considered through Žižek’s (2006) parallax view, the ‘double consciousness’ that DuBois prescribes can speak, not to a space that is occupied (Gilroy, 1993), but to an *asymmetrical perspective* which characterizes the tensions in ‘race’ relations, the ‘gap’ in cultural difference and the double-perspective of being, in the case of DuBois, an African-American.

Furthermore, when applied to cultural analysis, it is clear that a distinct lack of ‘turning back and forth’ forms an integral feature of debates on cultural difference (Simek, 2014: 119). Here, discussions on multiculturalism are predicated on separated calls for cultural differences to be promoted or assimilated in a rhetoric of national integration and community cohesion (Cantle, 2005). In effect, ‘Difference is *both* problematized and also viewed as the solution through the sanctioning of *some forms* of cultural differences’ (Rudge et al., 2012: 37 [italics added]). In fact, Duemmler (2015) refers to a ‘ambivalent logic’ underlying approaches to civic integration. That is, while civic integration is predicated on ‘inclusion’ through ‘respecting diversity’ it can also exclude by ‘problematizing integration deficits’ (Duemmler, 2015: 393). Similarly, Eijberst and Ghorashi (2017: 165) highlight how ‘integration strategies might have both positive and paradoxically negative effects at the same time, by heightening a sense of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and non-belonging’.

Viewed through Žižek’s (2006) parallax view, examples of cultural inclusion and exclusion can be read in such a way that ‘It is not that one disproves the other, but that their *mutually contradictory character* precedes and makes possible their materialization and meaning’ (Elerick, 2014: 209 [italics added]). In this sense, there is a cultural acceptance of the contradictions with identity (Žižek, 1989) and an agreement with the asymmetry that belies cultural inclusion, exclusion and difference (Georgiou, 2017; Noop, 2017). By viewing cultural difference through a parallax view, the ‘gap’ – which sustains such inclusion/exclusion, conceived as ‘antagonistic struggle’ (Žižek, 2011: 53) – is neither relativized nor sublated in the vein of postmodern cultural relativism or liberal tolerance; but instead, is transited via the crossing of the gap itself. In this sense, cultural differences are respected on the basis of the ‘minimal difference’ they exhibit. This offers a unique path that can work alongside examples of conviviality.

For example, when Gilroy (2004: 146) draws upon the comedy character, Ali G, played by British-comedian, Sacha Baron Cohen, he argues that:

For those angry people, the betrayal that Ali G represented was the culmination of a larger process of dilution and mongrelization in which the protective purity of largely racial cultures was being lost, leaving them vulnerable to unprotected encounters with difference that can only involve risk, fear, and jeopardy.

The middle-class, Alistair Leslie Graham ('Ali G'), is, in the performance of Cohen, a fictional white suburban male whose Jamaican Patois sits awkward with his urban black British imitation and style. However, what is important here is whether such 'dilution and mongrelization' (Gilroy, 2004: 146), in the case of 'Ali G', reflects a sublation of cultural differences or the crossing of a cultural gap, an asymmetrical awareness of culture that 'involve[s] risk, fear, and jeopardy' (2004: 146). This 'shock' resides in watching a white middle-class male, convivially cross a cultural gap so that 'racial' culture is not necessarily 'lost' but encountered through viewing the 'irreducible [cultural] asymmetry' of the Ali G performance (Žižek, 2006: 29). These cultural differences are performed in the refreshingly comedic way Britain negotiates its multiculturalism through the character of 'Ali G'.

Indeed, by way of extending this line of inquiry, this article argues that it is through the parallax of past and present – the 'minimal difference' that maintains the asymmetrical distinction between past and present (Callender, 2017) – that the 'materialization and meaning' (Elerick, 2014: 209) of convivial culture can be supported by a historical significance that deliberately 'shocks' and, subsequently, dislodges, popular accounts of the UK's 'white' past (Gilroy, 2004; Littler and Naidoo, 2004, 2005). This is amiable to the fact that understanding:

the power of racisms ... means accepting that there may be a degree of tension between the professional obligations to recover and to remain faithful to the past *and* the moral and political imperative to act against the injustices of racial hierarchy *as we encounter them today*. (Gilroy, 2004: 33 [italics added])

In this way, the past is neither limited to a particular period nor is it nostalgically used to remedy the present. Equally, this approach does not denigrate the past as inferior to the

present but respects the past as ‘different’, so that past-present comparisons provide a ‘minimal difference’ between ‘the then’ and ‘the now’. This does not contradict Gilroy’s (2004: 33) own assertions but, instead, helps to ‘mak[e] us historians of the present’. In effect, while we should be ‘careful not to project contemporary dynamics backward into circumstances with which they cannot possibly be congruent’ (Gilroy, 2004: 33), the ‘minimal difference’ which sustains the incongruent ‘gap’ between past and present (Žižek, 2006: 18), helps to ensure that ‘contemporary dynamics’ are not simply subsumed with the past, but are instead used to identify how cultural differences work in both the past *and* present.

This offers a way out of narratives that simply seek to include ethnic minorities in already established historical accounts. In fact, while ‘Conviviality renders the orthodoxy of integrationism anachronistic’ (Valluvan, 2016: 211), equally, ‘rethinking national heritage’, in the context of UK multiculturalism:

does not only mean ‘including’ ‘other’ heritages by simply tacking them on to an official national story that is already sealed, but ... involves revising Britain’s island stories to acknowledge their long and intertwined histories *with complex patterns of migration and diaspora* (Littler, 2005: 1 [italics added]).

Here, understandings of the past (‘complex patterns’) go beyond mere ‘inclusion’ in order to encourage a perception of the past whereby ‘the orthodoxy of integrationism’ can be challenged (Valluvan, 2016: 211).

To this end, parallax puts antagonism, asymmetry, strangeness and ambivalence, not just at the heart of contemporary understandings of the UK’s convivial multiculturalism, but alongside accounts of the UK’s multi-ethnic past, ensuring that ‘a more dialectical understanding of social relations and historical development’ can be provided (Van Krieken, 1998: 132 [italics removed]). Indeed, it is the pursuing of:

the painful obligations to work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history and to transform paralyzing guilt into a more productive shame that [... is] conducive to the building of a multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness. (Gilroy, 2004: 108).

In sum, if the spontaneity of conviviality is to encourage openness and if ‘a mature response to diversity, plurality, and differentiation’ resides within the UK’s post-imperial society (Gilroy, 2004: 108-109), then, understandings of multiculturalism need to go beyond mere reification (Gilroy, 2000, 2006) in order to challenge our understandings of the past *via* the present and our present *via* the past. Here, conviviality can serve to emphasize the transiting of a parallax gap, proposing counter-perspectives that highlight our convivial past in view of our multicultural present. It is here that a parallaxical account can help ‘not just to establish where the boundaries of the postcolonial present should fall *but also* to enlist Europe’s largely untapped heterological and imperial histories in the urgent service of contemporary multiculturalism and future pluralism’ (Gilroy, 2004: 155 [italics added]). By re-historicizing multiculturalism in the present, a re-politicization of the past can culturally communicate how ‘Black British history is’ more than just a history of the prepositioned ‘other’, depicted as a separated ethnic group, but instead reflects ‘our joint history’ (Olusoga, 2015). It is in the coming together of this ‘joint’ history, that the following sections will now consider.

### **David Olusoga’s *Black and British: A Forgotten History* and authored documentaries**

In November 2016, the BBC launched a series of programming dedicated to black British history. With content being broadcast on BBC Two and BBC Four as well the BBC’s radio and online platforms, the schedule was headed by David Olusoga’s four-part television series, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*. Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Olusoga migrated to the UK as a child, settling with his mother and family in Newcastle (Olusoga, 2016a). After studying history at university, Olusoga’s research focused on the history of ‘race’ and slavery within the UK and its former empire (Olusoga, 2016a). Indeed, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* sits alongside a number of other historical documentaries that Olusoga has both produced and presented. In 2014, he presented *The World’s War: Forgotten Soldiers of Empire* (BBC) and, more recently, in 2018, he co-presented the BBC’s *Civilizations* (BBC) with fellow historians, Simon Schama and Mary Beard.

However, for Olusoga (2016c), it was *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, which ‘was born out of an ambition to challenge the idea that black history is a specialist subject, only of interest to black people’. Instead, Olusoga and the production team ‘set out to re-imagine black history as part of mainstream British history and bring little-known stories to the public

in a new way' (Olusoga, 2016c). To this extent, the series served to meet some of the criticisms which, as previously noted, have been levelled at black British history; notably, that black British history did not begin with the *Empire Windrush*. As Dabydeen (2017) explains, 'Olusoga's stated purpose is to argue that black British history is not about migration and settlement, whether of black servants in the 18<sup>th</sup> century or black workers in the *Windrush* era'. Accordingly, an important feature of each episode was the erection of twenty heritage plaques, dedicated to Britain's black history. These plaques served to 'stamp a forgotten history physically back on to the landscape', with some plaques stretching back 2000 years (Olusoga, 2016c).<sup>1</sup>

Stylistically, the series is located in the 'authored documentary' genre, with the narrative being driven from the perspective of the presenter, Olusoga. Widely used within documentaries, the authored documentary stands opposed to observational documentaries, which aim to limit the author's perspective via voice-overs that help steer the narrative (Nichols, 1991). Instead, authored documentaries aim to locate the author's own perspective as central to the documentary's aims, purposes and prose (Bell and Gray, 2007). The most well-known example is Sir David Attenborough, whose numerous wildlife and natural history documentaries have formed a formative part of BBC schedules. With regards to historical documentaries, the presenter-led approach was adopted by Kenneth Clark in his thirteen-part television series, *Civilization* (BBC, 1969), which Olusoga appeared on in a updated edition (*Civilizations*, BBC, 2018), as well as Simon Schama's *A History of Britain* (BBC, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Notably, the genre has been subject to various criticisms, including: its apparent 'bias'; a tendency to promote the privileged views of the presenter; and, for offering 'a particularly closed way of telling history' (Bell and Gray, 2007: 129).

Despite these criticisms, the following sections will, in light of the preceding discussion, serve to highlight how Olusoga's narrative posed a number of important significances. That is, in their analysis of authored documentaries, Bell and Gray (2007: 117) highlight how the use 'of charismatic television personalities and dominant narrative structures' in popular historical documentaries can 'sugges[t] that these modes of address and televisual forms offer the viewer particular relationships to knowledge and ways of knowing'. Moreover, when considered in accordance with Gilroy's (2004) convivial culture and the ways in which this culture is experienced in everyday interactions and popular forms of cultural representation (Rabo, 2011; Wessendorf, 2014; Wise and Velayutham, 2014), then it is argued

that wider connections can be drawn to the work of Olusoga and, in particular, the stories used in the *Black and British: A Forgotten History* series. It is here that an evaluation of this series can work in accordance with Little and Naidoo's (2004, 2005) analysis of a 'white past, multicultural present' discourse, which, by emphasizing a historically orientated account of British multiculturalism, can serve to draw upon Žižek's (2006) parallax view as a tool of conviviality (Illich, 1973). In what follows, a parallaxical account will be used to highlight how *Black and British: A Forgotten History* helped to emphasize 'The radical openness' of the UK's multiculturalism via a turn 'toward[s] the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification' (Gilroy, 2004: xi).

### **Encountering our cultural conviviality**

Presented as an 'experiment', *Black and British: A Forgotten History* was, for Olusoga (2016a: xxi), an 'attempt to see what new stories and approaches emerge if black British history is envisaged as a global history and – perhaps more controversially – as a history of more than just the black experience itself'. In so doing, it represented an endeavor to both *discover* ('new stories and approaches emerge') and *reconfigure* our understanding of the past. In pursuing this path, Olusoga's (2016a: xix) early interests in history were noted in the following reflection:

the [Second World] war was the most exciting and significant event ever to collide with our terraced streets and decaying factories. It had changed the lives of my white grandparents, ... and I was intoxicated by the thought that German bombers had prowled the skies above my home town, and that my grandfather had scanned the skies while on watch on the roof of the Vickers Armstrong factory by the River Tyne, where he worked building tanks.

While recognizing 'the limitations of Britain's wartime imagined community' (Ugolini, 2014: 90), especially in relation to the wartime experiences of ethnic minorities, in this personal account, Olusoga's mixed heritage is closely entwined with the significance of the Second World War. What is important, however, is that his reflection is not just located as part of his family's history. Instead, such a reflection is contingent with a shared historical narrative that

maintains a prominent significance in accounts of British history (Weight, 2002). As Olusoga (2016: xix [italics added]) notes, ‘a gung-ho fascination with the Second World War ... was almost obligatory among boys of [the post-war ...] period, *whatever their racial background*’.

This highlights how ‘memories’ and forms of remembrance play an important role in orientating individuals (Zerubavel, 1985). For Olusoga, such acts of ‘remembrance’ take on greater significance when viewed as ‘a political act’ (Ramaswamy, 2016) from which revisited and uncovered interpretations of the past conjoin with the present. Indeed:

The modern black populations are doing what their Elizabethan, Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian predecessors did – amalgamating and integrating. *That longer, wider and deeper history helps explain the present.* It sets moderns trends within context and discredits the notion that the history of ‘black Britain’ can be understood as a separate or marginal one. (Olusoga, 2016: 28 [italics added])

Certainly, the effects of immigration within Britain form an integral, yet often ignored, part of Britain’s history. Eighteenth-century London possessed an already large population of black immigrants as well as Chinese and Indian sailors (Colley, 2014; Gupta, 2013). Similarly, by 1911, Cardiff was ‘a city where half the population came from somewhere else, not just from other parts of Europe and the UK, but also from the West Indies, China, Central American and East Africa’ (Colley, 2014: 29). Today, it may be difficult to determine the extent to which these immigrants felt ‘British’ but what it does reveal is that a multi-national and multicultural Britain has been in existence for large parts of its recorded history.

This was made manifest in the plaques which were erected to commemorate Britain’s black British history. Over the course of each episode, the erection of the black and gold plaques was used to commemorate important individuals, locations and events covered in the series and drawn from Britain’s ‘forgotten’ history. Accordingly, while it is clear that such forms of commemoration stand against conviviality’s unplanned and unorchestrated multiculturalism (Gilroy, 2004), the commemorative plaques used by the series provided a unique form of convivial commemoration, which, rather than homogenizing national memory, served to reflect the various forms of cultural memory that have shaped Britain’s past. This variety is ‘not a history of simple hybridity [used] to offset ... the achievements of the homogenizers and purity seekers’ but emphasizes how ‘local and specific interventions can contribute to a

counterhistory of cultural relations and influences’ (Gilroy, 2004: 161). Moreover, these counterhistories are not announced by subsuming the past within the present, but instead, direct our focus to the tensions that occur when an absent past is *encountered* in the present (Gilroy, 2004).

Indeed, the notion of ‘encounter’ forms an integral part of Gilroy’s (2004) conviviality. It is there in ‘the moral and political imperative to act against the injustices of racial hierarchy as we encounter them today’ (Gilroy, 2004: 33); in the failure ‘to prepare for the difficult task of making critical, historical, and philosophical encounters with racism productive’ (2004: 35); and, in his discussion of cosmopolitanism, ‘in the ordinary virtues and ironies – listening, looking, discretion, friendship – that can be cultivated when mundane encounters with difference become rewarding’ (2004: 75). In the case of Olusoga, such encounters are, as noted by Akbar (2016), evident in the ‘lacunae’ that Olusoga’s narrative exposes; a ‘lacunae’ made present by the forgotten history that the plaques signify.

Importantly, these encounters center on a past-present parallax from which the plaques reveal *what was forgotten but always there*. This occurs in two ways: first, if ‘current patterns of racial mixing are different in scale but are not out of step with our longer history’ (Olusoga, 2016a: 28), then it is apparent that the ‘minimal difference’ between the UK’s past and present ‘patterns of racial mixing’ is brought to light in the counterhistories that Olusoga encounters; and, second, by tangibly occupying particular locations, the ‘minimal difference’ between an absent past made present is subtly reflected in the plaques which bring ‘that long-forgotten history’ to bear (Gilroy, 2004: 164).

Such ‘exposure’ was achieved through accounts of national history that deliberately emphasized the ‘otherness’ of cultural interaction. In fact, for De Groot (2011, 283 [italics added]):

Much history is nationalistic, and popular historical understanding has often been manipulated in the service of nation; however, it does contain *a space of dissonance and challenge* that might be manipulated and directed. The past is quite literally a foreign country – *but it is also familiar, generically comfortable, innovative, thoughtful, fragmented, unfinished and challenging*. It is *other and familiar*, strange and capable of giving pleasure, a leisure activity and a call to arms.



This ‘space of dissonance and challenge’, conceived as a parallax gap, was exemplified in Olusoga’s ‘radical reappraisal of the parameters of history, exposing *lacunae* in the nation’s version of its past’ (Akbar, 2016 [italics added]). Viewed through the contention that the ‘minimal difference’ between past and present requires a change in ‘stand-point’, from which examples of cultural asymmetry are a constitutive feature of the UK’s conviviality, it becomes clear that Olusoga takes what is ‘familiar, generically comfortable, innovative [and] thoughtful’ and, through a change in stand-point, brings to light what ‘is fragmented, unfished and challenging’ (De Groot, 2011: 283). In doing so, cultural differences are not ignored but emphasized in light of their differences (Gilroy, 2004). Here, the ‘past’ becomes a tool for re-centering the idea of racial difference as integral to interpretations of British multiculturalism. The effects of this will be considered in the following section.

### **Unpredictable identification and ‘exposure to difference’**

In a segment on Dr. Samuel Johnson’s black servant, Francis Barber, Olusoga identifies and speaks to Barber’s great, great, great grandson, Cedric Barber, ‘an ostensibly white man whose great, great, great grandfather was a black Georgian. Through intermarriage, Cedric’s black heritage has all but vanished’ (BBC, 2016b). With the suggestion being made that ‘many white Britons may have hidden black ancestry’ (BBC, 2016b), in this example, Britain’s multi-ethnic past is relocated as an important part of Britain’s multi-ethnic present, ethnically challenging established accounts of British heritage and posing as a pertinent example of ‘the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification’ (Gilroy, 2004: xi). This is continued in other examples, such as, the unit of ‘Aurelian Moors’, a black Roman unit who were stationed at Hadrian’s Wall in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (the earliest known presence of a black community in Britain) as well as the remains of an African woman, the ‘Beachy Head Woman’, who grew up in East Sussex around AD245. In another example, Olusoga meets the ‘brown babies’ of Aberysychan (Wales), the offspring of US GIs who were stationed in the town during the D-Day preparations in World War Two. In each instance, plaques are used to commemorate this ‘lost’ and ‘forgotten’ history.

What is apparent in these examples, however, is that Olusoga ‘disturbs what was always-already there’ (Vighi and Feldner, 2007: 110); questioning the symbolic order of the past by identifying areas lost and forgotten. This is especially apparent on the BBC’s

accompanying 'iwonder' website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z8g2xsg#zpn8wxs>), which encourages us to 'rediscover' 'hidden stories' from black British history. What is notable, is how this forgotten multi-ethnic history is brought to light through a sense of ambivalence that underscores popular accounts of Britain's past and present, via examples that culturally challenge established understandings of British history, especially those that implicitly assume this history to be ethnically 'white'.

Indeed, as noted by Valluvan (2016: 207), if 'absolutist notions historically embedded within the privileges of whiteness' are to be challenged and if 'a multicultural that is practically sustainable and politically inclusive can emerge', then the above examples provide a clear historical challenge to assertions of white privilege, by critiquing the historical legitimacy that such privilege is grounded on (Littler and Naidoo, 2004; Runnymede Trust, 2000). This goes beyond a solitary focus on the narrativization of history (White, 1987), towards a consideration of how, through the notion of parallax, the gap between past and present can be observed through forms of interpretation that neither valorize nor denigrate the past, but, at their heart, seek to offer an appraisal of how the past can provide a 'minimal difference' with the present and *vice versa*. This challenge not only reflects, but, also requires, a shift in perspective as the 'gap' between Britain's multi-ethnic past *and* present is brought to bear in the detailing of Cedric's multi-ethnic heritage.

The significance of this, is that, to borrow from Derrida (1987), Olusoga puts conventional understandings of British history 'under erasure' (*sous rature*). His building of the past is one that is closely entwined with dissolving particular assumptions so that the nation's past is not whole, nor complete, but that such a past, whether acknowledged or not, contains gaps, contradictions and misunderstandings; indeed, a past made present in its absence (Derrida, 1987). In so doing, Olusoga's focus on the 'racial' experiences of the past, has the strange effect of re-producing the centrality of ethnic difference in the present. Rather than being neutralized, its significance is reignited through a present that engages with the contradictions, tensions and antagonisms that underscore Britain's shared past(s). What is argued here is that 'exposure to difference' (Gilroy, 2004: 109) requires an acceptance of cultural asymmetry which is encountered not as a form of indifference, but as a convivial feature of British history. It is in this sense that the parallax between past and present provides a 'gap' from which cultural asymmetry and 'the building of a multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness' (Gilroy, 2004:

108) can be brought together via the minimal difference that a historical analysis prescribes. It is this minimal difference which allows Olusoga (2016a: xx) ‘to reimagine what we mean by “black history” and ask where its border might be drawn’. More widely, the drawing of borders becomes an exercise that is contiguous with contemplating the reaches of Britain’s history and the convivial diversity of its population.

### **Conclusion and final comments**

If, according to Williams (2011: 19), ‘History is a way of learning’ which ‘begins by leaving the present; by going back into the heretofore, by beginning again’, and that, ‘Only by grasping what we were is it possible to see how we changed’, then, the path taken in this article offers a unique approach to achieving ‘some perspective on what we are’. Specifically, it is in ‘grasping’ the significance of ‘what we were’ and ‘what we are’ which can help us to elucidate on the UK’s cultural parallax. As a result, it has been the contention of this article that Gilroy’s convivial culture and Žižek’s parallax view can provide a historical relevance to the ‘everyday exposure to difference’ (Gilroy, 2004: 108-109) that characterizes the UK’s post-imperial cultural interactions.

Therefore, while ‘conviviality and intermixture ... appear to have evolved spontaneously and organically from the ... multiculturalism of the postcolonial metropolis’ (Gilroy, 2004: 136), this article has explored this evolution in the context of Žižek’s (2006) parallax view and with regard to the benefits that such a view can bring in exposing cultural difference as an integral part of the UK’s past and present (Littler and Naidoo, 2004, 2005). In particular, as a way of managing cultural difference, the notion of parallax helps to expose how these differences are drawn from a complex history of convivial interaction (Rabo, 2011).

Indeed, Olusoga’s history was not one that sought to divorce the past from the present, nor did it try and reclaim the past in any triumphalist form by re-establishing a conventional history of Britain from which its imperial history is viewed as a progressive beacon of modernity and civilization (Ferguson, 2004). Rather, what resulted from Olusoga’s account was that ethnic diversity was not ‘unique’, but, engaged and enacted with as part of Britain’s past *and* present. In fact, whereas ‘the central conviction of post-racialism is the denial of the salience of race in the lived experience of the racialized’ (Lentin and Titley, 2011: 79),

Olusoga's account put 'racial' experience at the center of 'British history' and its diversity at the heart of Britain's present.

Certainly, it is not the intention of this article to valorize the work of Olusoga as in some way distinct from academic work that takes place in various Universities within and outside the UK. Instead, rather than subsuming cultural differences, through hyphenated identities, or, through promoting cultural difference via a process of liberal tolerance that keeps the other's difference at arm's length (Žižek, 2006), Olusoga's *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, provided a parallaxical reading of Britain's past and present that required us not to subsume, denigrate or ignore 'cultural codes' (Gilroy, 2004: 156), but to cross them (Žižek, 2006). In doing so, cultural understanding sits at the gaps, tensions and ambivalences which characterize cultural difference. These differences should not be feared, but, as a characteristic part of our convivial culture, should be supplemented with historical analyses which both highlight but, also, bring to light, the significance of such difference in the present. It is here that Olusoga's *Black and British: A Forgotten History* locates difference as a constitutive part of the UK's history, which, in contrast to 'normative ideals of integration and communitarian belonging' (Valluvan, 2016: 219), allow us to examine 'Britain's spontaneous, convivial culture' and 'to discover a new value in its *ability to live with alterity* without becoming anxious, fearful, or violent' (Gilroy, 2004: xi [italics added]). In particular, this is not an 'alterity' that is 'new' and 'contemporary' but, instead, a fundamental part of the nation's history: of the gap made visible through transiting past and present.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The black and gold plaques worked in tandem with the common blue plaques used to signify a particular location, person, event or building within the UK. As historical markers, the blue plaques represent an 'official' form of historical commemoration, with the scheme being administered by the English Heritage Trust.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the most unique example of this genre being used, was the TV lectures of AJP Taylor. A renowned historian, Taylor used his televised lectures to present on nineteenth- and twentieth-century history, unique for the fact that the series was filmed and presented much like a University lecture, with Taylor speaking directly to the camera and the audience. The half-hour lectures were broadcast on ITV and aired between 1957 and 1961.

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