

# THERE ARE SOME ALTERNATIVES

Remembering 1980s Britain in contemporary British literature

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## Abstract

This thesis explores how the 1980s haunt contemporary British literature. Cognizant of a trend of cultural production (literary, film, television, music) interested in this period since the beginning of the twenty-first century, this thesis focuses on three historical novels by three critically acclaimed authors: Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, David Peace's *GB84* (both 2004) and David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* (2006). It reads these historical novels as memory texts conditioned both by their moment of publication (mid-2000s Britain under the premiership of Tony Blair) and the moments of the 1980s that they remember (1980s Britain under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher). These novels are oriented around different facets of the 1980s (the high-Tory world, the 1984-85 miners' strike and the Falklands War respectively) and so, read together, offer a cumulative portrait of the decade. However, each novel is read on its own terms for its specific interests in the public aspects of the 1980s. This thesis is thus divided into three chapters, with each taking a different memory discourse or mode as its analytical approach, as invited by the particularities of the novel it examines. *The Line of Beauty* is read in terms of the spectral presence of heritage; *GB84* in terms of occulted and occulting nostalgia; *Black Swan Green* in terms of the media and postcolonial melancholia.

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## Introduction

### “The 80s are going on for ever”

He found himself yearning to know of their affairs, their successes, the novels and the new ideas that the few who remembered him might say he never knew, he never lived to find out. It was the morning’s vision of the empty street, but projected far forward, into afternoons like this one decades hence, in the absent hum of their own business.

(*The Line of Beauty* 501)

Her two little princes dancing by their necks from her apron strings, and she looks down at the long march of labour halted here before her and says, Awake! Awake! This is England, Your England – and the Year is Zero.

(*GB84* 462)

‘It’ll be all right,’ Julia’s gentleness makes it worse, ‘in the end, Jace.’

‘It doesn’t *feel* very all right.’

‘That’s because it’s not the end.’

(*Black Swan Green* 371)

Did the 1980s end? How confidently can we answer this question? Re-presenting stories of the 1980s, as with any period with a presence in living memory, invites reaction and critique from those who were there. A recent example is *Brief Encounters*, the 2016 ITV comedy-drama set in Sheffield in 1982, loosely based on Jacqueline Gold’s account of the early days of lingerie and sex toy chain shop Ann Summers. It sparked *New Statesman*’s Rachel Cooke (who hails from Sheffield) to comment in an otherwise glowing review that, thanks to her “insider knowledge”, she is attune to the “mistakes” made by the series’ makers. For instance, “Brian the butcher would not have called his evening meal ‘dinner’”. However, perhaps more damning with respect to the series’ plot development, Cooke notes that Steph, the “perplexingly well spoken” former cleaner who hopes to earn some extra money from hosting ‘knicker parties’, is rendered

[S]o prudish that she can barely bring herself to touch a sock-style ‘marital aid’ ... let alone the cucumber-sized baton that is the Stallion vibrator. Really? I don’t think so. In 1984 I had a job in a Sheffield branch of Boots and all anyone talked about ... was sex. (Cooke).

Prudishness aside, what is also notable in the series is the previous work of its actors. Don Gilet, who in *Brief Encounters* plays the husband of one of the Ann Summers reps, also appeared in the

2006 BBC adaptation of Alan Hollinghurst's 2004 Man Booker Prize winner *The Line of Beauty* as protagonist Nick Guest's first lover Leo Charles. What we can see here is the fringe of a web of texts concerned with the 1980s. We might surmise, as *The Line of Beauty*'s Catherine Fedden does, that "the 80s are going on for ever" (393).

This thesis explores the ways in which the 1980s haunt contemporary British literature. Conscious of the trend of cultural production interested in this period since the beginning of the twenty-first century, my thesis is focused on three historical novels by three critically acclaimed authors: Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, David Peace's *GB84* (both 2004) and David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* (2006). I read these historical novels as memory texts conditioned both by their moment of publication (mid-2000s Britain under the premiership of Tony Blair) and the moments of the 1980s that they remember (1980s Britain under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher). These novels are oriented around different facets of the 1980s: the high-Tory world, the 1984-85 miners' strike and the Falklands War respectively. Read together, these novels offer a cumulative portrait of the decade.

These novels are not the only recent cultural productions concerned with the 1980s. The decade has seen something of a revival of interest from the forms of literature, film, television and music, particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century. As David James comments, it would seem that "a key aspect of the 2000s is thus captured by its creative ... re-entry into past decades" (335). Literary representations of the 1980s include Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), David Peace's *GB84* (2004), *1980* (2001) and *1983* (2002) (the latter two being the final novels of Peace's *Red Riding* quartet), David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* (2006), Max Schaefer's *Children of the Sun* (2010), Cathi Unsworth's *The Singer* (2008) and *Weirdo* (2012), the eponymous story of Hilary Mantel's short story collection *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* (2013), and Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* (2016). In film, the 1980s is the central period for *Billy Elliot* (2004), *This is England* (2006), *The History Boys* (2006, adapted from Alan Bennett's play of the same name), *The Iron Lady* (2011), documentary film *Still the Enemy Within* (2014), *Pride* (2014). In television, aside from *The Line of Beauty* and *Brief Encounters*, representations include the *I Love the 1980s* series (2001), *Ashes to Ashes* (2008-2010), and the follow-ups to the *This is England* film: *This is England '86* (2010) and *This is England '90* (2015)<sup>1</sup>. Even the special edition of 1980s sitcom *Blackadder*, *Blackadder: Back and Forth* (1999), in its opening montage of images asserting the prominence of its titular fictional figure throughout

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<sup>1</sup> I include *This is England '90* in this list as it registers the transition from the Thatcher 1980s to the John Major years of the 1990s.



Britain's history, includes Rowan Atkinson's character holding his nose next to Margaret Thatcher, who stands with her arms aloft in a victory pose.

What can we draw from the fact that a cluster of texts has emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century and is so interested in the same historical time period? As historical fictions, each produce visions of the 1980s and were (mostly) produced in the 2000s. This multitude of texts concerned with the 1980s produced in such a short space of time leads us to ponder how and what they contribute to the collective historical imagination. As Jerome de Groot suggests, historical fictions are praxis. He argues in his 2016 monograph *Remaking History: The past in contemporary historical fictions* that historical fictions have two main effects:

First, they contribute to the historical imaginary, having an almost pedagogical aspect in allowing a culture to 'understand' past moments. Second ... they allow reflection upon the representational process of 'history'. They provide a means to critique, conceptualize, engage with, and reject the process of representation or narrativization." (2)

What do the above texts contribute to collective understandings and renderings of Britain? Why has the decade of the 1980s emerged as such an urgent trope which haunts Britain's collective imagination? While the texts listed above, particularly the literary and filmic ones, each take the 1980s as their subject and setting, they concentrate on different aspects of this multifaceted decade and hence articulate different concerns. While it is difficult to generalise across such a diversity of texts, reading them against one another enables us to abstract certain recurrent themes and concerns. This is not intended to detract from the unique and specific concerns of each text and their creators, or to suggest that these texts would not, if categorised and organised in other ways, see different themes emerge, but rather to give a cumulative sense of how the 1980s has become culturally processed. Many are predominantly set in the Midlands and the North of England: *Black Swan Green*, *GB84*, *Nineteen Eighty*, *Nineteen Eighty-Three*, *The Singer*, *The History Boys*, *Brief Encounters*, *This is England*, *This is England '86*, *This is England '90* and *Billy Elliot*, for instance. They consider, variously, deindustrialisation and unemployment, the miners' strike, the after-effects of the Falklands War, and disaffected youth. In contrast, *Pride*, *The Line of Beauty*, *The Iron Lady*, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, *Children of the Sun*, *White Teeth* are principally set in London. These texts turn on the urban London experiences of the decade, and often (as some of the titles suggest) foreground the figure of Margaret Thatcher.

From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, we may view the events and forces of the 1980s with the benefit of some temporal distance. They occurred long enough ago

to allow us to view them as ‘other’ to our present-day experience<sup>2</sup>, to notice when evocations of them jar with our memories of them unfolding, like the erroneous “dinners” and prudishness. But do our memories, collectively, render the 1980s as an entirely separate epoch from our own? Or are the boundaries between this past and the present more flexible? We can see the blurring of this distinction as a natural consequence of the passage of time. As the series editors of academic text *The Decades Series* note, the field of contemporary British fiction (defined as from the 1970s onwards) increasingly must deal with the divergence of first-hand and second-hand experience of the period under consideration. But, as they note, “the rather self-evident nature of this experiential reality disguises the complex challenges it poses to any assessment of the contemporary” (Hubble, Tew and Wilson vii). 1980s Britain, however, increasingly comes under consideration by those who were born too late to have a meaningful experience of the decade. What younger readers – and authors – must increasingly do, then, is reconstruct the 1980s from the lived experiences and memories of those who were there, and overlay these against the sources they engage with. Thus, we might reflect on Julia’s attempts in *Black Swan Green* to reassure her younger brother, who is coming to terms with imminently moving out of his family home to live with his mother after their parents’ divorce, that things will be “all right ... in the end”. But we find ourselves responding to her consolatory comments, and to the question of the 1980s as a whole, with questions of our own. Does it “feel very all right” now? Did the 1980s ever *end*?

Perhaps we cannot immediately or definitively answer these questions. The specific texts I examine in depth share similar concerns. Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*, Peace’s *GB84* and Mitchell’s *Black Swan Green* are set in Britain during the 1980s, and are concerned with life in the Conservative elites’ world, the 1984-85 miners’ strike and the Falklands War respectively. They were published within a short space of time from one another: *The Line of Beauty* and *GB84* in 2004, *Black Swan Green* in 2006. These novels register the considerable social, economic and cultural upheaval that the 1980s represent to Britain, a decade which saw the Falklands War, 1984-85 miners’ strike, AIDS crisis, the Black Monday stock market crash, and the ongoing presence of Cold War. They belong to what Simon During describes as an “anti-Thatcherite novel” sub-genre (“Queering Thatcher” 6). Such is the proliferation of British cultural production which, almost compulsively, arcs back to the mores, sounds, aesthetics and concerns of a particular decade produced in the new millennium’s first decade. This suggests that perhaps the 1980s may have concluded only insofar as 1989’s calendar pages have turned. Yet this has

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<sup>2</sup> To avoid confusion between history (as a synonym for the past) and History (which denotes the scholarly interpretation of the past) I therefore adapt de Groot’s claim that “history is other” to suggest that the *past* be treated as “other” (*The Historical Novel* 3).

not meant the 1980s has ceased to exist in the collective imagination. There is something about the decade which implores us, collectively, to dwell on it with the familiarity we do with the present moment. The question of why this decade haunts our contemporary moment is central to this thesis.

Textual representations of the decade seem reluctant to assert its end. A feature common to these texts is the explicit and insistent interplay between the present the texts are produced in (the 2000s) and the one they are set in (the 1980s). Thus, their stories do not conclude in 1980s. In the films, for example, *Billy Elliot* concludes long after the miners' strike defeat to show Billy dancing in Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*. *Pride*'s final scene is a coda informing the audience of what happens to the 'real life' protagonists after the miners' strike, such as activist Mark Ashton's death from AIDS and Siân James becoming a Labour MP. The final scene of *The History Boys* shows the boys reflecting on where their post-secondary school lives have taken them: one is a school teacher, another a journalist, one had joined the army and was killed in action. Audiences are offered closure in terms of 'what happens next' to the characters, but are not offered similar closure in terms of the wider socio-economic effects of the 1980s. While these questions form the impetus for the films' plots to begin with – the miners' strike is the starting point for both *Billy Elliot* and *Pride*, for instance – they are absorbed into the film's broader focus on stories of the individual, at the expense of the broader interests of society. We could say that these films, in spite of their inherently critical approach to the 1980s, at least on a surface level, have nonetheless unconsciously absorbed Margaret Thatcher's oft' quoted maxim, "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families" (qtd. *Literature of the 1980s* 10).

This sense of deep-seated individualism is, perhaps unsurprisingly, thematised in the Margaret Thatcher biopic *The Iron Lady*. A dementing Margaret Thatcher, played by Meryl Streep, experiences flashbacks of her early life, marriage and parliamentary career, which are juxtaposed with her imagining the presence of her recently deceased husband Denis. The major events of Thatcher's premiership (the Falklands War, the miners' strike, the Brighton Bombing and the poll tax riots) are registered by how they affected Thatcher: as challenges to be navigated and managed by an individual rather than a consideration of the wider implications of these events on Britain at large. While this impulse is to be expected of a biopic film, it makes explicit the primacy of the story of the individual over the collective. This is also suggested by the other filmic representations of the era, such as *Billy Elliot*. We see how Billy has managed to carve out a career for himself in London, but not how his home village in County Durham has adapted to the realities of life without the mining industry. Consequently the stories of individuals, the

characters, become the primary focus and ending point of these representations of a decade overwhelmingly associated with rampant individualism. These films seem at best reluctant and at worst incapable of entirely divorcing themselves from an impulse to recede the fate of the collective to the individual, and consequently little is offered in the way of interpretive ambiguity. We are thus presented with visual narratives of the decade which offer a tenuous sense of closure. Through screen-based narratives of the 1980s, we know ‘what happens next’ and ‘how things ended’ to the characters, which masks the wider impact of the period they are set in.

Literary representations of the 1980s are far more comfortable in dealing with ambiguities of endings for characters. They also effectively place the 1980s as a past in a dialogue with the present. As Julian Wolfreys observes, books seem to “keep us in the here and now by remaining with us from some past, from our pasts” (71). Key examples of this are the novels *Children of the Sun*, *Weirdo* and *The Singer*, which deploy dual narrative structures through chapters alternating between the characters’ presents of the 1980s and the early 2000s. These novels are evocative of Suzanne Keen’s “romances of the archive”, a trend Keen traced in British fiction up to 2000, where the process of research and discovery in the archives is foregrounded (1). Protagonists – students, librarians, researchers, journalists – tend to be immersed in the archives and the action of the texts derives from the discoveries made by these characters. This interest in the archive is not limited to ‘literary’ fiction or ostensibly postmodern novels, but also emerges in “popular sub-genres ... such as detective fiction, fantasies, gothic and thrillers” (Keen 1). Within the novels of the 1980s considered here then, the process of investigation and discovery are thematised, suggesting that, despite the impression that screen-based representations of the 1980s attempt to impart, there are elements of this decade which remain unknown. More importantly, it is suggested that there is still more to discover and evaluate and thus absorb into our broader collective understanding and recollections of the decade.

Of the novels listed above, perhaps the most effective and disturbing ‘romance of the archive’ is evoked in *Children of the Sun*. ‘Present day’ protagonist James becomes deeply submerged in researching the subculture of the gay neo-Nazi movement for a possible screenplay, which comes at the expense of his relationships. His research progress narrative is centred on the story of prominent neo-Nazi Nicky Crane, whose sexuality is a secret kept in plain sight during the movement’s most visible years. James’s narrative alternates with that of neo-Nazi Tony, who navigates the scene while keeping his sexuality hidden from the 1970s to the 1990s. The two characters eventually meet in the present, via a gay hook-up forum, but the anticipated sexual intercourse does not occur: instead, James becomes incapacitated after using poppers for the first time. *Children of the Sun* displays something of an aversion to sex: characters

are frequently depicted on the cusp of sleeping together, only for events to intervene (concerns over the transmission of AIDS through sex without a condom serves as the main plot device here<sup>3</sup>) or a narrative gap to open up, with the reader returned to the characters after sex.

While filmic and literary representations differ in their willingness to ‘close off’ the 1980s, their insistent return to the decade for subject matter is symptomatic of a widespread cultural trend in Britain. “Instead of being the threshold to the future,” Simon Reynolds suggested in 2011, “the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the ‘Re’ Decade. The 2000s were dominated by the re-’ prefix: *revivals*, *reissues*, *remakes*, *re-enactments*. Endless *retrospection*” (xi, original emphasis). Echoing Reynolds, Elizabeth Guffey notes that during the early 2000s the 1980s in particular “have been resurrected, celebrated alternately for the cheery brightness of the period’s pop culture, the remote techno-futurism of its electronically synthesised music” (162). Today, we might push the lycra aerobics gear to the back of the wardrobe, smile at the novelty of listening to a Sony Walkman, or breathe a sigh of relief when we remember that Glenn Hoddle’s mullet now presents itself only as a ‘throwback photo’ on his Twitter account. These iconic ’80s imageries may be consigned to and thus evoked in memory alone. But equally we might absent-mindedly fiddle with a Rubik’s Cube or quietly revel in donning a Madonna-inspired outfit for an ’80s-themed party. We might also register the decennial release of Band Aid single ‘Do They Know It’s Christmas?’, generally sung by a clutch of the current top twenty singers who are accompanied by the eternal presence of Bono. We might, therefore, embody the period ourselves by acting with and upon its cultural remnants. Reynolds and Guffey characterise this present state of the collective imagination and its manifestations as ‘retro’.

It would be misleading, though, to imply that a retro collective imaginary is unique to the beginning of the 2000s. Historian Raphael Samuel registered a similar compulsive recourse to the past during the decade of the 1980s itself, such as Thatcher’s frequent references to ‘Victorian Values’. The sensibility and aesthetic he terms “retrochic” refers to a look applicable to clothing fashions, organisations of domestic and public spaces and even the presentation and discussion of food. Retrochic, writes Samuel, “plays with the idea of the period look, while remaining determinedly of the here-and-now” (*Theatres of Memory* 83). He suggests that retrochic makes a “plaything of the past”, avoiding the sentimentality or seriousness which we would associate with more ‘traditional’ ways of relating to the past, such as restoration or conservation (112-114). While critics such as Guffey and Reynolds see this fixation with the recent past as limiting –

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<sup>3</sup> See pages 34-35 and 238-239, where James and Tony (respectively) pick up casual partners, engage in foreplay but stop short of actually having sex due to “health” concerns.

Guffey, for example, warns that “we risk incorporating [the] values” of the pasts which “retro’s accelerated chronological blur” reintroduces to the present moment (163). Samuel is less pessimistic, however. He instead emphasises that retrochic is “provocative” as it brings “the old-fashioned ... up to date” (*Theatres of Memory* 112). Rather than stunting the present with appearances of the past, retrochic changes how we *see* the past. By contrasting the “old and new” in the everyday, retrochic provokes interest in the past in the spectator who registers this juxtaposition (113). It inspires interest in the period that it evokes, but does not presume to dictate how the past affects the present, nor what it contributes to this present.

### **Writing the past: memory, history, and artistic treatment**

One of the key problems in thinking about the 1980s is how to characterise our relationship to it from our current period, and therefore how it can be treated by art. Can we say that the decade is historical? Or is the decade only confined to the realm of memory? There are many artistic treatments of the 1980s already, but does this suggest that the decade is a facet of history, or simply part of a prolonged contemporary moment? We tend to assume that history is objective, verifiable, and grounded in fact. Memory, by contrast, is often believed to be subject to the vagaries and whims of the present moment and the rememberer (and therefore inherently untrustworthy). The difference and distance between history and memory is not agreed upon by cultural critics. Pierre Nora, for example, argues that the two discursive practices seem to be “in fundamental opposition” to one another (8). He suggests that memory “is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the actual present” and thus “remains in permanent evolution”, whereas history is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (8). Andreas Huyssen, meanwhile, writes of the intermingling of the two discourses as “historical memory”, coterminous with the diminishing distance perceived between past and present (1). He warns that, irrespective of the “specific content” that debates seeking to distinguish memory and history are based on, what they need to register is that “at stake” in these debates is “not only a disturbance of our notions of the past, but a fundamental crisis in our imagination of alternative futures” (2). This crisis derives from the diminished trust in history’s inherent claims to objectivity: the very fact that one can know of history and not learn from it (as we might think or hope one would) has resulted, in Huyssen’s words, in “the very legitimacy of the historical enterprise [being] shaken” (2; 5).

Cognizant of these issues, this thesis is written under the assumption that the spaces between memory and history are prone to slippages, and that memory feeds history just as much

as history feeds memory. While we no longer recognise the present moment as being the 1980s, due to the ways in which we understand and periodise the passage of time, we can still recognise the decade as intimately connected to our present moment. Part of this process sees the past, the other, materialise or become codified. In part, literature contributes to this process. Codifying memory, after all, requires a form of mediation, such as literature. Literature therefore becomes what Nora terms *lieux de mémoire*, or memory sites “where memory crystallises”. These sites exist, he writes, because “there are no longer ... real environments of memory” (7). This is not to suggest that there were not moves to process or codify the 1980s in literature during the decade. We might think here of Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library*, published in 1988 and depicting the summer of 1983, which makes it clear that, in the light of AIDS, the world had changed irrevocably for the gay community and gay culture in the interim years. We might also consider Ian McEwan’s novel *The Child in Time*, published in 1987, in which an unnamed female prime minister is prominent. The figure is at once rendered familiar and strange: we can only think of this female figure as Thatcher yet, as she is not named, opening the possibility of another figure, there is a disjunction which also prevents us from doing so irrefutably. We can thus detect here a simultaneous sense of dislocation and continuity in the literature produced during the 1980s as it reflects upon the recent past.

### **Collective imaginary: Haunting, spectral politics, and the 1980s**

De Groot notes that from the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, notions of the historical “as a cultural trope developed largely unchecked and unconsidered”. “Britain”, he writes, “is a society fascinated, continually reading, rereading, plotting and conspiring different versions and different timelines” (*Consuming History* 2). The timeframe which de Groot identifies here parallels the election of Tony Blair’s Labour Party in 1997 (the first Labour government since 1979), which was at pains to divorce itself from any historical links with historical Labour.<sup>4</sup> Tony Blair insistently reoriented the party away from its socialist origins, abolishing Clause IV in the Labour Party’s constitution, the party’s commitment to securing “the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service” (qtd. in Gani). In his maiden speech as Labour leader in 1994, Blair announced of the party

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, with some irony, that Blair commented in 2003, just prior to the invasion of Iraq, that “There has never been a time when ... a study of history provides so little instruction for our present day.” (Qtd. in Vincent)

We have changed. We were right to change. Parties that do not change die, and this party is a living movement not an historical monument. If the world changes and we do not, we become of no use to the world. Our principles cease being principles and just ossify. We have not changed to forget our principles, but to fulfil them, not to lose our identity but to keep our relevance. Change is an important part of gaining the nation's trust. (Blair 1994)

Since Margaret Thatcher stepped down as prime minister in 1990, aspects of her premiership have insistently re-emerged and refigured in British politics. The abolition of Clause IV evinces this, signalling a fundamental shift to the right for both the Labour Party and British politics as a whole. Thus, even though Thatcher is no longer in office herself, the ideologies which epitomised her time as prime minister continue to permeate British politics.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, when asked in 2002 what she considered her greatest achievement to be, Thatcher is widely believed to have replied with “Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds” (qtd. in “Centre Right”). In the same year, Labour’s Peter Mandelson declared in an opinion piece for *The Times* that “We are all Thatcherite now”.

Coterminous with the re-interest in and re-emergence of the 1980s in contemporary culture, the tropes of haunting and spectrality became prevalent in cultural theory.<sup>6</sup> Since the publication of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* in 1993 (and its English translation in 1994), the trope of haunting, or more specifically, the trope of the spectre, become widely used as mode of analysis within the fields encompassed by cultural studies. This ‘spectral turn’, note María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, editors of *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*<sup>7</sup>, especially dominated the fields where questions of history, individual and collective memory, as well as tradition were prevalent (2). *Specters of Marx* was also a response to Francis Fukuyama’s *End of History*, in which Fukuyama argued that “history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process” had come to an end and that “there

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<sup>5</sup> This shift has been charted by various commentators. Well-known left wing activist and *The Guardian* columnist Owen Jones, in *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (originally published in 2011 and a second edition released in 2016), reminds us of Blair’s claim that “we’re all middle class”. Here, Jones traces the deliberate erasure of class as a form of social organisation in Britain pointing, for example, to the renaming of “social classifications used in national statistics” (the ‘Social Class based on Occupation’ committee was renamed ‘National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification’). Blair’s Labour, noted Jones, had “vetoed any reference to class” (98). We might also think of James Meek’s *Private Island: Why Britain Now Belongs to Someone Else*, which examines how the privatisation of essential services such as healthcare, water, power, railways and housing has become central to the state of contemporary Britain: under Thatcher, Blair, and David Cameron.

<sup>6</sup> The ghost, of course, is often linked with the gothic literary tradition, beginning with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818. While the figure of the ghost has long figured in human cultures, and was particularly popular during the late nineteenth century, developing out of the Romantic era and the interest in intersecting worlds (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2).

<sup>7</sup> *The Spectralities Reader* (2013) is the first collection of its kind, and includes material from literary, geography, history, memory, trauma, queer, gender, race and media studies.



would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled” (xii). *Specters of Marx* was thus also Derrida’s attempt to suggest, in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, deconstruction as Marxism’s natural successor<sup>8</sup>, and that Marxism would be forever haunted by atrocities committed under the Soviet Union. Thus, Derrida suggests, our state of being in the present is necessarily haunted by the events of the past. This he calls “hauntology”, as a pun on the French pronunciation of ontology, suggesting that simply the state of being is to be haunted.

Haunting, for Derrida, disrupts the linear relationship we understand to exist between past and present. “The ghostly,” he writes, “would displace itself like the movement of this history” (3). While haunting is intimately connected to history, it seeks to upend the structures we place on time so as to order our relationship with the past. Haunting “is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar” (3, original emphasis). It cannot be predicted or assumed when or how the past may re-emerge as a spectre upon the present, only that it does so as we attempt to make the past, as fragment, part of the present “by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead” (9, original emphasis). Thus, in attempting to make sense of the past Derrida suggests we “ontologise [the] remains” of what has passed and therefore “make them present” (9). But by doing this we cannot entirely control what comes with what we invoke. Each fragment of the past that we draw upon in the present becomes an event in itself. This event as a repetition of what has occurred before becomes the ghost (or spectre) that haunts the present. Derrida suggests, then, that “the question of the event” is “the question of the ghost” which is bound in a relationship of “repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time” (10, original emphasis). Repetition of an event is not a simple act of replication, which suggests that the conditions of the original event and the event’s replica must be identical, which is impossible. Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren clarify this as “an active, dynamic engagement [which] may reveal the insufficiency of the present moment, as well as the disconsolations and erasures of the past” (15).

Since the publication of *Specters of Marx*, del Pilar Blanco and Peeren note that ghosts have continued to manifest both “in popular culture and the aesthetics and politics of the

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<sup>8</sup> An argument criticised by several scholars in *Ghostly Demarcations: A symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, Michael Sprinkler’s collection of responses to *Specters of Marx*. See, for example, Tom Lewis’s “The Politics of ‘Hauntology’ in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*” (pp. 134-167), or Terry Eagleton’s “Marxism without Marxism” (pp. 83-87), the latter describing Derrida’s “dramatic somersault onto a stalled bandwagon” as “pretty rich” (83-84).

everyday” (16).<sup>9</sup> I have already examined the re-emergence of the 1980s in retro-inflected popular culture, so here I shall outline the spectral presence of the 1980s in British politics around the time *The Line of Beauty*, *GB84* and *Black Swan Green* were published (although this is not to suggest that the two are diametrically opposed). This is suggested by Scottish writer and political analyst Gerry Hassan, who in 2013 compared the British imagination to a zombie:

[I]ncreasingly the past and the voices of the dead are crowding out those of the living and the present ... There is a serious connection between the rise of a form of zombie national imagination, of the power of the ‘living dead’ and the rise of a morally degenerative, antisocial form of capitalist order. (38)

While Hassan’s choice of metaphor to signal the presence of the undead in the contemporary British imagination hinges on a bodily re-presentation of the past (unlike Derrida’s ghost, which is ethereal and physically intangible), he nevertheless reinforces a tendency to interpret the past with the language of the undead. Taken together, these metaphors cumulatively suggest the transitory nature of contemporary British politics: a shifting amalgamation of past and present, which manifests both in the figures present and the ideologies they espouse.

As I shall show, these are bound up in the longer history of Britain’s diminished empire. To write about erasure of the past in the present of Britain is to necessarily reckon with empire. Empire lies at the heart of what Paul Gilroy calls Britain’s “cultural infrastructure” (*After Empire* 15). Derrida suggests that “haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (66). Haunting is thus bound in the condition of Britain as it attempts to process the loss of its empire after the end of the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> Gilroy draws parallels between the 1982 Falklands War and the 2003 Iraq invasion, suggesting that they were both motivated by Britain’s “pathology of greatness” which stems from its former empire (97). He notes that “the appeal of being great again” that drove Thatcher’s foray into the South Atlantic had “endured and mutated and emerged again as one significant element” to drive a “largely reluctant” Britain to invade Iraq (103-4). If Britain’s general public had, in the early 2000s, lost its appetite for wars which promulgate British ‘greatness’, the longstanding national story of Great Britain nevertheless sees ‘greatness’ bound up in its very name and therefore offers a structure of identity to which the war could be absorbed and justified.

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<sup>9</sup> Around the same time, hauntology was adopted as the name of a music movement. See Mark Fisher “What is Hauntology”, *Film Quarterly*, 66:1 (2012), pp. 16-24; Jamie Sexton “Weird Britain in Exile: Ghost Box, Hauntology, and Alternative Heritage”, *Popular Music and Society*, 35:4 (2012), pp. 561-584.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Gilroy terms this condition ‘postimperial melancholia’, which I examine in greater depth as part of my reading of David Mitchell’s *Black Swan Green* in Chapter 3.

However, while it might be argued that the two wars indicate cultural similarities in the sense that they were started in a bid to affirm the instigators' power against a perceived threat of a dictatorial regime, there are some differences between them. Thatcher pursued war in the Falklands against the wishes of the United States and Ronald Reagan; the invasion of Iraq was a joint effort of Blair's Britain and George Bush's United States. The Falklands War was almost unanimously supported by the British public; the invasion of Iraq was preceded by some of the largest demonstrations in British history *against* the war. The war in the Falklands saved Thatcher's position as both leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister; by contrast Blair's role in the war has seen calls for him to be tried at The Hague as a war criminal.<sup>11</sup>

That we can partially but not entirely reconcile the Falkland and Iraq wars is perhaps further illustrated by the use of British nationalism which characterised nascent popularities of Thatcher and Blair. New Labour's links to 'Cool Britannia' recall in some ways how the aftermath of the Falklands War benefited Thatcher's 1983 re-election, which was more or less to the tune of *Rule Britannia*. In the absence of an overseas imperial war to fuel national pride, Blair and Labour closely associated themselves with Brit Pop (we might think here of the Spice Girls, Oasis member Noel Gallagher's Union Jack guitar or his visit to 10 Downing Street in the aftermath of Blair's 1997 election win) and were elected in the aftermath of England's hosting of the Euro 1996 football tournament. Both leaders achieved electoral success by latching on to a re-emerging sense of national pride for political ends, although in the case of Thatcher it was a nationalism generated by her own government's actions, whereas Blair picked up on a particular strand of national mood. However, what we can say here is that success in general elections for Thatcher and Blair can be thus be linked to politically shrewd articulations and adoptions of resurgent national pride. As Derrida reminds us, the original event is never identical to that of its repetition.

### **The spectre of Margaret Thatcher**

It is impossible to think of the British 1980s without also thinking of Margaret Thatcher. While this thesis is not specifically concerned with the manner of representations of the former prime

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<sup>11</sup> After the publication of the Chilcot Report in July 2016, Jeremy Corbyn and other political leaders suggested that Blair acted illegally. However, as several legal commentators for *The Guardian* have pointed out, due to the structure of the legal system this is unlikely to happen. See Geoffrey Robertson QC's "Putting Tony Blair in the Dock is a Fantasy".

minister,<sup>12</sup> it is interesting to note that, in the novels this thesis is concerned with, *The Line of Beauty* is the only one in which Thatcher herself is both named (albeit rarely) and physically makes a named appearance. In Peace's *GB84* she is simply referred to as 'the Prime Minister', even as she makes her speech to the Conservative Party conference (279). By contrast, her omnipresence in *Black Swan Green* is derived from the intensive media coverage of the Falklands War and its immediate aftermath, increasing Thatcher's profile and thus giving protagonist Jason Taylor cause to gush "Mrs Thatcher's bloody *ave*. She's so strong, so calm, so sure." (126, original emphasis) In *The Line of Beauty*, her presence is rendered spectrally – she is often mentioned, but rarely directly named: it is "the Prime Minister" who favours the idea of an annual Falklands parade, "Madam" who has been in office for four years, she is "the Lady" who "looks beautiful without any sleep", but "the lady herself" is "Mrs T" (*The Line of Beauty* 135; 108; 278; 155).<sup>13</sup> Writing on *The Line of Beauty*, although not working specifically within a Derridean framework, Kim Duff describes Thatcher as a "revenant figure" whose "spectre [...] haunts 1980s British bourgeois society" which *The Line of Beauty* recreates (128).

The controversies which engulfed recent representations of her suggests the inherently political nature of the presence of the 1980s several decades on. Hauntology helps to illuminate and explain the nature of these representations of Margaret Thatcher as the dominant political figure of the British 1980s. In an interview in 2002, Derrida asserted that "[m]ourning and haunting are [...] unleashed before death itself, out of the mere possibility of death" (qtd. in Derrida and Stiegler 49). His comment, concerning the impossible paradoxes of inheritance as it conditions the present moment, are prescient in considering Thatcher as *the* revenant figure of the 1980s. While she may have retreated from public life following the death of her husband Denis in 2003, her spectre still maintained a presence in the public sphere. Even prior to her death, the issue of Thatcher's afterlife in the collective imagination was the subject of heated debate. Responses to the 2012 film *The Iron Lady* were mixed. Charles Moore, Thatcher's official biographer criticised the film, arguing that it was "exploitative" and "calculatedly unkind" to depict Thatcher in this way while she was still alive ("Margaret Thatcher: a figure of history and

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<sup>12</sup> How the figure of Margaret Thatcher has been remembered in popular culture has been examined in various other places, and has become a focus of several critical studies. See, for example, Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho's 2014 edited collection *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*.

<sup>13</sup> While Thatcher's potential company is often mentioned but does not eventuate (it is hoped that she might be a guest at Toby's twenty-first birthday, or that she will be in attendance at one of Gerald's many dinner parties). When she does finally make her appearance, the scene of her presence, focalised through Nick, who is high on cocaine at the time, unfolds in a slightly surreal way. Nick invites the Thatcher to dance (the only person to actually do so at the party – despite the fawning Conservative MPs), while Gerald is left to watch "his idol ... getting down rather sexily" with Nick as they "caper all over the floor" (385). It is only later, when Nick sees a photograph of himself dancing with Thatcher that he notices her "look of caution that he hadn't been aware of at the time", implying her own thoughts to how the scene might be perceived (*The Line of Beauty* 407).

legend”). His concerns were echoed by *Telegraph* medical columnist Max Pemberton, who suggested that watching the film was tantamount to partaking in “cruel, thoughtless voyeurism” (“The Iron Lady and Margaret Thatcher’s dementia: Why this despicable film makes voyeurs of us all”). *The Guardian*’s Peter Bradshaw saw the film as “too benign and celebratory” and Thatcher “defanged, declawed, depoliticised” (“The Iron Lady – review”). Depicting Thatcher’s dementia is the point of controversy here. As Seumus Milne points out, “it invites sympathy for a human being struggling with the trials of old age” (“A Thatcher state funeral would be bound to lead to protests”). While the concern around the ethics of the manner of depicting dementia are certainly valid, they can also be correlated to political viewpoints: the right were incensed that Thatcher seemed to be “exploited”, while the left were frustrated that it humanised her and distracted from her divisive actions while prime minister.<sup>14</sup>

The swirling debates over how Thatcher should be thought of in the afterlife sense came to a head in the uproar which greeted the publication of Hilary Mantel’s short story “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher” in 2014 – just over a year after Thatcher’s death. The short story, as the title suggests, imagines the successful assassination of the former prime minister, in the aftermath of the Falklands War victory. A sniper with IRA connections prepares to shoot Thatcher from the vantage point of a Windsor house, imagined to be shortly before the real IRA attack in the Brighton Bombing. Following the story’s initial publication in *The Guardian*,<sup>15</sup> the tone of right wing responses to it is best summed by that of Lord Bell. A former public relations adviser to Thatcher, Bell called for Mantel to be investigated by the police on the grounds that the story was based on a moment when Mantel caught a glimpse of Thatcher 30 years prior, and explored the thought that, if she was somebody else, Thatcher might have been assassinated. “If somebody admits they want to assassinate somebody,” argued Bell, “surely the police should investigate” (qtd. in Barr, “In defence of Hilary Mantel’s Thatcher story – and fiction”).

### **Literary politics: memory and nostalgia**

As the furore around *The Iron Lady* and *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* emphatically demonstrates, cultural remembrances of the 1980s – particularly through the figure of Thatcher – are inherently political. How they are interpreted in the public sphere, and therefore how these

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<sup>14</sup> Responses to *The Iron Lady* anticipated the reaction to Thatcher’s death the following year. Indeed, as news of her death was announced, spontaneous street parties erupted in places particularly affected by Thatcherism such as Brixton, Glasgow and Liverpool.

<sup>15</sup> “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher” was originally to be serialised by *The Telegraph*, but this was dropped after the editor decided that the story would be objected to by its readers (Davies).

figures pass into culture – what gets taken for fact and fiction, for instance, or indeed what facts should be represented – therefore becomes the site of fierce contestation.<sup>16</sup> *Tipping the Velvet* author Sarah Waters suggests that, regarding the historical novel’s navigation of fact and fiction:

I don’t think novels should misrepresent history, unless it’s for some obvious serious or playful purpose ... I think we have a duty to take history seriously – not simply to use it as a backdrop or for the purposes of nostalgia (qtd. in *Remaking History* 31).

Waters here suggests the risks involved in writing of the past as they stand for any historical novelist. Even though, as de Groot points out, the act of writing historical fiction is by definition a tautology, and cannot hope to be ‘objectively true’ alone, the reader still expects that what they are engaged with is motivated by truth to some extent (*Remaking History* 3).

Waters’ sentiments are echoed by Hollinghurst. Reflecting on the marketing of his 2011 novel *The Stranger’s Child*, for example, he comments that “I had to be careful this book wasn’t marketed as a *Downton Abbey*-type thing, and I hope it doesn’t trade in easy nostalgia and fantasy about the past; rather the opposite” (“Alan Hollinghurst: Sex on the Brain”). We can extrapolate from Waters’ and Hollinghurst’s comments a fear, or at the very least suspicion, of what fundamentally drives cultural engagements with the 1980s and its figures, both on the part of the producers of texts and those who engage with the texts. Alternatively, how these engagements and the intentions behind them might be *perceived*, particularly with regards to nostalgia, is also of concern. But how a work is perceived is, in part, dependent on the cultural context historical fiction is published in, and the mores and desires of the particular moment. Hollinghurst’s reference to the *Downton Abbey* television series, which was at the height of its popularity when *The Stranger’s Child* was published, for example, suggests a distrust that the general public is unable (or unwilling) to perceive historical fictions depicting similar periods as being motivated to depict these pasts for different reasons and to different effects. *Downton Abbey* has been cited by critics such as Alex Murray as providing a form of “escapism” during the Austerity years from 2010 onwards through its “saccharine versions of the past” (125). This is particularly evident when these engagements trade in fiction as much as fact – that the characters and their stories are fictional (or only loosely based on real stories) against the backdrop of real historical events such as the First World War – and it is perhaps initially unclear what the

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<sup>16</sup> We might think here of the furore which followed the publication of David Peace’s *The Damned United*, an imagined reconstruction of late football manager Brian Clough’s 44-day reign at Leeds United. As with *GB84*, *The Damned United* features characters based on real historical figures. Objections regarding the portrayal of key figures in *The Damned United* (namely Clough himself, and then Leeds player Johnny Giles) saw a court injunction force Peace to issue an apology and amend subsequent editions of the novel (see pages 8-9 of Jerome de Groot’s *The Historical Novel* for further details).

overlaying of fiction upon fact is intended to achieve. But essentially what Hollinghurst and Waters reject here is an uncritical acceptance of visions of the past inflected with fantasy and nostalgia – the desire for an unrealistic fantasy which papers over ‘what really happened’, and distracts or diverts attention to the now.

In light of such suspicions around nostalgia’s presence in the collective imagination, it is necessary to provide some qualifications for using nostalgia – and, indeed, memory modes in general – as a framework for reading *GB84*, *The Line of Beauty* and *Black Swan Green*. These texts are each, to an extent, nostalgic insofar as they express a desire to (re)turn to what we might now think of as both the homeland and birth of contemporary Britain. This is not to suggest that these novels – lesser still their authors! – long for the world or the conditions of the 1980s. As David Peace emphatically states, “it shouldn’t be possible ... to feel nostalgic about the time and place I was writing about” (qtd. in Hart 556). But rather, what these novels express is a desire to know the world of the 1980s and what this knowledge may offer our navigations of the decade’s insistent haunting of the present moment. Thus, what I hope to make clear here is that recognising nostalgia as a useful mode of *accessing* the 1980s does not equate to *accepting an unproblematically nostalgic view* of the 1980s.

Nostalgia regained prominence in the cultural lexicon following the publication of literary scholar Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* in 2001. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, inspired by her trip to her former home in the former Soviet Union, Boym suggests that we may distinguish nostalgia as taking two main forms, restorative and reflective (xviii). Restorative nostalgia, she says, “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition”, and it takes the form of national memory underpinned by the desire for a “return to origins”. To an extent this conception of nostalgia could be seen as analogous for heritage, which offers an appearance of a natural and inherent condition. Meanwhile reflective nostalgia, Boym suggests, “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing” and suggests that “absolute truth” is a doubtful state (xviii). Reflective nostalgia may be reconciled (although it does not have to be) to the individual psyche or memory, as restorative nostalgia is to the social or collective psyche or memory.

What is particularly salient for our purposes here is Boym’s characterisation of nostalgia as “an ambivalent sentiment” which “permeates twentieth-century culture” (Boym xiv). This, in the first instance, alerts us to the all-encompassing, pervasive nature of nostalgia, and in the second instance, that it is not something which must be reducible to an “individual psychology” (such as that of an author or a reader). Rather, nostalgia may be a collective experience and desire which underpins how a culture remembers, and therefore knows, itself, and thus how it might be

constituted in the present. As Boym suggests, “[n]ostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future” (xvi).

Huyssen explores the increasingly indistinct relationship between past, present and future, suggesting that the boundary which separates the past and the present “used to be stronger and more stable than it appears to be today” (1). He characterises this contemporary cultural shift as changing from one with a preoccupation with “present futures” to one with “present pasts” (11). If, as the concluding passages from Hollinghurst, Mitchell and Peace’s novels quoted as this introduction’s epigraph draw attention to, conceptualisations of the present in the terms of the 1980s present are bound in relation to the future. We might also conclude that this impulse contracted and then receded into conceptualisation of the present in relation to the past in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a contrast Huyssen recalls as a “decade of happy postmodern pluralism” which became “the 1990s ... haunted by trauma as the dark underside of neoliberal triumphalism” (8).

What we have been seeing to this point is an evocation both of nostalgic and melancholic collective experience. Yet melancholia is rejected by Boym as a characteristic of anything other than an individual consciousness. She suggests that melancholia and nostalgia are oppositional; that nostalgia evokes a relationship “between personal and collective memory” whereas melancholia “confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness” (xvi). Geographer Alastair Bonnett disagrees, noting that “it is inarguable that a yearning for what is gone, a desire constantly reinforced and fed by change, represents a melancholy mood” (*Geography of Nostalgia* 6). As we have seen already in Gilroy’s evocation of postcolonial melancholic Britain, melancholy can indeed be attributed to a collective consciousness.<sup>17</sup> We can surmise, thus, that melancholy is conducive to, or at the very least coterminous with, a nostalgic imagination. Nostalgia, similarly, contributes to a melancholic collective imagination.

### Cultural questions of memory and nostalgia

Mieke Bal posits cultural memory as a performative act. This performance, she writes, does not necessarily occur as a conscious act as, “in many instances, such acts are not consciously and wilfully contrived” (vii). Cultural memories of the 1980s become embedded in collective memory

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to suggest that Gilroy’s analysis makes much of nostalgia, however; indeed he seems somewhat ambivalent to it. See Alastair Bonnett’s *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the politics of nostalgia* for his analysis of *After Empire*, which Bonnett suggests “treats nostalgia as inherently suspect” (see 123-130).



via the filmic and literary representations of the decade. Yet if we can detect in political and social questions regarding the 1980s a distrust of the vagaries of memory and nostalgia in general, then what of the decade's cultural manifestations? What is the most appropriate, productive way of reading historical literary fictions that engage with questions of memory and history of the recent past?

My framework of inquiry for reading *GB84*, *The Line of Beauty* and *Black Swan Green* is indebted to Kate Mitchell's proposition that historical fiction be considered "memory texts" (12-13).<sup>18</sup> Taking her cue from Mieke Bal's claim that memory is "an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future", Mitchell suggests that positing historical fiction as 'memory texts' enables us to ask questions beyond the usual dichotomy of "historical fidelity" and representation that tend to be the focus in critical readings of historical fiction (Bal vii; Mitchell 13). I have adapted these questions to reflect the specific concerns of this thesis:

why does the text invoke[sic] this aspect of the past, in this way and in this form, now? How does it function as a technology of cultural memory, shaping our historical consciousness? And how does it enable us, as readers, to conceptualise the *relationship* between the [1980s] past and our present? (13, original emphasis)

Ultimately, Mitchell suggests, the term "memory texts" permits us to

[c]ritically account for the variety of historical modes [these fictions] enact, without automatically privileging ironic distance and dismissing nostalgic revival. It posits nostalgia as a more complicated and multiple mode of recollection. Moreover, understanding [these texts] as a present act of recollection foregrounds the role of the reader in producing historical meaning. It furthers our understanding of how the relationship between present and past is conceptualised in multiple ways in a culture that is, paradoxically, obsessed with history and yet is charged with the inability to think historically (13-14).

To Mitchell's questions I would add that considering historical fictions as memory texts also enables us to read each historical text on its own terms. We may read them in accordance with its own explicit and implicit aims, as well as situating them in relation to one another, in

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<sup>18</sup> Mitchell's formulation of memory texts forms the basis of her account of the rise of the neo-Victorian novel, in part as a response to critical tendency to situate this sub-genre of historical fiction "in relation to a postmodern problematisation of historical knowledge, rather than as an act of recall" (12).

order to provide an account for the haunting presence of the 1980s in recent British cultural and literary production. While Mitchell's remarks are made specifically about neo-Victorian novels,<sup>19</sup> they are also relevant for this thesis in its readings of literary fictions set in the 1980s. As a decade which is in the process of becoming history, but also saw the birth of neoliberalism and other conditions of our contemporary existence, we cannot hold the 1980s entirely separate from our present day. By asking questions grounded in the interests of *memory* rather than *history*, we are freed from concerns of historical fidelity alone.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, Mitchell suggests that memory discourses are valuable for considerations of historical fiction in several ways. Firstly, it elides the tendency to situate history and fiction in an oppositional relationship, similar to that of memory and history as noted earlier. As de Groot points out, fiction is generally subsumed to be the "lesser partner" in this binary (*Remaking History* 3). By considering historical fictions as memory texts, history is no longer implicitly posited as the authoritative discourse, but instead becomes one of several ways of understanding the past. This enables texts and media, such as novels, to "contribute to our historical imaginary" without depending on and perhaps exclusively "privileging the 'factual'" (32).

Secondly, Mitchell suggests that memory texts "both communicate memory – that which is already known through a variety of media ... and offer themselves *as* memory (32, original emphasis). They also enable us to take into account the contributions other media forms make to the historical fiction, which I examine particularly in relation to *GB84* and to a lesser extent *Black Swan Green*. As indicated earlier in this introduction, simply the existence of the plethora of texts produced since the turn of the century that are oriented around stories of the 1980s indicates the resonances of this period in collective memory. Thus, it is productive to see what kinds of knowledge are produced when these media forms are read collectively. Referring to historical fiction as memory texts enables a way of integrating wider, varying understandings of the past into our readings of a text, and the constructions of the past – media other than the "historians' narratives" we would ordinarily recourse to for this purpose (32).

The third important thing to note is that positing historical fiction as a memory text also allows us to also consider the role that the reader and reading environment plays in the

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<sup>19</sup> Neo-Victorian fiction, according to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, is "historical fiction set in the nineteenth century" which "must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*". This fiction bridges the gap between the contemporary and the Victorian as "a series of metatextual and metahistorical conjunctions as they interact with fields of exchange and adaptation" (4, original emphasis). The prevalence of the prefix 'neo-' as a genre-descriptor in contemporary fiction (in addition to neo-Victorianism) is not unproblematic, and will be touched on shortly.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, the question and necessity of historical accuracy is foregrounded more so in *GB84* than in *Black Swan Green* and *The Line of Beauty*, as per the authors' respective aims for their novels.

transmission of knowledge that text and reader engage in. We can read in Bal's description of memory activities occurring in the present an echo of Edward Said's observation that

[t]exts have ways of existing, both theoretical and practical, that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society – in short, they are in the world, and hence are worldly. The same is doubtless true of the critic, as reader and as writer (4).

Building on Said's delineation of the distinct moments which govern both a text's existence and critical responses to it we could also suggest that, in the context of historical fiction, the text also exists in the world it seeks to represent. Thus, we can read an interplay between the present moment of the text as it is written (the authorial present), the textual present itself (the present of the text as depicted) and the present experienced as the text.

### **The historical novel today**

Seeing historical fiction as memory texts is, in part, a response to what Mitchell terms a "reductive opposition" in recent debates on historical fiction, in which:

[a]t the very moment when postmodern challenges to the traditional authority of history seemed to open up new possibilities for the role of fiction in historical recollection, freeing it from questions of accuracy and authenticity, scholarly debates equated non-ironic recuperation of the past with critical naiveté: historical fiction must self-reflexively problematise representation or be deemed nostalgically uncritical (13).

This critical tendency to see historical fiction as either needing to challenge the role and authority of history or problematising the ways in which history is represented will be touched on again shortly in a little more detail. But it is important to be cognizant of this debate at this moment in order to assert how memory texts are a more useful frame in which to situate historical fiction for this project. To highlight the appropriateness of Mitchell's formulation of the 'memory text' in characterising for a strand of contemporary fiction concerned with accounting for the period of the 1980s, however, it is necessary to indicate the development and debates surrounding the historical novel since its origins in the nineteenth century. The contemporary fiction that I consider in this thesis is, I argue, historical. But *GB84*, *The Line of Beauty* and *Black Swan Green* also draw heavily on their respective authors' personal memories and experiences of the period

they represent, as well as ‘source material’ (of varying degrees).<sup>21</sup> As the pasts they represent being so recent, we are required to constantly remind ourselves of the gap between the moment they are written and read in with that they depict, their status as historical novels is not a foregone conclusion. Harry E. Shaw postulates, for example, that “historical probability is present” in novels of the recent past, although he suggests that, by virtue of this idea of the recent past, it does not manifest in “a strong enough way to shift our perception of their [the novels] form” (38).

According to Avrom Fleishman’s classic account *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf*, a novel becomes historical on account of the “active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force” within the text (15). Implicit in this, however, is that this force cannot be ‘recent’ (15). History must act upon and shape both the characters within the text, as well as the “authors and readers outside it” (15). These historical force(s) must also be recognisable to the reader, and there is perhaps a sense that these forces may only be recognisable after the passage of time. However, during the course of the 1980s, commentators were quick to register the seismic shifts of the decade. Stuart Hall, one of Thatcherism’s most astute critics, wrote in the introduction to his *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* that the “conjecture” of 1978-1988 “has proved to be a historic turning-point in postwar British political and cultural life” (1). Of the three novels this thesis focuses on, *GB84* is the most attuned to this shift, as its day-by-day chronicling of the miners’ strike traces the 53-week strike as a turning point in modern Britain, culminating in ‘Year Zero’ as the beginning of ‘now’. Positing these novels as memory texts allows us to account for the historical forces present in these texts as we recognise them emerging and consolidating.

Perhaps it is distrust in the relationship between memory and history (and therefore historical fiction) that characterised initial critical understandings of what ‘counts’ as a historical novel, or what a historical novel ‘should do’. Such concerns were made clear in Walter Scott’s *Waverley*, widely considered to be the first historical novel in the genre’s recognisable form today. This suggested that there needs to be around 60 years between the novel being written and the period that it depicts. More recently The Historical Novel Society’s Richard Lee, while

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<sup>21</sup> We might think here of Peace’s description of laying his own memories against newspaper reports from the time of the strike as he wrote the *GB84* (Hart and Peace 555). Similarly, Mitchell acknowledges “debts of detail” to Andrew Collins’s memoir *Where Did It All Go Right?*. Meanwhile, while Hollinghurst dismisses the role of research in the writing of novels, citing instead the primacy of the imagination, we cannot overlook his own personal history and interests: as a former M.Litt. student at Oxford, his own father’s interest in literature, history and architecture (which Hollinghurst suggests he himself inherited), and as a former deputy editor at the *TLS* (“Alan Hollinghurst, The Art of Fiction No. 214”). Thus, while Hollinghurst’s work would not be considered ‘researched’ in the way we describe Peace’s forensic efforts, it would be remiss to dismiss Hollinghurst’s as entirely divorced from processes of research.

acknowledging the inherently arbitrary nature of the decision the society has made in offering a definition, proposed that:

To be deemed historical (in our sense), a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described, or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research). (“Defining the Genre”)<sup>22</sup>

The idea that, due to the historical and social particularities a realist novel inherently offers, all novels might have the potential be termed historical, argues Fleishman, renders “the term ‘historical novel’ useless” in that it no longer distinguishable as a particular literary mode (15; 15 fn9).

The arbitrary sense of temporal distance of a historical novel from the events it depicts, and thus the importance of the events themselves as depicted by historical novels became less of a critical concern at the height of postmodernism in the 1980s. Linda Hutcheon coined the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ to account for a particular trend in historical fiction, which sought to destabilise notions that the discourse of history can make “truth claim[s]” (93). In her influential *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, published in 1988, Hutcheon argues that “postmodern writing of both literature and history” emphasise the “meaning-making function” attributed to these discourses. She stresses that the “meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts’ (89, original emphasis). As influential as the idea of historiographic metafiction idea was, we are generally now at a stage where we recognise that it is an apt description of a sub-genre of historical fiction produced at a particular moment, rather than a catch-all term to describe fiction purporting to represent the past. As Alan Robinson points out, this suggests an “inadequately narrow” reduction of “historiography to epistemological issues” (xiii).

This can be seen as symptomatic of a broader concern in contemporary literary studies, which Peter Boxall notes as the need to develop a language with which to discuss the literature produced in the twenty-first century (17). While his comments concern fiction produced in the twenty-first-century more generally, and thus not necessarily or exclusively pertaining to historical fiction, they also echo Mariadele Boccardi’s more specific assertion that “there is a need for a scholarly approach to the genre” of historical fiction (2). Taken cumulatively, Boccardi

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<sup>22</sup> Similar sentiments were echoed in the early to mid-twentieth century. Victorian fiction scholar Kathleen Tillotson, for example, suggests that novels set less than two generations ago be termed ‘novels of the recent past’ as a separate and distinct entity to ‘historical fiction’ (93). Those set more than 40 to 60 years ago, suggests Fleishman, may be considered historical (3).

and Boxall's sentiments suggest that current terms of reference and the language deployed in discussions of the genre are not wholly adequate for the issues contemporary historical fiction evokes.

Some efforts have been made to develop ways of talking about recently produced historical fiction. Elodie Rousselot, for example, attempts to recuperate the recent past as able to be thought of as historical via the term 'neo-historical fiction'. This, she claims, is "defined by its participation in, and response to, contemporary culture's continuing fascination with history" (2-3). While perhaps Rousselot's formulation of 'neo-historical fiction' does not adequately delineate a 'new' subgenre of historical fiction which "is characterised by its similar creative and critical engagement with the cultural mores of the period it revisits", <sup>23</sup> it does indicate the critical shift away from the historical fiction/historiographic metafiction binary that has dominated criticism of the genre over the last two decades (2). Nevertheless, use of the term 'neo' has emerged in recent accounts of contemporary historical fiction. Bentley, Hubble and Leigh identify a "prominence of neo-historical fiction in the 2000s" (16). The 'neo-' prefix creeps into the critical vocabulary of critics such as Christopher Vardy when concerning fiction of the 1980s like *Black Swan Green*, *GB84* and *The Line of Beauty*, dubbing the texts "neo-1980s" in the same way we might use the term "neo-Victorian" (100). It might be premature to assign such a label to fiction like *GB84*, *Black Swan Green* and *The Line of Beauty* at this particular juncture: what, after all, is the form identifiable with the 1980s that these novels imitate?

## Chapter Outlines

The novels that each chapter of thesis concentrates on were chosen for their engagements with high profile events and moments of the 1980s. Each chapter takes a different discourse of public memory as its analytical focus. The chapters are ordered chronologically by the subject matter of the novels. Thus, I begin with the Falklands War, move to that of the miners' strike and finish with the novel offering a survey of the high-point years of the Thatcher administration, which encompasses the landslide 1983 election victory, the Big Bang and Black Monday.

The first chapter takes up the question of the spectral nature of heritage, with this being the memory discourse used to analyse Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*. The novel is a partial rewriting of the Thatcher decade. Hollinghurst's first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, is set in the summer of 1983, the temporal point at which *The Line of Beauty* begins. I begin this chapter

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<sup>23</sup> As McNeill points out, this is not radically different to what older forms of historical fiction do ("Review", 639).

by examining how Hollinghurst rewrites the overlapping period the novels depict, and how *The Line of Beauty* recalibrates moments from his first novel – a consideration of *The Line of Beauty*'s oeuvre inheritance. Then, drawing on Derrida's notion of hauntology, I examine how heritage has a spectral presence in the novel. Attentive to the repetition of words which evoke surfaces and spectrality, I trace the verbal patterning of these words and phrases as they evoke sites of heritage and thence constitute Nick Guest's relationship to the high-Tory world he hopes to become part of in the novel. I conclude the chapter by examining an explicit attempt to use heritage as a means of gaining access to the world. The Ouradi family, the patriarch Bertrand especially, collect and display paintings as a means of displaying both their wealth and place in this society. Yet the paintings are revealed to be by "Zitt" – an artist real in the novel's diegesis, but who is actually an invention of Hollinghurst's. The chapter therefore concludes with an exploration of the effects of placing fakery in the role of heritage. In tracing these supplementary details within the novel (I deem them so as they do not affect the progression of the novel's core story), I argue that *The Line of Beauty* critiques the centrality of heritage to the Thatcher years, revealing this memory practice's inherent fictitiousness despite its pretences and ambitions to create a sense of national identity and community which appears natural and actual.

The second chapter considers Peace's *GB84* in terms of the novel's complicated and contradictory relationship with memory discourses of nostalgia. Out of the three novels this thesis examines, *GB84* is the most explicit in its narrative aims of intervening in the collective memory its subject matter concerns. In other words, Peace's novel is an intervention in how the 1984-85 miners' strike is remembered and becomes history. Thus, my analysis is primarily concerned with how Peace has structured his narrative at the macro level. While some critics have noted the presence of pop music in the novel, there is scant consideration of what this presence enables in the novel's engagement with and contribution to Britain's collective memory. This chapter aims to address this gap in the critical material, as I argue that Peace strategically deploys this material to create an atmosphere of dislocation and division. The material the novel considers source material; both popular culture and historical, is at once familiar and defamiliarised; it orientates as it disorientates both the reader and the characters the novel follows. This, I argue, is the result of Peace's complicated and contradictory relationship with nostalgia as a mode of evoking the past. I then move to an examination of the less obvious presence of alternative music, which Peace cites in his 'sources' list but does not obviously evoke in the novel. I contend that this music makes its presence known through the characters the novel follows, and makes a case study of Neil Fontaine's character development arc in relation to West Yorkshire city Bradford's New Model Army's 1984 single 'The Price'. *GB84*, despite its

author's well-documented suspicion of nostalgia, engages with the practice nevertheless: I argue that nostalgia manifests in the novel not so much as a desire for what happened, but rather as a desire to know the fact(s) of what happened.

The third and final chapter considers Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* in relation to Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholia and the mainstream media, where he examines Britain's inability to acknowledge and "mourn" its diminished empire and associated loss of prestige and sureness in its global role. Consequently, British culture dwells in times where Britain was surer in its sense of self, namely during the Second World War, a spirit which Margaret Thatcher tried to recreate during the Falklands War. With this in mind, I argue that *Black Swan Green* toys with the historical novel's capacity to explore recent memory by registering the postcolonial melancholic state of Britain in the early 1980s, in the moment where Thatcher's Britain crystallises. My reading of the novel registers how print media in particular is represented as capturing, reflecting and helping to fuel this zeitgeist, as well as cultivating a desire to remain stranded in the moment they represent. Jason is consumed by news of the Falklands War, and collates clippings while anticipating that the War will be remembered throughout the world in the same vein as the Second World War. The sense of postcolonial melancholia is further reinforced at the local rather than national level after the War has ended and a Black Swan Green local was killed in it. The presence of the village's local paper is specially noted at the village's 'crisis meeting' over the prospect of a permanent settlement for the traveller community nearby. Thus, paying specific attention to these and other moments generated by Britain's diminished empire in *Black Swan Green*, I suggest, enables an examination of the novel's engagements with the legacies of British imperialism. In a passing remark in *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed*, Joseph Brooker suggests that *Black Swan Green* "does not primarily aim to be a state of the nation address" (215). This chapter suggests that, on the contrary, the novel is very much preoccupied with the state of Britain as it navigates its position in the postcolonial world.

By reading these novels as memory texts remembering the 1980s, we have recourse to reflect on the relationship of memory, history and literature as they gesture at past, present and future. They also indicate the continuing relevance and need to critically evaluate our memories and recollections of the recent past, and how we retrieve these, as they insistently figure in the present. The 1980s, as a decade so insistently relevant to our epoch, persists as a spectre haunting the present.



## Chapter 1

### Spectres of heritage in *The Line of Beauty*

The national heritage is a powerful source of such meanings. It follows that those who cannot see themselves reflected in its mirrors cannot properly 'belong'.  
(Hall "Whose Heritage?" 24)

Ideas of Englishness and English heritage are fundamental to *The Line of Beauty* and its recollection of the 1980s. When asked about the relationship between England and his novels, Alan Hollinghurst remarked in an interview that

I do feel profoundly attached to my native land ... there is an element of active construction in my novels, obviously, but in some strange way, before all that, they accumulate in my mind in various different strands ... I end up writing something which isn't by any means a wholly conscious strategic decision. It's just something which has come about. And that thing that comes about does tend to be very steeped in Englishness. ("What can I say?" 202)

English heritage, the form of public memory this chapter is oriented around, manifests distinctly in *The Line of Beauty*. Prominent settings include country houses, conversations between MPs revolve around possible commemorations of the Falklands War, while antiques and fine art in the homes of the moneyed elites persistently figure. The question underpinning my reading of *The Line of Beauty* is: How does *The Line of Beauty* draw upon and portray these heritage discourses in its representation of the 1980s? And to what effect?

*The Line of Beauty* offers ample sites from which to examine how English heritage<sup>24</sup> is constituted. This chapter is therefore concerned with how *The Line of Beauty* foregrounds the artifice of national heritage (which became a politically loaded concept during the 1980s) in its representation of the 1980s. Ideas of heritage, I argue, form a reciprocal spectral relationship between the discursive practices which constitute both national heritage, and the characters of the novel who can only exist on its peripheries as 'other'. As Harry E. Shaw notes, characters in historical fiction, or memory texts in this case, are likely to "illuminate historical events and destinies" (49). For this reading I focus on protagonist Nick Guest and the Ouradi family (namely Nick's lover Wani and his father Bertrand) as the 'others' to national heritage in *The Line*

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<sup>24</sup> Throughout this chapter, in the interests of variety, I use the term 'British heritage' interchangeably with 'English heritage', 'national heritage' and simply 'heritage'. I acknowledge, however, that 'British heritage' is something of a misnomer, in that it only refers to what are understood to be ideas of Englishness, as opposed to incorporating Welsh and Scottish ones (see Hall "Whose Heritage?" 26-27).

*of Beauty*. Aristocrat MP Gerald Fedden, with whom Nick lives as a lodger, is a counterpoint to these characters as an embodiment of English heritage. First, I examine how ideas of national heritage figure in the novel. I then consider how interactions with these sites constitute Nick, and how Nick himself views these sites. These largely emerge in supplementary details generally unobtrusive to the development of the novel's plot. Finally, I return to the more explicitly fictive elements of heritage as it is foregrounded in *The Line of Beauty*'s inheritance of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Hollinghurst's first novel, which is also set in the 1980s.

### “The Heritage”

Stuart Hall reminds us that national heritage is a form of social memory which manifests as a story of the nation. He writes:

What would ‘England’ *mean* without its cathedrals, churches, castles and country houses, its gardens, thatched cottages and hedgerowed landscapes, its Trafalgars, Dunkirks and Mafekings, its Nelsons and its Churchills, its Elgars and its Benjamin Brittens?

We should think of The Heritage as a discursive practice. It is one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory ... nations construct identities by selectively binding their chosen high points and memorable achievements into an unfolding ‘national story’. This story is what is called ‘Tradition’. (‘Whose Heritage?’ 25, original emphasis)

Thatcher's Conservative government was careful to curate the presence of the past in the 1980s as a way of papering over the social divisions its policies created during the decade. Heritage and inheritance in Britain thus became a political tool in the 1980s. Heritage initially emerged as the dominant structure of relation to the past in the aftermath of the Second World War. It was the site where “certain ‘structures of feeling’” coalesced to enable the post-war consensus which now dominates characterisations of the years prior to Thatcher's election (Krips 1-2). However, as critics such as Patrick Wright<sup>25</sup> have observed, Thatcher's uses of the past depended on her

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<sup>25</sup> Wright's book, *On Living in an Old Country*, is an astute critique, and probably the most well-known, of the Thatcher government's utilisation of heritage, published during the 1980s. The ‘heritage industry’ was the subject of much criticism by academics in the 1980s. Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry* (1987) is perhaps the most damning, in which he argues that the burgeoning “heritage industry”, which saw an increase in the number of museums and similar institutions in Britain, point to “the imaginative death” of the country, one that is “obsessed with its past, and unable to face its future” (9). Raphael Samuel, however, offers a more sympathetic view on the burgeoning presence of heritage culture in the every day. He termed perspectives such as Hewison and Wright's as “heritage-baiting”, suggesting that reactively critiquing the prevalence of heritage culture is simplistic, and overlooks why heritage emerged as a popular way of engaging with the past (*Theatres of Memory* 263).

paradoxical view of its role. On the one hand she would characterise the past as contributing to “social inertia” (Wright 137). During the 1984-85 miners’ strike, for instance, Thatcher accused National Union of Mineworkers president Arthur Scargill of trying to “plunge Britain into a ‘museum society’” (Wright 137). But equally she would extol ‘Victorian Virtues’ such as working “jolly hard”, living within one’s income, and having “tremendous pride” in one’s country as being part of a “perennial values” set which all British citizens should hold (qtd. in *Island Stories* 334). This had, Raphael Samuel writes, the effect of “rehabilitating the notion of the Victorian and associating it not with squalor and grime, but on the contrary with goodness and beauty, purity and truth” (*Island Stories* 334). Thatcher’s inclination towards this “essentialist” interpretation of the past pervaded her re-election in 1983. It is also suggestive of the nature of the heteronormatively masculine, competitive world that her re-election gave license to, which Hall alludes to above (*The Hard Road to Renewal* 71).

National Heritage straddles memory, history, architecture, art and artefact as they contribute to a national story. It is ultimately fictive in nature, though it trades in its appearance as the ‘facts’ of the nation. It tends to be evoked in terms of heteronormative masculinity; the actions of ‘great men’ performing ‘great acts’, be they wartime leaders or producers of high culture. As Hall identified during the Falklands War, Thatcher specifically drew on former war-time Prime Minister Winston Churchill via “a highly selective form of historical reconstruction” in order to shape her own image as a prime minister capable of leading Britain to victory:

“I know you will understand the humility I feel at following in the footsteps of great men like [...] Winston Churchill, a man called by destiny to raise the name of Britain to supreme heights in the history of the free world” (qtd. in *The Hard Road to Renewal* 71).

Manifesting as remembrances of the past, then, heritage was deployed to serve political campaigns, such as supporting the Falklands War. This support was then remobilised by Thatcher in order to win the following year’s “landslide” General Election victory (*The Line of Beauty* 3). At the time of the Falklands War, Britain’s capacity to fight was calibrated as a specific and inevitably Conservative inheritance. It is in this political climate that *The Line of Beauty* begins.

Questions of heritage directed at the novel *The Line of Beauty* have tended to be asked in the artistic sense as opposed to the explicitly political.<sup>26</sup> Criticism of Hollinghurst’s oeuvre, and

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<sup>26</sup> By contrast the three-part television adaptation of *The Line of Beauty* has been evaluated in terms of its relationship to heritage cinema, which was a particularly popular British film genre in the 1980s. Dion Kagan argues that the television series “elaborate[s] a *critical* history” of screen heritage, as “heritage techniques are deployed ... in self-conscious, parodic and satirical ways” as it depicts the eventual exclusion of Nick from the Feddens’ world (“Homeless Love” 277). See also Kagan’s “Possessions and dispossession: homo economicus and neoliberal

*The Line of Beauty* in particular, has largely been interested in the novelist's relationship with the literary influences on his work. The two book-length treatments of the author published to date, Johnson's *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence* (2014) and Michèle Medelssohn and Denis Flannery's edited collection of essays *Alan Hollinghurst: Writing under the influence* (2016), for instance, are examples of this. Both consider how Hollinghurst's oeuvre as a whole is influenced by his literary predecessors and their traditions.<sup>27</sup> Johnson suggests that "interest in the affective value of *pastness* – as opposed to the less dynamic experience of 'historical precedence' – lies at the heart of Hollinghurst's full body of work", and so is the central focus of his own analyses (3, original emphasis). His critical concerns are exclusively of the literary and artistic heritage of *The Line of Beauty*. Medelssohn and Flannery, meanwhile, are partly attentive to the "sexual-political landscape" and "historical circumstances" of the publication of Hollinghurst's work, such as *The Line of Beauty* (5).<sup>28</sup> Turning to the persistence of the "neo-liberal political culture he depicts", Flannery comments that Hollinghurst is both "a writer of 'now'" and "also part of the past" (5).

As a novel structured by the 'high points' of the 'Thatcher years' neo-liberal political culture, 1983, 1986 and 1987 (a landslide general election win, the Big Bang, and the third, albeit less convincing, general election victory of Thatcher's time as Prime Minister), the idea of traditions and national heritage are embedded in *The Line of Beauty*'s narrative structure.<sup>29</sup> Yet, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, "a heritage is never natural", despite its gestures and appearances to the contrary (211). Heritage, as a form of cultural inheritance, must be actively identified. This is, according to Derrida, "always a task" (67). This task comes from the inherently and necessarily heterogenous nature of inheritance; as Derrida writes, "if the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it" (18). Thus, while a national heritage may appear

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sociality in *The Line of Beauty*", which examines Nick's dual identity as "subject and observer" of neoliberal culture under Thatcher through the conventions of the heritage genre in the adaptation (798).

<sup>27</sup> Tracing the presence of Henry James in *The Line of Beauty* has been the focus of several early responses to the novel: see Daniel Hannah; Andrew Eastham; Julie Rivkin; and Denis Flannery, who argue (amongst other things) that figurations of Henry James are an integral component of Hollinghurst's rendering of the "gay 1980s" (to borrow Rivkin's phrase) in *The Line of Beauty* ("Writing the Gay '80s with Henry James: David Leavitt's *A Place I've Never Been* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*"). Evaluating this vein of Hollinghurst criticism, however, Soo Yeon Kim suggests that while the work done is "helpful", these articles are "intent more on identifying Jamesian elements in the novel" than considering "the innovative ways this novel uses James" (177). While these critical discussions are important to note, as are the literary inheritances of Hollinghurst's work, they are not where my interests lie for the purposes of this chapter.

<sup>28</sup> Considerations of sexuality form the second main strand of critical interest in *The Line of Beauty*. See for example essays by Myron Yeager, Kim Duff, and Geoff Gilbert.

<sup>29</sup> 1983 is also the year the second National Heritage Act was passed. Following on from the first, passed in 1980 in order to "establish a National Heritage Memorial Fund for providing financial assistance for the acquisition, maintenance and preservation of land, buildings and objects of outstanding historic and other interest" (National Heritage Act, Chapter 17). The 1983 Act was more specific in its effects, establishing the Boards of Trustees for museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, thereby enabling access to public funds, and more deeply inculcating heritage sites and practices into public life (National Heritage Act, Chapter 47).

homogenous and 'true', gaining its cultural resonance from the appearance of a unified true story of the nation, it must balance this appearance with the reality that it papers over numerous discrepancies. In light of Derrida's remarks, the first question we should ask when considering heritage sites in *The Line of Beauty* is this: how do they stand up to scrutiny? What might give a critic such as Johnson recourse to describe *The Line of Beauty* as a novel "contentiously grounded in historical reality", beyond the fact that the novel is a fiction (120)?

### **"Steeped in Englishness"**

Gerald Fedden, MP and aristocrat, embodies Englishness and English heritage. He opens the annual Barwick Summer Fête by gazing at the gathered crowd from a stage and announcing "This is a classic English day [...] and a classic English scene" (270). The reader is not told what it is about the scene before Gerald that makes it so classically English to him.<sup>30</sup> What he actually sees is not important. What is important is what he wants his audience to see, he as one of them, and what he does not want his audience to see: the fact that he "loathes Barwick" with its "squalling kids and deaf pensioners", which cannot compare to his preferred stage of the House of Commons (269-70). As if to hide his contempt, he announces to the crowd that "far from being a rich businessman who came down from London to loathe them he was in fact the spirit of Barwick, the Pickwick of Barwick, opening the fête to them as if it were his own house" (270). To borrow from Wright, Gerald's words aspire to suggest "forms of self-understanding" which can "be shared by people of strikingly different situation and circumstance" (5). Gerald's speech, with its gestures of self-deprecation and rhetoric of commonality, is intended to diminish the distance, both geographic and social, between himself and his constituents: not only does Gerald come from an aristocratic background, but he also lives in the affluent London suburb of Notting Hill. Gerald's constituency Barwick, however, is located in the East Midlands county of Northamptonshire, and is broadly rural and lower-middle class. His daughter Catherine suggests that he would be happiest, however, "If only you didn't have to be MP *for* somewhere" (270, original emphasis).

As an MP, Gerald's main identity is dependent, by definition, on being tied to and representative of "somewhere". Yet as he is taken around the Barwick fête, it becomes patently obvious that he does not 'belong' in his own constituency, far less represent it. He "hadn't

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<sup>30</sup> Gerald's comments echo (or perhaps anticipate) those of former British Prime Minister John Major, who succeeded Thatcher, and famously declared to the 1993 Conservative Party conference that "Fifty years on from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and, as George Orwell said, 'Old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist' and, if we get our way, Shakespeare will still be read even in school." (Major)

dressed for the country at all”, with his suit “a dash of Westminster among the shirtsleeves and jeans and cheap cotton frocks”; he awkwardly participates in a ‘welly whanging’ competition (271; 273). He only takes an interest in his constituents if they are one of “the local blue bloods” (282). Yet all this affirms is the distance that exists between Gerald and his constituents in general, and the importance in the fact that this ends up not mattering (he is re-elected in the following year’s general election). Gerald reinforces the version of Englishness taken as representative of the whole nation, yet only applicable to a few. As Alastair Bonnett notes, such a projection of national identity as the culmination of a falsely assumed shared past invokes a kind of “class transference. ‘We’ see our past in ‘theirs’ (but they do not have to return the favour)” (*The Geography of Nostalgia* 10).

Gerald represents himself by invoking English heritage through a caricature of himself at the Barwick Summer Fête, through his reference to the titular character of Charles Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers*. This reinforces the inherent dependence of heritage on simplified images and ideas, the linked high points of a national history. Something similar can be detected in *The Line of Beauty*’s gradual introduction of Gerald to the text. We discover him through image, caricature, and catchphrase. The language and arts of essentialism are what introduce the reader to Gerald’s character. He is first represented in the novel in a group photo of MPs, and is memorable because of specific aspects of his attire and demeanour: “The smile, the white collar worn with a dark shirt, the floppy breast-pocket handkerchief” which “would surely be famous when the chaps in the rows behind were mere forgotten grins and frowns” (3). The reader’s next encounter with Gerald is when he arrives home from France, and features his first direct speech, “All must have prizes”, which he later repeats at the Barwick Fête (20; 271).

This dialogue is presented in the same discursive space that the reader is alerted to through the presence of two caricatures of Gerald hanging in the kitchen. The narrator notes that the caricatures invite a contrast between a “grinning, hawk-nosed cartoon image” and a “handsome everyday mask”, underneath which a “predatory goon” might lurk (20-1). These versions of Gerald both depend upon and simultaneously sustain the sense of caricature which characterise both him and by extension the idea of English heritage underpinning *The Line of Beauty*. He enables himself to be reduced to a catchphrase or recognisable by the stroke of a caricaturist’s pen, relishing the possibilities this offers. Gerald’s “everyday mask”, then, can be read as analogous to that of English heritage – the “handsome” exterior hiding something more sinister lurking beneath it, as the supposed glory of English heritage elides its own more menacing histories. Gerald’s public appearances, like the public nature of heritage, aspire to link

together high points of his own career and glossy appearance, yet there is always the implication that some darker aspect of his character lurks on the periphery.

The dark side to Gerald, which reinforces the “competitively heteronormative” world that Thatcher’s re-election effectively enabled, and what is suggested by the day of the summer fête, also manifests as a ‘classic’ in another sense (*Hard Road* 71). Gerald’s presence at the fête provides the opportunity for Nick to discover Gerald’s affair with his secretary Penny. This affair eventually provides the catalyst for Nick’s relationship with Wani being discovered by the papers. Gerald’s affair with Penny is later registered by Nick in the language of competition, as he discovers that Gerald’s wife, Rachel, was the former girlfriend of Penny’s father, and thinks to himself “It was more than competitive, it was pathological – to steal the girlfriend and then fuck the daughter” (497). The affair, which is hidden by Penny’s involvement in the writing of Gerald’s diary which, she claims, “was strictly the record of his political life, a kind of ‘archive’ [...] ‘an important historical resource’” (367). As Nick expresses amazement that Gerald can “resign in disgrace one day and be offered a job at eighty thousand a year the next”, while Nick himself is facing eviction from the Fedden household, he is informed by Penny that “this is how this world works ... Gerald can’t lose” (497). What *The Line of Beauty* demonstrates here then, is how embedded the privilege of the moneyed, aristocratic elite is in the construction of heritage as public history. This can only be taken advantage of by those who are born into it and may therefore inherit and shape it, by creating and archiving their own lives as ‘historical resources’.

### **Pasts haunting the present: The Falklands War**

Against the backdrop of a supposedly stable English heritage that Gerald embodies, recent pasts punctuate and haunt conversations in *The Line of Beauty*. Haunting and variations on the theme, after all, is a commonly deployed trope for describing manifestations of the past in the present. In his first volume of *Theatres of Memory*, for example, Samuel (who during the 1980s and early 1990s wrote on the challenges to history that contemporaneous debates on the status of heritage posed to collective historical understanding) writes of “memory’s shadows – those sleeping images which spring to life unbidden, and serve as ghostly sentinels of our thought” (27). *The Line of Beauty* presents Englishness and English heritage as a potentially sinister force. This is registered by Gerald’s adult daughter, Catherine, who is prone to self-harm and is described by her brother as “pretty volatile” (6). She is, however, attune to the menacing nature of the world that her father embodies (6). This aspect of the world reveals itself to her when she is in one of

her “moods” (6). Catherine describes the experience of a moment of crisis early in the novel to Nick as being

when everything goes black and glittering ... It is beautiful, in a sense. But that isn't the point ... it's poisonous, you see. It doesn't want you to survive it. That's what it makes you realize ... It's the whole world just as it is ... everything exactly the same. And it's totally negative. You can't survive in it (17).

Catherine's description of the world as “exactly the same” and “totally negative” registers as the monolithic nature of the burgeoning ideology of neoliberalism which is to characterise the idea of Englishness during the Thatcher years in which people like her father “can't lose” yet people like Nick cannot “survive”.

Soon after her moment of crisis, Catherine wanders into a stagnating conversation about how to memorialise the previous year's Falklands War at a dinner party in the Fedden family home. A Home Office junior minister with “precocious gravitas and unflappable self-importance” and his pregnant wife believe that establishing a public holiday and monument to the War is of paramount importance (134). An annual holiday, the minister suggests, would be “A Trafalgar Day for our times”. His wife, it emerges, has other more pressing concerns: “Why not revive Trafalgar Day itself? Trafalgar Day must be revived! Our children are forgetting the War Against the French...” (134). Nick, who has “drifted” into this conversation, can only marvel “at just how unavailable his thoughts on the subject were” (135). The couple argue that as it is Thatcher's “preference” for a parade “as well as a prominent memorial” in order to honour what the couple believe to be both her “triumph” as well as that of the British forces, these are the most appropriate forms of commemoration (135). The conversation ends after the junior minister's wife describes the Falklands War soldiers as “staunch ... dauntless”, to which Catherine responds by “covering her ears and grinning, ‘it's no good, I just can't bear words with that *au* sound in’” (135).

This brief intercourse about how the Falklands War should be commemorated illuminates how national heritage emerges in the narrative present of *The Line of Beauty*. This conversation has little bearing on the development of the plot. The couple do not reappear, and the Falklands War is only referred to once more in the rest of the novel. Yet in spite of this we can see how the importance of the past is encapsulated by the Falklands War victory, giving it a political potency. The past is suggested to be at once both desired and disruptive. Commemorating a recent war directs attention to one which has long since receded from living memory. This somehow becomes an urgent concern as British children are implied to no longer



appreciate the historical differences, and thence wars, between Britain and France that have been formative in establishing a British identity. Thus, as Wright notes, “history, tradition and cultural identity” are manipulated in “endless public invocations of the national identity and tradition” that the proposed Falklands War commemorations would provide (5). Yet Catherine’s unwillingness to contend with a discussion of this history, in a declared aversion to “*all*” words, destabilises these ideas of tradition. Instead, they gesture towards the persistent, haunting nature which invocations of the political past prompt in the present.

### **“Who are you? What the fuck are you doing here?”**

If we can interpret Gerald and the Falklands War conversation that takes place within the bounds of his Notting Hill home as offering a benchmark of Englishness and English heritage concerns in *The Line of Beauty*, then how do these affect the character most desperate to ingratiate himself with the world they represent, Nick Guest? In Nick, Kim Duff identifies “a desire for a sense of Englishness that is not unlike ... the nostalgic renderings of English heritage during the 1980s” (127). Duff reads this as part of Nick’s attempts at “identity formation” through his interactions with the gendering and sexualising of the body of Margaret Thatcher, as well as his aesthetic experiences of urban architectural space. However, here I focus on the impossibility of Nick’s attempts to situate himself within the Fedden household and therefore the version of England that this household and its owner stand in for.

The past as heritage as it contributes to Nick’s state of being in the present invites a consideration of Derrida’s<sup>31</sup> notion of hauntology, the Derridean play with the word “ontology”, which the *OED* defines as “the science or study of being”. As Pierre Macherey notes, ‘hauntology’ (also the French pronunciation of ontology) denotes a “science of ghosts, a science of what returns”, of haunting as *being* (18). Derrida suggests that the state of being is, in effect, haunted by what has gone before, and that what has gone before will emerge, unbidden, into the present, making its presence known spectrally. Through the spectre, Tom Lewis suggests that Derrida here indicates “the inherent instability of reality. Granting only a fleeting modality to material being it [the spectre] serves as the sign of an ‘always-already’ unrealised and unrealisable ontology” (140). In the Fedden household, Nick’s presence is characterised by a state of ‘always almost’, a never entirely realised state of being. He exists as a spectre to Englishness as

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<sup>31</sup> Other Derridean readings of *The Line of Beauty* focus on Nick’s subjectivity and Derrida’s theory of hospitality and the host as invited by Nick’s surname, Guest. See for example Soo Yeon Kim “Betrayed by beauty: Ethics and Aesthetics in Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*”, or Daniel K Hannah’s “The Private Life, the Public Stage: Henry James in Recent Fiction”.

represented by the Fedden house. Thus, we must ask whether the question of ‘being’ in a particular epoch can productively be asked of historically-oriented novels such as *The Line of Beauty*, in which its characters must exist in the shadows of polarising, ideologically charged figures.

Nick’s presence in the Fedden household, and therefore the upper echelons of Tory society, and thence the nation, is inherently unstable. His place in the household is never entirely certain. Apart from the overt signalling of this by his surname, Guest, he is at once a lodger, pseudo-guardian of Catherine, a friend of Toby’s, and a family confidant. Yet he is not quite any of these either. Nick’s paying the rent of £20 is “always awkward”, likened to a “form of mild extravagance ... like flowers brought by a dinner guest, which were also a bit of a nuisance” (118). Indeed, his presence as a guest at the Feddens’ dinner parties is contingent on the need for him to be “making up the numbers” (121). His panic when Catherine cuts herself while the Feddens are in France, and omitting to tell Rachel about it, leads to her sense of betrayal when she does discover what happened and contributes to his being ejected from the house. Was Nick’s primary role to be a friend to Catherine, or her guardian? Do these roles differ? While he and Toby are initially stated to be friends, with this being the condition upon which he first enters the Fedden household, Toby moves out of the family home shortly after Nick moves in. Further, Nick’s initial crush on Toby and later withholding details of his relationship with Wani makes their friendship firstly unbalanced, and then no longer possible. After the scandal of Gerald’s company emerges in the papers, Nick’s peripheral position to the inner sanctum of the family is underscored by his exclusion from crisis talks between Rachel and her brother, Lionel Kessler: “Nick smiled and hesitated. There wasn’t a cup [of tea] for him, but he longed to be included.” (447). Through a quintessential emblem of Englishness, tea, Nick is reminded that he does not entirely belong to the household and, by extension, England. As Duff notes, the representation of Gerald’s domestic space in the Notting Hill house “blurs the boundaries between the public and the private”: Nick’s ejection from this private space is also ensures his ejection from the public idea of Englishness (124). Nick’s status in the Notting Hill house is never fully realised, either by Nick himself or by the Feddens. Indeed Gerald, as the emblem of Englishness who finally ejects Nick from the house, shouts to confirm Nick’s eviction “who are you? What the fuck are you doing here?” (482).

To write of the spectre is also to write of vision or how something is seen. It is not enough simply to indicate Nick’s being rendered spectral to the world he is placed in; we should also consider how he situates himself and the world in the narrative. While *The Line of Beauty* is narrated from an omniscient third person perspective, much of it is focalised through Nick, the

spectre or the outsider. For some critics, the fact that Nick is a permanent ‘outsider’ makes him the perfect ‘observer’ of the Tory world to which he can never truly belong. He may partially exist in this Tory world, afforded and therefore possessing enough knowledge to appear to belong to it without explicitly subscribing to the beliefs that underpin it. In Simon During’s words, Nick is an “apolitical Thatcherite”, implicitly complicit in this world under the guise of ‘the aesthete’ who need not settle on a political position, but may simply enjoy the benefits this affords him (121). In theory this should make Nick the perfect observer; one through whom the reader sees the hypocrisies and contradictions of the Thatcherite world. But we do this in spite of Nick, not because of him. Brief moments suggest to us that his is not the most reliable point of view. He recalls stealing money from his mother to buy her a gift of a china hen, although the narrator then suggests that Nick cannot remember if he actually took the money or not. He’d “denied it through such storms of tears that he wasn’t sure now if he’d stolen the money or not; he’d almost convinced himself of his innocence” (267). The theft “still darkened his mind as a failed, an obscurely guilty, attempt to please” (267). While Nick has, on the one hand, told us that he stole the money, he also tries to suggest that he did not. As Nick becomes consumed by visions of what he wishes his world to be – he at the centre as the pleaser – his desires colour his perception of the situations he finds himself in. This is then relayed to the reader as the world as Nick wants it to be, and how his reading of the situations he finds himself in are conditioned by desire. His dance with Thatcher at the Feddens’ anniversary party brings this into stark relief. Nick invites Thatcher to dance at the Feddens’ anniversary party, and they “caper all over the floor” (385). It is only later, when Nick sees a photograph of himself dancing with Thatcher, that he notices her “look of caution that he hadn’t been aware of at the time” (407). Nick, we must surmise, is an unreliable focaliser – ultimately to his own cost.

Nick’s final moments on the street crystallise his position as both spectral subject of and subject to the Thatcherite world he is ejected from. Nick’s return of the property’s keys begins this process, as he does so increasingly reluctantly. The front door key is “flung” through the letterbox; the back-door key, which at this point could still give him access to the house, “soon” follows; but the key that Nick is “most reluctant” to return is the “sleek bronze Yale” to the communal gardens, where he first had sex. He pauses, thinking that “it had a look of secrets to it. He could probably keep it, no one would remember; it would be nice to still be in fact, if not by rights, a keyholder,” before eventually pushing his hand through the letterbox and holding the key “for a second before letting it drop onto the mat” (499-500). The increasingly expansive narrative discourse dedicated to Nick’s return of the keys dwells longest on his memory of a time where he both appeared to be accepted by the Feddens’ world and could push the boundaries of

what this world could accommodate.<sup>32</sup> It also highlights the fact that his strongest connections to the Fedden house and the world it represents were not the publicly acceptable ones, but rather those that he could ameliorate and fit himself in with. Nick had “loved letting himself in” the front door when he first moved into the Feddens’ because it became a daily public affirmation that he belonged to the world it let him enter (5). However, entering through this door and thus accessing the Feddens’ world and their Britain, ultimately proves less of an attachment in his moment of crisis than what is now the only tangible connection to his first sexual experience he now possesses, given Leo’s death from AIDS. Nick finds it more difficult to relinquish the peripheral ties to the house and the memories they represent than those which appear more appropriate to this world.

After Nick is evicted by Gerald, lacking a clear next destination and anticipating a positive HIV test result see him envisage “afternoons like this one decades hence” (501). Nick is forced to think of possible future scenarios that are unlikely to include him, but he can only do so by seeing iterations of the present moment replicated indefinitely. The language of spectrality emerges to dominate the novel’s final pages, emphasising Nick’s changed relationship with the Notting Hill street on which he is no longer welcome. Nick’s drifting evokes his initial impressions of the street. The street’s “white terraces” once “stared at each other with the glazed tolerance of rich neighbours” (5). Descriptions of Kensington Park Gardens are recalibrated to highlight Nick’s changed position. A “glazed” outlook once meant turning a blind eye and thus enabling inclusion. However, as Nick passes a neighbour, such an outlook now emphasises his exclusion. Nick avoids the man “with a regret that held him and glazed him and kept him apart” (501). As Nick lingers on pushing the last key through the letterbox, he imagines himself “haunting the place, gazing up at the Feddens’ windows for glints of the life they were leading without him”. He then “drifted unexpectedly down the street”, past houses with a “muted gleam” (500). Nick’s relation with the street and his memories of it cannot be constituted in definite terms any more: they are finally rendered partial, spectral, as his ‘right’ to be present there is withdrawn.

### **Building and possessing a heritage**

Nick’s return of the Fedden household keys points to the role possession has in Englishness and English heritage manifest as a given context in the novel, a discreet form governing social

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<sup>32</sup> The private garden, where Nick first has sex with Leo, sees him challenged for the first time as to his right to be there when a neighbour informs him that “it’s keyholders only” (41).

relations and personal ambitions. Equally, it signals the artificial nature of heritage. Closely scrutinising heritage buildings (the most prominent heritage form in Britain) as they are introduced, and therefore rendered public, *The Line of Beauty* shows how their foundations both literal and metaphorical are imbued with fictionality. Hawkeswood, the country house childhood home of Rachel Fedden and Lionel Kessler and location for Toby Fedden's twenty-first birthday party is built on an "artificially flattened hilltop" and is "a seventeenth-century château re-imagined in terms of luxurious modernity" with a "sheer staring presence" (48). Inside, the two-storey high central hall possesses an "arcaded gallery on the upper level, and a giant chimneypiece made from bits of a baroque tomb", which give the impression of "a fusion of an art museum and a luxury hotel" (48). The natural contours of the landscape are modified to enable the construction of Hawkeswood, which is itself an imitation of another architectural tradition, and warrants a "high-minded but humourous entry in Pevsner", the famous guide to British architecture (48). The Market Hall in Nick's (fictional) hometown, Barwick, is often "locally claimed, against all the evidence" to have been designed by Sir Christopher Wren, the architect who redesigned London after the Great Fire in 1666 (285). Serving as the location for the Barwick constituency candidate announcements in the 1987 General Election television coverage, a reporter announces the market Hall was "built" by Wren, publically linking the town with a 'great man' of English history (419). The Market Hall and Hawkeswood are both iconic in their local settings and famed for facts and stories about their construction that are demonstrably false. Yet it is these falsities that enable these buildings to be absorbed as markers of British heritage, as they are nationally recognised in commentaries on their location.

Heritage objects such as paintings present themselves more discreetly in *The Line of Beauty*'s narrative. Their potential fictionality is not signalled as overtly as that of the buildings. While the buildings provide settings for action within the plot, with their fictionality made explicit, heritage objects are instead portrayed as 'real' both internal and externally to the narrative discourse. This is particularly true of the paintings by the fictional artist Zitt, whom Johnson refers to as a "fictional wildcard", which hang in the Ouradi family home in Lowndes Square (120). These paintings are treated by the novel as if they are as 'real' as the creators of other pieces, such as the Cézanne at Hawkeswood or the Gauguin gifted to Gerald and Rachel for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The two Zitt paintings, which according to Nick are "ghastly", depict Buckingham Palace in yellow in the first, and "the Stock Exchange and the Mansion House, done in mauve" in the other (219; 220). These imposing paintings force themselves into becoming topics of conversation between Nick and Wani as well as between Nick and Wani's mother Monique. Wani suggests to Nick that he should look at the painting

before joining the family dinner, as Bertrand is “rather into buying Zitt”, while Monique notices “with a hint of mischief” that Nick is looking at her “husband’s new Zitt” (219; 220). The Zitt paintings are firmly cast as belonging to supermarket magnate Bertrand, who has ambitions to become a lord, as opposed to other items in the family home that are not linked to a specific Ouradi.

Bertrand’s desire to become a lord, and thereby insert himself into the upper-echelons of British society, is indicated by the placements of these paintings. The Buckingham Palace painting is hung on the landing outside Bertrand and Monique Ouradi’s bedroom, making it one of the first things he sees as he begins the day. The Stock Exchange and Mansion House work is hung between the windows of the dining room, and so the painting literally becomes part of his outlook on London. Placing the painting which juxtaposes these buildings, which are not actually situated next to each other, against the view of London signals Bertrand’s desire to position himself as part of the Tory elite. It also foreshadows Wani’s later operations in property development, which contribute to the renegotiation of the London skyline. Furthermore, the Stock Exchange and Mansion House painting underscores the increasingly intimate relationship between power and money that the 1980s encouraged, as it reimagines London’s layout in order to bring together the residence of the London mayor and one of the oldest stock exchanges in the world.

Nick and Bertrand’s discussion of the paintings inevitably lead to a discussion about Gerald Fedden, in whose family home Nick lives, and thence to Thatcher. The paintings thereby enable an ironic link between Bertrand and Gerald, the latter of whom possesses plenty of heritage objects in his Notting Hill house, but does not “have a clue where most of it came from” (283). In an echo of Gerald’s philistinism regarding his own possessions, the Zitt paintings similarly suggest a degree of ‘cluelessness’ about Bertrand. Monique’s mischievous observation of Nick suggests, at the very least, that she agrees with his judgement that the paintings are “ghastly”, a fact which does not seem to concern Bertrand. Her comment that Zitt is “extremely contemporary” implies a knowingness about the proposed social function of this artwork, to project Bertrand into the position of power which becoming a lord affords. Yet Nick and Monique’s brief dialogue also offers a sly wink to the reader as to the ontology of these paintings within the novel. The reader knows that they are created by an artist invented by Hollinghurst and, in the case of the mauve painting, they depict a geographically false image. Artifice is central to the existence of these paintings that are put to work to support an individual’s attempt to gain access to a vestige of power in English society. *The Line of Beauty* subtly renders the reality of these (ultimately successful) attempts farcical.

### Re(-)membering the 1980s

Alan Hollinghurst first wrote about the 1980s in *The Swimming Pool Library* in 1988, setting the novel in the summer of 1983 as the realities of the AIDS crisis were about to be realised. *The Line of Beauty*, published in 2004, inherits the world which *The Swimming Pool Library* concludes at the close of this summer and, as Hollinghurst himself describes, “develop[s] it further” (“What can I say?” 206). After all, in an interview with the *Paris Review*, Hollinghurst stated that *The Line of Beauty* was borne of his desire to pursue the “perverse idea” of writing “about the Thatcher boom years as seen from the inside, against the grain of my own political convictions”, and so explore “a fallible individual and the implosion of the Tory world of power and money which seduces him from the start” (“Alan Hollinghurst, The Art of Fiction No. 214”). Thus, *The Line of Beauty* takes *The Swimming-Pool Library*’s portrait of 1983 as a world inhabited nearly entirely by gay men, underscored by the only child in the novel, Will’s nephew, asking his uncle “am I [gay]?” and broadens its vision to encompass the Thatcherite decade, resplendent with “heterosexual queenery” (*The Swimming-Pool Library* 61; *The Line of Beauty* 382).

José M. Yebra, however, suggests that *The Line of Beauty* “can be read as a belated textual echo”, an “in-depth revision” of the 1980s presented by *The Swimming-Pool Library* (199). Grounding his reading of the novel in the discourses of trauma studies, Yebra writes that it is “a new symptom” of the AIDS trauma, and that Nick “recasts” the experiences of predecessors both of *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty* as a way of “working through” this trauma (199). While it is true that Nick’s experience in the latter parts of the novel is conditioned by the trauma of his first lover’s death and his second lover’s imminent death from AIDS, and the fear that he himself may soon test positive for HIV, there are subtler instances of refiguring, echoes, and recastings of *The Swimming-Pool Library* throughout *The Line of Beauty*. These are not always directly connected to the AIDS crisis. Instead, they mark Hollinghurst’s historically specific moments of authorship.

*The Line of Beauty* occasionally suggests the co-existence of the world of its literary predecessor. When Rachel Fedden suggests to Nick that he should feel comfortable bringing his “friends” home, for example, Nick imagines this she is only likely to accept his being accompanied by “a nice white graduate from the college”, a Will Beckwith figure, as opposed to Nick’s first lover, Leo, who is black (*The Line of Beauty* 127). Uncommented on by critics thus far is the presence of Will’s grandfather, Denis Beckwith, who exists on the periphery of the Feddens’ social circle. Gerald’s plans to organise a concert at his Notting Hill home come to fruition and are perceived by Nick as follows:

Gerald's growing preoccupation with the concert idea ... had come to a peak of competitive angst when Denis Beckwith, a handsome old saurian of the right enjoying fresh acclaim these days, had hired Kiri te [sic] Kanawa to sing Mozart and Strauss at his eighty-fifth birthday party." (246)

The momentary re-emergence of Denis Beckwith suggests that *The Line of Beauty*'s conception of Thatcher's Britain both overlaps with that offered by *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and broadens it. For *The Line of Beauty*, revisiting the Thatcher era two decades on means recasting and rewriting symbols of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, particularly in its evaluations of the male body and associated spaces. What originally could be read in the self-contained, self-sufficient world that the earlier novel evoked must now be seen in the broader terms of the legacy of the AIDS crisis within Thatcher's Britain. Thus, while *The Swimming-Pool Library*'s representations of these moments often carry, at the very least, hints of sexual charge, *The Line of Beauty*'s are more reserved. Toby, watching Nick remove his shirt to sunbathe, comments that "you're in pretty good shape these days ... I was noticing" (324). Toby's comments recall a moment in *The Swimming-Pool Library* when long-time Corinthian Club figure Bill Hawkins remarks to Will on the physical development of the Corinthian Club gym-goers, before moving on to that of Will himself:

"That boy Phil's coming on well ... very nice definition. Said he was a bit loose after being off for a spell, but I should say he'd put on a centimetre or two this week alone ... I'd like to see you do some more work ... You've got the makings of something really choice" (10-11).

Bill is seen by Will as possessing "an old-fashioned ethos of a male community, delighting in men, but always respectful and fraternal", and so Will does not immediately interpret his comments as having sexual undertones. Toby's comment, however, signals friendship without the possibility of sexual attraction.

Perhaps more noticeably, however, is the idea of what these associated spaces might offer to the male body. This idea also undergoes a shift in representations between *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty* namely regarding the gym and the eponymous swimming pool. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the gym represents an "underworld full of life, purpose and sexuality" where "[b]oys" could "work on their bodies in the stagnant, aphrodisiac air of the weights room" (9). When Nick visits Kessler's Bank with an old Oxford contemporary, he is taken to the bank's gym in the basement, where he is subject to the sight of other men aggressively "slamming weights up and down", either "working up their aggression or working it



off', and overhears "esoteric boasts" between shower stalls (*The Line of Beauty* 204). Indeed, as Nick reflects to himself, he sees 'the gym' in the abstract sense as a "gay place" (*The Line of Beauty* 204). Nick's idea of a gym is thus more akin to what the Corinthian Club offers Will, although by living in a largely straight world, he is not afforded the same access to these idealised spaces as Will is.

In a similar vein, the motif of swimming in the earlier novel is recalibrated in the latter. When Nick, in 1983, is confronted with the scandal of a junior government minister caught in a car with a "rent boy", he responds by thinking of "aesthetically radiant images of gay activity, gathering in a golden future for him, like swimmers on a sunlit bank": his own desired future, echoing what the pool signified for Will (*The Line of Beauty* 25). Swimming, be it in a pool or a river is thus initially associated with and is keyed as vital for an idealised space for gay fantasy. But this opportunity is shattered as Nick later watches Catherine and her boyfriend Jasper cavorting in the pool at the Feddens' France manoir, unable to swim himself due to the overwhelming heterosexuality of the couple commandeering the space: "the pool was theirs, like a bedroom" (*The Line of Beauty* 311). This sense of the pool becoming recast in straight rather than gay terms is further accentuated by Gerald, who sees fit to express his own infatuation with Margaret Thatcher in terms of swimming, as he gushes over her eyes, "[d]on't you just want to swim in them?" (*The Line of Beauty* 319).

Will Beckwith, *The Swimming-Pool Library*'s protagonist, is introduced to the reader as a hedonistic gay aristocrat "riding high on sex and self-esteem" (*The Swimming-Pool Library* 3). We cannot say the same for Nick at the beginning of *The Line of Beauty*, who we discover is a virgin and has only quite recently come out. While both Nick and Will are Oxford graduates, the two are also socially remote: Nick is somewhat ashamed of his middle-class background, and sees it as something which places him at a distance and disadvantage from the aristocratic Fedden family whom he boards with in London. Nick's ties to aristocracy derive not from birth but through friendship and a secret crush on fellow Oxford graduate Toby Fedden. Nick does not experience hedonism and highs (both from drugs and sex) on a level comparable to Will, until his relationship with Lebanese millionaire heir Wani Ouradi. Wani is perhaps a more comparable character to Will. After all, his own taste for excess is marked from our first encounter with him at Toby's twenty-first birthday party when he offers Nick cocaine.

The sense that Will's spirit is emergent in Wani is accentuated in the latter's recalling of one of *The Swimming-Pool Library*'s most iconic lines. Narrator Will, retrospectively (from an unspecified time) evaluates the summer of 1983 by telling the reader that, while he did not quite

know so at the time, this was “the last summer of its kind there was ever to be” (3). He notes that it nevertheless had “a faint flicker of calamity, like flames around a photograph, something out of the corner of the eye. I wasn’t in work – *oh, not a tale of hardship, or a victim of recession, not even, I hope, as part of a statistic*” (3, my emphasis). The first part of Will’s statement alludes to the burgeoning presence and awareness of AIDS. The italicised comments, however, chillingly anticipate those made by Wani four years later. Clearly dying from AIDS, he is asked about his condition at a business lunch shortly after the Black Monday crash of 1987. Wani opts to answer the question, which he interrupts before it is finished, as if it concerns his business interests: “Oh, a disaster ... Quite unbelievable. One of my bloody companies lost two-thirds of its value between lunch-time and tea-time” (*The Line of Beauty* 433). The fate escaped by Will has befallen Wani, although like Will he does not speak of it directly. Wani instead frames his illness in economic terms: he would prefer to be seen as a victim of recession, not AIDS. Wani goes on to state that “it bounces back. It has already. It always recovers. It always recovers. ... We’ll all be absolutely fine”, curtailing any further discussion on his health (*The Line of Beauty* 433). Wani’s description of one of his companies losing value over the course of a single afternoon does more than simply recast Will’s words, however. Wani’s deflection of a question about his illness to one about the state of his business draw attention to the relationship which emerged between AIDS and the accelerating liberalisation of the British economy under Thatcher<sup>33</sup>. Intended to placate Nick and their dining companions, Wani’s remark could be interpreted as representative of the blasé sentiments which ultimately contributed to events such as Black Monday as well as a futilely optimistic comment on his own condition and that of fellow AIDS sufferers.

Wani’s words register a micro form of periodization endemic to the 1980s: before lunch and after tea, before the crash and after, before he contracted AIDS and after. This toys with the sense of before and after as a form of periodization that *The Line of Beauty* and *The Swimming-Pool Library*, from the perspectives of 1988 and 2004 respectively, enact: firstly of the horrors of the AIDS crisis, but also expanding into the Thatcher decade as a whole. It suggests the importance of haunting to periodization. As Fredric Jameson suggests, Derrida necessarily periodizes a form of Marx’s influence in *Specters of Marx*, which in one sense is perceived to have come to an end. The question, Jameson suggests, then becomes “What does it mean to affirm this?” (29). While Wani’s comments echo Will’s, thereby underscoring the *The Line of Beauty*’s relationship with its

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<sup>33</sup> In her analysis of the language of finance and disease in literature, Nicky Marsh has argued that “discourses of HIV/AIDS,” functioned as “a metaphor for financial bust” which characterised the burgeoning neoliberalism of the 1980s (i.e. Black Monday) and in the particular context of gay sex, also highlight the “tensions within the neo-liberal agenda” (306). While economic liberalism might have been cast as a virtue in the mid-1980s, social liberalism was not.

predecessor *The Swimming-Pool Library*: his comments can only be made with the benefit of hindsight that comes with the passage of time on the part of the author.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that English heritage is a fundamental form of memory deployed in *The Line of Beauty*'s representation of the 1980s. As heritage becomes a prominent political tool, it works to include and exclude individuals from England's national story. Heritage lurks in and haunts the textual present, emerging in stray and supplementary details and settings. Those who cannot belong are cast aside. The past materialises in *The Line of Beauty* as a spectre, manifesting as an inheritance of the present and in many ways an unwanted one. Key to *The Line of Beauty* are its re-visions of the facades and veneers of a world which initially appeared glamorous to, and thus seduced, Nick. Hollinghurst draws on the sinisteress of what is ultimately a surface attraction, like the "ghastly" Zitt paintings, to highlight what the past, as constructed as an English heritage, may afford to those who can and cannot forge a lasting connection to it – and those who can and cannot be assimilated by it.

## Chapter 2: Occulting nostalgia in GB84

It's obviously a very peculiarly British kind of event ... I think that fiction can illuminate fact ... when you say, 'fuck the non-fiction, I'm going to write it as a fiction' then you're at that point immediately of being a bit more honest, in a perverse way.

(David Peace qtd. in Gregorits 82)

As a historical novel, *GB84* poses both a curious challenge and contribution to Britain's collective memory of the 1984-85 miners' strike. In an interview promoting the novel, David Peace proclaims

[at] the end of the day, I'm not satisfied with nostalgia for something that I certainly wish still existed but doesn't. I didn't want the book to offer a sense of redemption, because as a country we haven't got it. And we don't deserve it." (Qtd. in Marqusee)

Prior to the novel's publication in 2004, the twenty-year anniversary of the strike, some appetite for reengaging with this period was displayed which did offer a redemptive sense. In 2000 the popular film *Billy Elliot* was released, laying a feel-good 'success against the odds' story against the increasingly desperate reality of the strike. The following year a re-enactment of the Battle of Orgreave, a clash between strikers and police which shaped the trajectory of the strike and the ways in which the strike was perceived, was organised by artist Jeremy Deller. The re-enactment highlighted, as historian Adam I. P. Smith writes, that "striking miners [...] are figures from another age, speaking another language," and "fighting a battle incomprehensible to most of us" (308). Involving former striking miners who were only too happy to relive "the last time there was any real sense of community, any show of fight and strength and dignity", the re-enactment demonstrated the fundamental shift the strike's defeat catalysed in Britain: the end of collective movement and solidarity which lay unquestionably at the core of a community and its identity (qtd. in Smith 308)<sup>34</sup>.

My reading of *GB84* takes its lead from Peace's comments on his intentions for the novel and the Britain he seeks to represent with it. In this statement, Peace implies that nostalgia implicitly offers a sense of national redemption. He echoes critics who see nostalgia as a "structure of relation to the past" that only offers a "regressive" engagement with this past – simplifying and, crucially, romanticising it (Bal xi). Yet to reconstruct the intricacies of the

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<sup>34</sup> As described by an unnamed participant of the re-enactment, a driver for the National Coal Board during the strike.

miners' strike in *GB84*, a part of recent history which the novel's readers will be somewhat familiar with, Peace adapts forms of popular culture that tend to be read as and used in "regressive", escapist and romanticising contexts, namely pop music. In this chapter, I argue that while *GB84* dismantles the nostalgic cultural forms that were so prominent in the 1980s (and continue to be so today), thereby denying its readers the 'feel-good' affects these forms tend to produce, the novel is also dependent upon these forms. To do this, recognising the overwhelming level of detail and complexity that *GB84*'s readers must contend with, I limit myself to examining two formal aspects of the novel which govern the reader's experience of it: the novel's five-part structure, and its six narrative perspectives, and closely read textual moments which illuminate the strike's historical, socio- and geo-political contexts as they mingle with nostalgia discourses I identify.

As *GB84* culminates in a vision of an apocalyptic Britain at the moment the strike is defeated, it is impossible for someone to be left with "a sense of redemption" after reading it. The novel is a hostile text. Single word lines and unfinished sentences are as commonplace in *GB84* as recourses to experiences of beauty are in Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*. Where Hollinghurst offers an (on the surface at least) aesthetically pleasing vision of 1980s Tory London, Peace does the opposite in his portrayal of strike-riven Yorkshire. Andy Beckett, reviewing *GB84* for *London Review of Books*, describes the experience of reading the "attritional, repetitive routine of the strike" as "draining". Similarly *The Telegraph*'s Sukhdev Sandhu suggests that the novel "stretches the very limits of readability", with every sentence "like a jab between the eyes". It cannot be overemphasised that *GB84* is not a simple or forgiving read – but nor does it aspire to be. The novel aims to produce a "top to bottom, left to right" reconstruction of the miners' strike from the first day to its last (Peace qtd. in Hart, 566). Part of the novel's task is to force the reader to understand and experience the sacrifices made by the miners; the frustrations and stresses that the monotony endemic to a long-term strike can produce. It does this in order to address what Peace sees as Britain's deficient memory of the strike, which he believes prevents young people from remembering it or, crucially, understanding its significance to Britain (Brooker, "Orgreave Revisited" 40).<sup>35</sup> Drawing on a wide range of resources in order to be as close to the 'truth' of what happened as possible, a (fictional) crime narrative is woven into the strike narrative, conveying both the strike's magnitude and its lingering, haunting relevance to present day Britain.

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<sup>35</sup> While we might think of the 2000 film *Billy Elliot* as potentially alleviating these concerns, Peace is "dubious" of the film. However, he does admire "anything that makes people aware of the strike" (qtd. in Brooker "Orgreave Revisited", 40).

Such is the overwhelming relentlessness of the level of detail invoked, the novel often obscures its own contents, leading to misreadings even by the experts. In his review for *The Guardian*, for example, Terry Eagleton states that “running through the book is an unbroken interior monologue by a striking miner”. There are two alternating striking miner monologues which run through the novel. Katy Shaw, author of the first major critical accounts of David Peace’s work, refers to miner “Peter’s young daughter” as the creator of the scrapbook *True History of the Great Strike for Jobs*. The creator of the scrapbook is in fact Peter’s wife, Mary, not his “little girl” (*Texts and Contexts* 83; *GB84* 330).<sup>36</sup> In seeking to inform its readers of the realities of the strike, *GB84* suggests, perhaps in spite of itself, the near-impossible task of grappling with the strike in its entirety.

### **An Occult History: *GB84* and the strike today**

The act of occulting, according to the *OED*, is to “hide, conceal; to cut off from view by interposing something”. The *OED* defines the state of *being* occult may be both “not disclosed or divulged, secret; ... communicated only to the initiated” or even “not apprehensible”. Initial critical interest in *GB84* has largely addressed how the novel’s desire to revise collective memory of the strike creates an “occult history” of it. Joseph Brooker and Matthew Hart, for example, respectively emphasise the novel’s role as “a belated version of the true history” or “a revisionist history” of the strike (“Orgreave Revisited” 41; “The Third English Civil War” 583). The miners’ strike, after all, occupies an uncomfortable place in Britain’s collective memory, in that it represents the end of a way of life, which suggests that its relevance to present day life is perhaps not immediately clear. At its core, as Seumas Milne writes, the strike was

a last ditch fight to defend jobs, mining communities and the NUM itself against a government prepared to bring into play unlimited resources and its entire panoply of coercive powers as and where necessary to break the union and its backbone of support. It was also a challenge to the ‘logic of capital’, to the savage, job-devouring ‘restructuring’ of industry on the basis of narrow profit-and-loss criteria, rather than broader social and economic costs. (18)

In the years that have followed the strike, this is not how it has generally been remembered. As Owen Jones observes, for those who grew up after the strike its meaning can be particularly

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<sup>36</sup> I point to these errors not to nitpick but rather to emphasise that, even for the most careful readers, *GB84* presents a complex challenge.

difficult to comprehend, so embedded as its effects are in unconscious everyday experience (the neo-liberal economic order, a weak trade union presence in Britain, an aversion to acknowledging the role of class in politics) (49).<sup>37</sup> As Milne notes, the strike represented different things to the active participants than those involved from afar. To the “Tories, most of the media and for the Labour and TUC [Trade Union Council] leaders who left the NUM to fight alone”, the strike signified “a regrettable saga of picket line violence, undemocratic manoeuvring, ranting obscurantist dogmatism and inevitable defeat”. For the strike’s frontline participants, the miners and their supporters, the strike was a “principled – even heroic – stand”; one of the only proper confrontations with the Thatcher administration’s determined dismantling of the consensus politics and policies that largely characterised the first three decades of post-World War II Britain (21). The strike’s defeat in March 1985, when the NUM voted to return to work and thus end the 53-week strike, may therefore be seen as the major turning point in recent British history. It marked the moment at which Britain decisively shifted from a collective, consensus-based society to one which emphasised the virtues of individualism, where profit margins took priority over the wellbeing of communities.

To Thatcher and her government the strike was, in then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry Norman Tebbit’s words, a “war on democracy” (qtd. in Milne xiii). Seizing on the Nottinghamshire NUM branch’s refusal to take part in the strike (it instead demanded a national ballot, and when this was not forthcoming, continued to operate the Nottinghamshire mines), the government exploited the divisions within the mining communities and turned parts of Britain into a police state. While the Yorkshire and Welsh miners’ fight to save their pits and therefore their jobs and communities originally garnered some sympathy from the British public, as the strike wore on this receded into apathy and opposition to the miners.<sup>38</sup> This can be linked to the way the strike was reported in the media. During the strike, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously labelled the striking miners “the enemy within”.<sup>39</sup> The epithet was used as a front page headline by *The Daily Mirror*, a Labour Party-supporting national paper owned by Robert Maxwell, a ‘self-made’ businessman and Thatcher supporter with dubious links to the

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<sup>37</sup> Owen Jones’ *Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class* is a useful, lucid examination of the reluctance to acknowledge the presence and of the working class and class politics in British politics. A legacy of Thatcherism and the miners’ strike in particular, the lack of diminished working class presence played a crucial part of Tony Blair’s reorientation and reimagining of the Labour Party.

<sup>38</sup> Originally from West Yorkshire himself, Peace comments that perceptions of the strike “depended where you were. In the North, where we were, obviously there was an inherent, almost innate sympathy for the miners. It kind of went away a little bit, as the strike dragged on” (qtd. in Gregorits 85-6).

<sup>39</sup> This label has been reclaimed by the former miners and their supporters, as suggested by Owen Gower’s 2014 documentary of the strike *Still the Enemy Within*.

Soviet Union (Milne 225).<sup>40</sup> Thus, the strike has largely been portrayed, and has therefore been perceived, in general terms as an impediment to ‘progress’ as the government’s attempts to reform (i.e. liberalise) the British economy, as an attack on civil institutions such as the police, and therefore undemocratic and an affront to Britain as a whole. In a similar vein, video footage from the Battle of Orgreave, a key clash between strikers and police, was doctored to show the miners as the aggravators of the day – when in fact it was the police who made the first charge (Milne 365).

*GB84* is trained on these key experiences of the strike. The media in the context of the collective notion of the nation, as Benedict Anderson reminds us, conjoins “fraternity, power and time meaningfully together” (Anderson 36). Early in the strike, the police and media are suggestively cohered as a single entity in an oppositional relationship to the miners: the Establishment against the miners. This is made clear early in *GB84*, as miner Martin recounts sharing a soup flask with the police on the picket line: “Not that they’d put that on television or in papers” (10). But it is the Battle of Orgreave in which this relationship is confirmed, as the miner realises (as Britain is hence led to believe that the miners were the aggressors) that “[t]he TV had lied again. They had cut the film. They had stitched it back together. Stitched the Union up with it” (*GB84* 138). Left with no effective way to respond to the media, the closest tool the miners have to constructing their own counter-narratives to that which the media doggedly perpetuated is in the form of scrapbooks like *True History of Great Strike for Jobs*, which Peter’s wife Mary determinedly makes, in order to document and eventually counter the “Tory bloody lies” perpetuated in the clippings she collates (350). But while such actions have the potential long term to demonstrate the “lies” as told in their present moment, they also highlight the increasing powerlessness of the miners and their communities in the strike. Images of the miners as the violent aggravators have endured in collective awareness of the strike. They provide an account for the violence of the strike, while at the same time occulting the fact that the British army was deployed in order to subdue and overpower the miners, that the police led the charge at Orgreave, and that there was a concerted agenda in the national media to support the government in the strike.

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<sup>40</sup> See chapter five ‘All Maxwell’s Men’ of Milne’s *The Enemy Within* for more on the relationship between Margaret Thatcher and Robert Maxwell (215-254).



## Structures of Relation I: Paratext

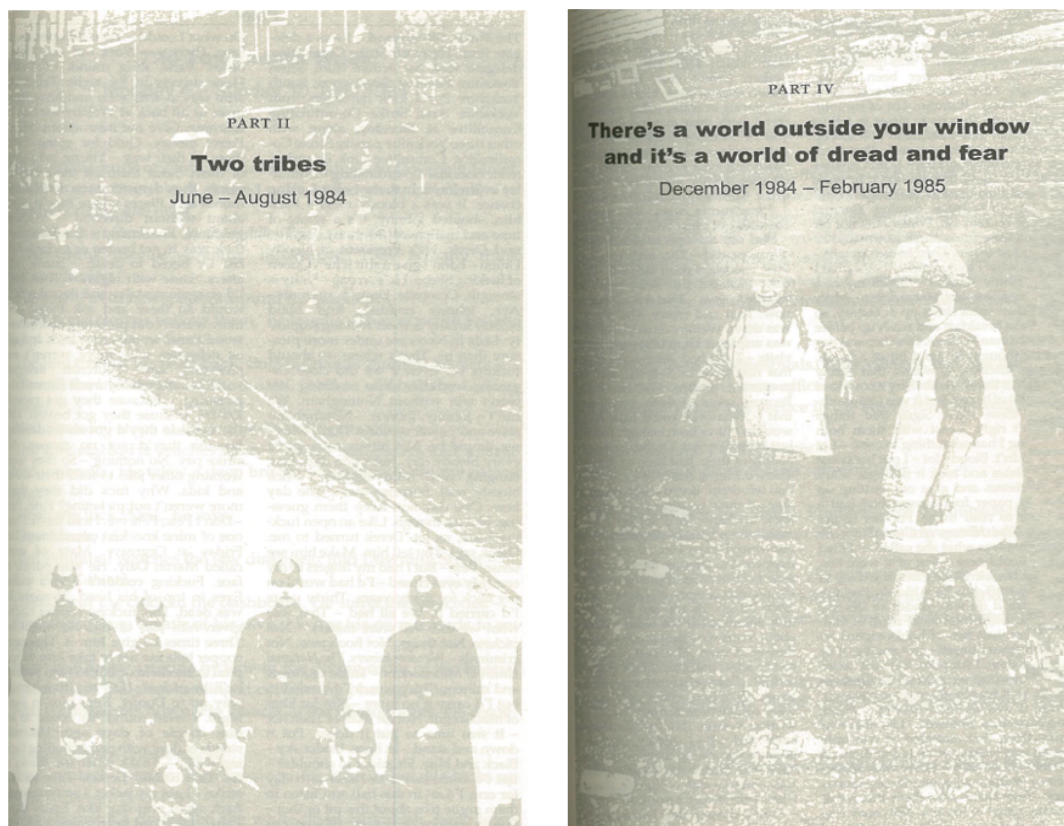


Figure 1: Images used to introduce sections of *GB84*

The paratextual elements of *GB84* are vital to the novel's rendering of the strike, as they set up how it is perceived in Britain's collective memory. It is in recognition of these elisions and gaps in collective awareness of the strike that *GB84* declares itself as “a fiction in a novel based upon a fact” (Author's Note). This is reiterated at the end of the novel, with the statement “This novel is a fiction, based on a fact” preceding a detailed ‘Sources and Acknowledgements’ list which includes reference books and music (464). In the Author's Note, Peace describes the “persons appearing as well-known personalities under their own names” from the strike as “appearing ... often in occult circumstance”.

The epigraph which follows this note, the final three lines of Scottish poet Edwin Muir's ‘The Labyrinth’ provides a hint of the dis- and re-orientation that the reader will experience in reading the novel: “Oh these deceits are strong almost as life. / Last night I dreamt I was in the labyrinth, / And woke far on. I did not know the place.” (Muir qtd. in *GB84* n.p.). These lines direct the reader towards considerations of the representation of space and spatial dislocation in the novel; *GB84*'s labyrinthine networks of motorways, county borders, government spies and

NUM branches which cumulatively produce a Britain most strange to its reader. They suggest Britain is a place the reader perhaps “did not know” – despite the very strong likelihood that Peace’s readership will be British, or someone familiar with Britain and its recent political history. But then this is the novel’s aim, to subvert the received narrative of the strike as it has endured in post-2000 Britain. Posing the Muir poem as an epigraph sets the thematic context of *GB84* in terms of the excavation work that the reader must undertake as they read the novel in order to make sense of its engagement with Britain’s collective memory. Thus, as Dougal McNeill observes, *GB84* “generates interrogative readers” who are “forced into the questioning ... pose systematically repressed in so much contemporary culture” (*Forecasts of the Past* 82). The reader thinks that they know Britain, but the reality is that they do not. Yet ascertaining this is not a simple task. While *GB84* offers sources for the interested reader to discover more about the strike, it nevertheless requires a certain level of pre-existent knowledge on the part of its readers, particularly in terms of Britain’s geo-politics and socio-political history, the histories of tension between the north and the south, the class conflicts that are so embedded in British identity. This is knowledge that, should the reader not possess it, renders aspects of the novel inscrutable.

It is worth, for a moment here, recalling nostalgia’s intimate connection to geography, and its associated capacity to distort relationships with notions of place. Svetlana Boym notes that nostalgia, originally understood as a sickness, is a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii-xiv). She writes that much of nostalgia’s appeal and power resides in its being

the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many power ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. (xvi)

Yet the emotional associations of nostalgia do not have to be negative or a replacement for critical thinking. As Mieke Bal points out, “nostalgic discourse can take on all the different values any discursive mode can take on, depending on context and use”. Nostalgia, then, “is only a structure of relation to the past, not false or inauthentic in essence”. When “critically tempered and historically informed”, nostalgic discourses have the potential to be productive memory forms (xi). The homeland in *GB84*’s Yorkshire, which Peace often emphasises as possessing an intrinsic sense of “apartness”. He refers to the region as “historically ... the place of the defeated, subjugated and ultimately neglected people of England” (qtd. in “An Interview with David Peace” 562). Yorkshire’s apartness is immediately foregrounded as fractures and ruptures along regional lines are quickly established in *GB84*. As Martin Colebrook observes, fracturing

and “fragmentation” of the nation is at the heart of the novel (42). This is suggested in its representation of the UK government’s early strategic isolation of Nottinghamshire, “*An entire county sealed off*”, as the police tried to block pickets from across Britain preventing Nottinghamshire miners continuing to work in spite of the strike:

All roads in and out of Mansfield and Nottinghamshire blocked with checkpoints; the motorway down to a single lane in each direction; tracker dogs in every field; helicopters and spotter planes overhead; three thousand police deployed –

Every taxi and coach firm in Yorkshire and Derbyshire told not to accept fares from miners or face immediate arrest; every taxi and coach stopped just to make sure; every private car and van –

The Dartford Tunnel closed. The borders with Scotland and Wales.

(18-19, original emphasis)

Every possible access point to Nottinghamshire, be it from the county’s northern (Scotland, Durham, Yorkshire, Lancashire), south (Kent, via the Dartford Tunnel, Leicestershire), eastern (Lincolnshire) or western (Wales, Derbyshire) mining counterparts is blocked off. While Yorkshire is the main setting for the majority of the novel, the entirety of Britain is evoked in this relatively brief discursive space, radiating out from Nottinghamshire which is here the central location of contention. As is characteristic in *GB84*’s style, in this excerpt the prose is gradually pared back. The first open-ended run-on sentences suggest and foreshadow the gradual, creeping control exerted by the government. The sentence fragments which bluntly conclude this description of the blockading of Nottinghamshire impose a sense of finality. The rhetorical force of passages such as this emphasises the spatial dislocation that the British government’s response to the strike depended on in order to break the strike.

Reading *GB84* offers the reader a sense that, in spite of the novel’s 465 pages, it gestures at more than can be contained between the covers. Deciphering the novel involves a constant oscillation on the reader’s part between different sections of the book, from the paratexts to its narrative to its sources. What separates these is not always clear. ‘The Argument’, for instance, a short passage, is placed in the gap between *GB84*’s paratexts and narrative discourse. Prefacing Part I and page 1, yet clearly readable as part of *GB84*’s narrative, ‘The Argument’ takes place on “Friday, January 13, 1984 –” and shows an unnamed woman informing an unnamed man that the strike will begin “Early March ... South Yorkshire” (n.p.). In lacking a page number (as is the case of the author’s note and the Edwin Muir epigraph), ‘The Argument’ cannot be fully

considered a part of the narrative discourse. It hovers on the periphery, simultaneously delaying the narrative's beginning, yet at the same time hinting that it itself is part of the narrative. It is somewhere between an introduction, a preface and an epigraph.<sup>41</sup>

Ascertaining the identities of these figures is only possible after the reader has actually read *GB84* itself. A scene closely mirroring 'The Argument' takes place close to the end of the novel when Neil Fontaine encounters Diane Morris at the end of the strike. Both scenes are illuminated by "Harsh service station light", the phrase "the stink still here" appears at the end of both passages (n.p.; 457-58). The scenes also subtly differ. In 'The Argument' "She puts a cigarette to her lips, a lighter to her cigarette ... She inhales, her eyes close. She exhales, her eyes open". The second scene sees "Diane Morris" putting "the cigarette to her lips, a lighter to her cigarette ... Diane inhales, her eyes closed. Diane exhales, her eyes open" (n.p.; 457). In 'The Argument' the unnamed Diane figure "puts an envelope on the table". The second scene shows Diane picking an envelope up off the table (n.p.; 457). In 'The Argument' an unnamed man "waits"; in the second scene "Neil Fontaine waits" (n.p.; 457).

Perhaps most crucially for reading *GB84*, however, is the repetition of the word "power", the word which concludes 'The Argument' and introduces the second scene. Its connotations, however, shift between the two, first linked with "electricity", the first word of The Argument, and then with "loss", the final word of the second passage, and the signal that the strike has finally been defeated. The occulting of the identities of these figures, who become so important in the novel later on, as well as the hidden meanings of key terms, reminds the reader of the extent to which those directly affected by the strike (the miners) are, at this particular juncture, oblivious to the scale of the government machinations and the identities of those who drove it. Argument is what ultimately underpins and drives *GB84*'s narrative, the differences of views of the mining industry and Britain that the miners and the government hold, and the opposing views of the strike which emerge as the strike continues: to scab or not to scab, to vow to fight or to give up. Yet the imperceptible turns that the nature of the argument takes, which ultimately impacts upon the miners the most, is embedded in the turning of these words. Power initially manifests as control over electricity, a reference to the blackouts caused by the strikes of the 1970s, yet is finally produced as pertaining to the victors of the strike.

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<sup>41</sup> I draw here on Gérard Genette's remarks on the positioning and role of epigraphs and prefaces. He suggests that epigraphs are at "the *edge* of the work, generally closest to the text" and serve to "mark ... the tenor of a piece of writing" (144; 160). 'Preface', meanwhile, may "designate every type of introductory ... text", which does not need to be specifically labelled as such, and generally consists of "a discourse produced on the subject of the text that follows" (162-3). 'The Argument' satisfies both of these.

While we can read ‘The Argument’ purely in terms of its refraction and repetition within *GB84* alone, if we consider the novel in its broader literary contexts and socio-political contexts, the unnamed female in ‘The Argument’ may also be read as a Margaret Thatcher figure. We can also consider ‘The Argument’ against its development in Peace’s later novels *The Damned United* (2006) and *Red or Dead* (2013), which begin with ‘The Argument II’ and ‘The Argument III’ respectively. These novels form what Peace calls an ‘inverse trilogy’, with *GB84* both beginning it as the first novel published, (‘The Argument’) and also posed as the end of it, as “the long march of labour halted” in 1985 (462).<sup>42</sup> With each novel set in England’s north (Yorkshire and Liverpool), the decline of consensus Britain is inversely traced, as it begins with Liverpool Football Club manager Bill Shankly’s vision of football as “a form of socialism” for his Liverpool teams in 1959 and concluding with, in 1985, the defeated miners’ strike (*Red or Dead* 576). *The Damned United* begins with ‘The Argument II’, which presents an unnamed collective against an unnamed female:

In her shadow time. / On our terraces, in our cages, from Purgatorio, we watch, / With our wings that cannot fly, our tongues that cannot speak: / ‘*Destroy her politics! Destroy her culture! Destroy her!*’ / But our wings are thick with tar, tongues heavy with her coin, / On our broken backs, our broken hearts, she’ll dine again tonight. / In her shadow place –”  
(*The Damned United* n.p., original emphasis)

Refrains and themes from each ‘Argument’ echo and ebb between the novels. “*Electricity*” becomes “*power*” in *GB84*, a subtle repetition and refraction of imagery which drove the strike - whoever ultimately had control over electricity could assert power (original italics). In *The Damned United* the imagery of ‘power’ foregrounded in *GB84*’s ‘The Argument’ is recalled by ‘The Argument II’ in its first two words: “Repetition. Repetition –” (n.p.). In *Red or Dead*, this is again reiterated: “Repetition. Repetition. Repetition” (n.p.). *GB84* can be read as part of a broader textual relationship, pushing the reader outside of the text and pulling them back in.

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<sup>42</sup> A parallel narrative may also be read in the trilogy in the recession of football to politics as the dominant narrative concern, with socialism mostly manifesting as part of Bill Shankly’s characterisation, although his politics do become more overt towards the end of the novel, as shown through his conversations with Harold Wilson (see ‘Chapter 88. The Religion of My Time’, pp. 699-707). Politics, meanwhile, is equally as endemic to *The Damned United* as football, as Brian Clough attempts to assert control over the Leeds United team. The novel concludes by integrating national politics and football in ‘The Argument II, cont.’: “In May 1979 / Margaret Hilda Thatcher and the Conservative Party won / the General Election, / and Brian Howard Clough and Nottingham Forest won / the European Cup” (*The Damned United* n.p.). Football becomes a peripheral concern in *GB84*, figuring as an occasional comment on results and linking them to the strike: “Best news of week was [Sheffield] Wednesday beating Forest three-fucking-one – Take that, you scabby fucking bastards, I thought” (*GB84* 210).

## Structures of Relation II: Narrative

*GB84* is divided into five sections and narrated from seven narrative perspectives: two striking miners, Martin Daly and Peter Cox; right wing paramilitary figure and driver for Thatcher adviser Stephen Sweet (modelled on actual Thatcher adviser during the strike David Hart), Neil Fontaine; paramilitary figure David Johnson (also known as ‘the mechanic’); NUM chief executive Terry Winter (modelled on the NUM’s chief executive Roger Windsor) and government spy Malcolm Morris. Literalising Peace’s aim to represent the strike from left to right (mirrored by the narrative arc, which begins in what are arguably left-wing perspectives, from the pre-strike Britain of Martin Daly and ‘Terry Winters’ perspectives, and concluding with Neil Fontaine and Martin’s visions of an apocalyptic right wing post-strike Britain in the thrall of Thatcher’s realised neoliberal vision), these narratives reflect and refract the events of the strike as they are experienced by these characters. *GB84* takes time and place as its primary organising principles, as illuminated by Martin Daly and Peter Cox’s narratives, which are scaffolded by day numbers and specific locations respectively.

But while on the surface *GB84* appears tightly structured in this way, as with the novel’s paratextual material there are moments where the strike pushes through the material constraints that the fact of novelistic reconstruction imposes upon it, namely the constraints of the page itself. This is exemplified by Peter and Martin’s narratives, which are organised into justified-aligned, smaller-type two-column single page monologues, mimicking the column inches of the tabloid press which so denounced the miners. These narratives precede the beginning of each week of the strike, as shown in Figure 2 overleaf, a typical spread at the beginning of a week of the strike, in this case the thirty-sixth, or the second week of November.



pint in Hotel with a few of lads. I crack jokes about Gadhafi with a couple of lads. I give a lift up Hardwick Farm to this one lad. Then I go back to my blanket on bedroom floor in middle of afternoon and I lie there and I think, Fuck this for a game of soldiers. I get back up from blanket on bedroom floor. I go down stairs and out to shed. I get my barrow and get my shovel. I get my riddle and get some bags. I stick them in back of car and drive down to village. I go back on spoil and back to work. I dig and I sieve. I dig and I sieve. I watch my hands turn red and night come down – I watch pit and pit watches me – I work near kids and I work near mothers. I see folk I know and folk I don't. I count blokes on their tod and blokes in teams. I fill one big bag and I fill another. I put first bag in barrow and push barrow to boot. I put bag in boot and push barrow back for second. I put second bag in barrow and push barrow back towards where car is – Fuck. Bloody security man is stood there, waiting for us – He says, Bloody going with that? Taking it home, I say. You're bloody not, he says. That's theft, that is – How's it theft? I ask him. I dug it. It's fucking mine – Is it fuck, he says. You want to dig coal, go back to work, you lazy bastard – I look at him. I look at bag. Took me four fucking hour, I say. That did – Fucking waste of time, then, he says. Takes this Stanley knife out of his little uniform – I'll give you half of what I get for it, I say. I swear to you – Fuck off, he says. That hard up, I'd just fucking take it off you, wouldn't I? You might fucking try, I tell him. But that'd be all you'd fucking do – He steps towards us. Listen twat, he says. I could have thee for theft and trespass – I look at him. I nod. You could do, I say. Aye – But I'm not fucking going to, am I? he says. Tell you why, shall I? Go on, I say. Let's hear you, then – Because I work twelve hour a day out here for a paid-fifty an hour, that's why – I nod again. Say nothing this time. Just listen – So tip that bag out that barrow, he says. And we'll say no more about one n boot – Day 245. Pete opens envelope. Pete looks at paper. Pete says, Back to Rodsworth. Everybody nods again.

I'm down to drive. Not many can let Takes mine a few turns to start. No sign of Gary or Tim this week – Except on top of spoil. Don't blame them – Mas them, though. Their company – Last Keith's back. Back with his new test-Police State took them out, he laughs. Welfare State put them back in – Fucking country, says other lad in with us. Bloody brilliant – Park down in Adwick village. March up to pit. End rest of Thurocroft lads. Look out for us – Push and shove. Shove and shout. Shout and hurl abuse at scabs. Do my fucking picket – Feel like a bloody robot sometimes, though. I walk back ahead of Keith. Jacket over my head. Pissing it down it is now so I start to run – Not looking where I'm going, am I? Run straight into this copper – leg. Nearly knock him for six. He says something to us. I don't hear what it is. I just keep going. I get back to car. I get in. I shut door. I look up. I see him coming over to car. That copper. I see his gob opening and shutting like a fucking fish, but I can't hear him – Not news he's got his fucking truncheon out. He shatters my bloody windscreen. His mates starting on even other car. Every other fucking car – Bang. Bang. Bang. Smash. Smash. Smash – Every fucking windscreen. Just sat here covered in glass, me – Shards in my hair. Cuts all over my face – Feels like I've been stung by a load of fucking bees. I don't want to bloody cry, like – Not in front of all lads. But I don't know what else to fucking do – Day 246. I miss her. Mas her all time – Day 247. Letter on hall floor's not from her. Never is – It's from him again. Personal touch this time – Dear Mr Daly, How much would you like for your soul? That's only thing you like left, we have heard. No wife. No kids. Nothing left now. We want to help you avoid aggro and intimidation. So here is a little tear-off slip and a first-class frequent return envelope. Please enclose your fucking soul. Remember, no stamp needed – Bribes, blackmail and browbeating. That's what our leader said – God King Arthur. He was fucking right and all, our Arthur – Right as bloody usual. Love him or hate him, he's always

## The Thirty-sixth Week

Monday 5 – Sunday 11 November 1984

Terry Winters raged. Terry Winters roared – 'That bastard has betrayed me for the last time,' he ranted. 'The very last time.'

Diane ran a bath for Terry. Diane dabbed warm water on Terry's arms and legs. His neck and face. She soothed his skin and bones. His brow. His conscience –

'Think about the money,' said Diane. 'You'd be bankrupt already without me,' said Terry again. 'They need me.'

'They need you,' agreed Diane. 'But they don't deserve you.'

The Mechanic stands in the phone box. He takes a breath. He dials her number –

It rings once. She picks it up. She says, 'David?' 'Mum,' says the Mechanic. 'It's me.'

'Oh, love, where are you? Where have you been? Been worried sick –'

'I can't tell you,' says the Mechanic. 'I can't stay on here long, either –'

'Picture's on front of every paper. Every news. Every time I switch it on –'

'I know, I know –'

'But they've not said your name,' she says. 'Haven't been here, either. I –'

'They won't.'

'I don't understand,' she says. 'Why won't they?'

'Because they want me dead, Mum. That's why.'

Poor woman doesn't speak for a moment. Then she asks him straight. She says, 'Did you do it, love? Did you kill that policeman, David?'

'Yes,' says the Mechanic. 'I did.'

'Then you'd best be off then,' she says and hangs up.

Terry Winters stayed under the sheets until the children had left for school. Theresa for work. No risk of silences on the stairs. Coldness over the cornflakes. Hysterics in the hall. Terry Winters would have stayed in bed all day –

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Figure 2: Pages 312-313 of GB84

By preceding the labelling of the week the miners' narratives are keyed to, the novel ensures that the events of the strike are told first and foremost from the perspective of the miners affected by the strike as they occur. *GB84* thereby gives primacy to the miner's voices over the instruments which contributed to the strike's defeat, namely the government and the NUM. These narratives discreetly resist being confined by the same temporal and physical boundaries that the novel's internal structures otherwise impose, however.

The narrative sections of the miners rarely conclude with full sentences. Nor are they continued onto the following page, but instead are picked up several pages later as the subsequent week of the strike begins: "They're telling us to stay put. Let Nottingham ... make up their own minds"; "Leon Brittan promising all police in world to make sure anybody who wants to ... work can"; "You're blaming wrong bloke. Blind ... she shouts." (2-10; 10-20; 20-32) The miners' narratives refuse to be confined by the physical parameters imposed by the page. They simultaneously appear to conform to the novel's established chronological ordering of events (day by day, week by week), yet they also imply that they manifest beyond or in spite of this ordering. This arrangement offers the miners a certain organising power in the wider context of the novel. As the miners' narratives are the only consistently linear ones in the novel, they remind the reader where in the strike they are situated in terms of its events, giving a consistent,

practical context to the date and week number on the following page. The fragmentary nature of the other narratives render them unhelpful to the reader in this regard, as illuminated by the double page spread of Figure 1. The two Terry Winters narratives represented, for instance, show him with his mistress Diane and then in his family home. Variations on these scenes are repeated several times throughout the novel. While appropriate in terms of progressing Terry Winters' individual story of the strike, as a possible leaker of information to his double agent lover, they are unhelpful for tracking the trajectory of the strike on the picket line where the strike action takes place. Likewise, the italicised fragment that is David Johnson's (the Mechanic) narrative is specific to the development of his story as a government agent infiltrating the picket lines. While the infiltration of picket lines by government agents is a fact of the strike that *GB84* is predicated on, what is less certain are the precise movements and identities of these figures. While these figures must be represented in the novel in order to fulfil *GB84*'s task of providing a complete reconstruction of the strike, and illuminating aspects of the strike hitherto obscured to collective memory, they must also hover between the precise and the imprecise as they are represented as relating to moments of the strike. These figures are part of the fiction that illuminates the fact that drives *GB84*, reminding the reader of the shadowy, haunting presence of these figures in the wider context of the strike, but necessarily resist being definitively set in the story. These features of fragmentary narratives provide an experience of disjointed chaos, occulting as much as they reveal about the strike.

Peace's decision to arrange the narratives in this way presents some interpretive problems. If part of *GB84*'s task is to produce readers sympathetic to the miners' plight, is the arrangement of their narratives conducive to this? Mary McGlynn, for example, warns that a "less congenial interpretation" of the arrangement of the miners' narratives in relation to the others could result in further marginalising "already marginalised characters" (327). By the time the reader reaches the next miner narrative, it is likely that they must turn back to the previous one so as to establish what they are reading. The experience of reading about the strike parallels that of living through the strike by reflecting the creeping ways in which the right-wing opposition to the strike gradually infiltrated the strikers' lives. The fact that the miner's narratives are consistently interrupted by the more powerful figures of the strike that the other narrative perspectives represent highlights the diminishing strength of the strikers as they edge closer to end of the strike and their defeat. This should not be interpreted, however, as a suggestion that Peace deliberately marginalises the miners. Such a view would seriously misread where Peace's sympathies lie, and indeed the aim of *GB84* to revise the place of the strike in Britain's collective memory. However, Peace's reconstruction of the strike is necessarily bound to the indisputable



facts of the strike, such as its defeat. As Brooker writes, “Peace may be reimagining history, but he is not seeking magically to alter its outcome” (*Orgreave Revisited* 41). What he can and does offer instead is a renegotiation of the power that is attached to who sets the agenda of telling the story of the strike and thereby conditioning how the events may be interpreted, which during the strike fell in the hands of the media. In the case of *GB84*, however, this power lies with the miners.

Attention to Peace’s experimentation with presenting the past from multiple narrative viewpoints should not be construed as questioning *GB84*’s status as historical fiction or its intervention in collective memory. Nevertheless, this aspect of the novel has led to some interpretations of it as an example of historiographic metafiction. Katy Shaw describes the novel as a “postmodern form of historiographic metafiction”, proposing that the multiple narratives (as visually represented on the pages, see Figure 2) are evidence for a “metafictional collapse” into polyphony; a Bakhtinian reflection on “thoughts about thought, experiences of experiences and words about words” (*Texts and Contexts* 86). Drawing on Shaw, McGlynn suggests that the novel’s “engagement with the conventions of postmodernism”, via its typographical experimentation and overlaying section titles with photographs (as in Figure 1), make it a form of historiographic metafiction (326). Yet readings of *GB84* that account for the novel only in the terms of the postmodernism-based genre’s suspicion of the truth claims or knowledge that can be offered by a narrative sit uncomfortably with the work that the novel does. While these features suggest an eschewal of the narrative linearity and cohesion which we typically expect from a historical novel, they work to suggest new and appropriate ways of communicating knowledge of the strike to a wider audience. A reading of *GB84* that sees it simply as a “polymorphous mass” of voices undermines the knowledge-building work that the novel does, as well as its desire to revise a particular narrative which underscores a key aspect of contemporary Britain’s collective memory (*Texts and Contexts* 87). Central to the novel, after all, is its desire to address the deficient public knowledge of the 1984-85 miners’ strike, but to do so in a way which does not oversimplify the realities of the strike. This can only be done by the novel taking the possibility of historical knowledge seriously, not by seeking to “problematiz[e] the nature of historical knowledge”, which Linda Hutcheon suggests is the task of historiographic metafiction (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 111). As Hutcheon herself distinguishes,

Historical fiction ... usually incorporates and assimilates these data [i.e. ‘facts’] in order to lend a feeling of verifiability (or an air of dense specificity and particularity) to the fictional world. Historiographic metafiction incorporates, but rarely assimilates such data. More often, the process of *attempting* to assimilate is what is foregrounded. (114)

*GB84* is certainly “dense” in “specificity and particularity”. It does not foreground the process of assimilating “facts”: it simply uses them as appropriate to develop its narratives.

### Structures of Relation III: Nostalgia and pop music

In addition to using seven narrative perspectives, *GB84* carefully tracks the strike’s trajectory in terms of pop culture. The novel, and therefore the strike, is divided into five parts. The first four are roughly the same length, the fifth is noticeably shorter. The first four parts directly reference chart topping pop music released in 1984, situating in the months that they were released and were top of the UK singles chart. Accordingly, Nena’s “Ninety-Nine Red Balloons” covers March to May 1984, Frankie Goes To Hollywood’s “Two Tribes” covers June to August 1985, George Michael/Wham’s “Careless Whisper” covers September to November 1984, and Band Aid’s “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” (represented by the lyrics “There’s a world outside your window and it’s a world of dread and fear”) covers December 1984 to February 1985. Part V, “Terminal, or the Triumph of the Will”, noticeably the shortest section, covers March 1985 to an unspecified end date. Part V deviates from the structural pattern, not only in its open-endedness and length, but also in its reference to the 1935 German propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (released exactly 50 years before the end of the strike) rather than another pop song.<sup>43</sup>

The deployment of specific cultural references in *GB84* can be partly explained by Peace’s obsessive process of researching and writing the novel. This involved a combination of methodically examining all available relevant “factual” materials from and of the period (including local newspapers and conducting interviews with people involved in the strike) and attempting to “place” his own memories of the strike against “what actually happened according to the papers” (Peace qtd. in Hart, 555). While writing the novel from his home in Japan, he “submerged” himself in cultural material from the period:

I think this ‘cultural’ research helps with the detail of the language, which has changed and continues to change dramatically. Most people who have lived abroad for some time comment on the difficulty of understanding jokes, soap operas, and kids’ slang when they do return ‘home’ – ‘at home he feels like a tourist’. Music, books, and film are particularly helpful in bringing back the language of a time and a place, the particular

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<sup>43</sup> “Terminal or Triumph of the Will” instead signals the apocalyptic nature of post-strike England, with Holocaust imagery particularly prominent in order to illuminate the “long march of labour halted”: “And they shave our heads. Send us to the showers – Put us on their trains. Stick us in their pits” (462).

metaphors and references that were commonplace then. I also think the music [...] adds another layer, or depth maybe, to the text. (Qtd. in Hart 555)

Music manifests in several layers in *GB84*; in the structure of *GB84*, introducing each section of the novel, and within the novel's narrative discourse. Each section title signifies the dominant thematic concerns of their respective parts of the narrative. The reader can thus abstract the strike's trajectory even before engaging with the narrative discourse itself: hope for the strike's success, the descent into a pseudo-civil war and surveillance state, the internal hostility to the miners' strike, and the final crushing defeat.

To date, criticism of *GB84* has tacitly acknowledged the presence of pop music in the novel. It scratches the surface in terms of the cultural form's function as adding to historical detail, as opposed to considered the medium's potential as a memory aid in *GB84*, as I seek to do here. McNeill notes that the "overwhelming" presence of song lyrics and titles in the novel "draws attention to a motivating device behind the strike itself [...] the re-composition and reorganisation of capital we now know as 'Thatcherism or neoliberalism'" (*Forecasts of the Past* 83). Matthew Hart observes that part of Peace's "fidelity to ... sociocultural 'fact'" in the novel can be found in his references to "contemporary pop culture" (581). Shaw takes a broad approach to accounting for the presence of music irrespective of genre, arguing that it plays a "decisive role in rewriting the story of the strike" and adds "depth to characterisation [enabling] the reader to access aspects of personality which are revealed unwittingly through musical taste" (*Texts and Contexts* 82).

However, if pop music's presence in *GB84* can potentially serve to "overwhelm" the reading experience, echoing critiques of nostalgia as a dominant structure of relation to the past, then the effects of this are worth considering, especially against Peace's anti-nostalgia sentiments that introduced this chapter. After all, nostalgia tends to be castigated as a particularly regressive way of engaging with the past, even Svetlana Boym admitting that "nostalgia can be divisive" (*Future of Nostalgia* xiii). By explicitly linking ideas of nostalgia to processes of deindustrialisation in a novel as politically-oriented as *GB84*, which makes its judgements on the period it represents unequivocal, it can be easy, as sociologist Tim Strangleman cautions, to invoke a "smokestack nostalgia", or the misty-eyed assumption that things were unequivocally better in industrial times past, and that a representation of such times will demonstrate this (23). To an extent this is implied in other recent representations of the strike; the 2014 film *Pride*'s selling point has been that "like *Billy Elliot* and *The Full Monty*, [it] will make you cheer!" (*Vanity Fair* qtd. *Pride* DVD cover). Yet this is not the effect that nostalgia discourses have in *GB84*.

Pop culture references in the form of pop music offer entry-points into the specific history that *GB84* evokes. These songs suggest an accessible hook into this past to the reader of *GB84* through the readers' pre-existing knowledge of the 1980s' cultural products, as well as the music's generic qualities. The songs are catchy<sup>44</sup>, and have in common the synth-pop sound we tend to associate with 1980s music. A link emerges between the songs which provide a point of entry into the character of the moment of the strike the song is connected to, as it simultaneously distorts the rough reality of the historical moment it is linked with. Thus, while pop music offers a degree of familiarity to *GB84*'s readers, the novel also defamiliarises the songs it draws upon as the form manifests for the miners during the strike. This particularly occurs with "Two Tribes" and "Do They Know It's Christmas?" While pop music is occasionally sought by the miners as a refuge from the tedium of the strike ("bit of music to cheer us up – *Nellie the Elephant*") it rarely provides relief (420, original emphasis). This is wryly commented on by a miner, who having heard Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Two Tribes" on the radio so many times he has recourse to suggest that someone "[o]ught to make it bloody national anthem" (176).<sup>45</sup>

Part IV is the only section title to use lyrics rather than the song's title ("There's a world outside your window / and it's a world of dread and fear", as opposed to "Do They Know It's Christmas?"). This immediately suggests darker undertones to the song than would initially be thought of simply at the mention of the title, and refracts the reader's attention from exteriority to interiority. As maintaining the strike became a question of navigating the internal divisions that manifested amongst the miners as the strike continued, such as lack of money and relationship breakdowns, it becomes a private as well as public struggle.

Miner Peter Cox describes the song playing in mid-January, 1985:

Keith stuck the radio on – Last Christmas. Least it wasn't that fucking Band Aid record. Billy in Hotel had been telling us how that was all a government plot to distract public sympathy away from miners. Make miners look greedy next to little brown babies dying of starvation in Africa. That was how BBC had come to film it. (400)

This ostensibly well-intentioned song, sung by some of the 1980s' most well-known singers (such as Bono and George Michael) becomes a tool to ostracise the miners. Peter's reference to

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<sup>44</sup> "99 Red Balloons", for example, is described by music critic Scott Miller as having "one of the best hooks of the 1980s" (119).

<sup>45</sup> "Two Tribes" was also used as the *I Love 1984* theme song, of the *I Love* television series. The series is much reviled by Peace, although at the time of writing *GB84* he was unaware of its being made ("An Interview with David Peace" 556).

the BBC at the end of this excerpt underscores the role that television and other visual media played in marginalising the miners and the strike. Attention should be paid to the moments that the songs appear in the narrative, however. The timing of the reference to Band Aid here (mid-January) is also prospective. It anticipates (with the benefit of authorial hindsight) the all-encompassing nature that the Live Aid concert of 1985 would have in the cultural sphere, which Mark Fisher describes as “the beginning of a time of the fake consensus that is the cultural expression of Global Capital” (“A world of dread and fear”). As support for and the capacity to maintain the strike wanes, the challenge to capital that the strike originally posed recedes. Resistance to the government eventually becomes absorbed by the monolithic culture that the government represents and enforces, as it brings Yorkshire under its control through finally breaking the strike. Thus, “Two Tribes” and “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” in particular come to metonymically represent the dominant national culture as interchangeable with the government. They work to oppress and marginalise the miners and their struggle, gesturing at the exterior manifestations of the songs beyond their intended purposes as standalone songs.

### **“Different planet. Different world – Different country. Different class”**

Until now I have focused on the more noticeable organising strategies deployed in *GB84*, which draw on the imagined national community in a bid to provide the novel with a form of coherence. *GB84* draws attention to the anaesthetising nature of pop culture, which can be used to distort, numb and override perspectives on and experiences of the present, as was used as a tool against the miners. The question we should now consider is how *GB84* represents the tension between the local and the national cultures. Andreas Huyssen notes that while memory discourses “remain tied to the histories of specific nations and states [...] the political site of memory practices is still national”, one should nevertheless “ask whether and how the trope [of memory discourses] enhances or hinders local memory practices and struggles, or whether and how it may help and hinder at the same time” (16). As a “regional fiction”, *GB84* carefully amends Huyssen’s sentiments in that its engagements with national memory discourses are adapted to attend to local concerns (Colebrook 29). As Shaw points out in her study of representations of the strike, the form of the novel “has the potential to decentre official systems” as it “breaks and reverses hegemonic relationships” (*Mining the Meaning* 144). Through the novel’s points of reference and primary structuring devices, the structure imposed from above is met by a more discreet counterpart from below, as the national is met by Yorkshire-based cultural forms. In other words, the overt structuring of the narrative by pop music of 1984

is met by covert evocations of the music of alternative Northern bands: a structure from above met by that of below. This is initially signalled by the fragmentary, ghostly voices which occasionally interpose the miners' narratives: "*The dead brood under Britain. We whisper. We echo. The emanation of Great Albion*"; "*You have stolen my language. You have stolen my land*" (2; 238).

The menacing, foreboding tone of the novel accelerates as the strike develops, builds and defuses and rebuilds the tensions endemic to those who control the strike, the NUM and the government. This can also be traced back to the northern music Peace lists in his 'Sources and Acknowledgements' list: Liverpool's Frankie Goes to Hollywood (*Welcome to the Pleasuredome*) and The Mighty Wah (*A Word to the Wise Guy*); Bradford's New Model Army (*Small Town England*) and Sheffield's Cabaret Voltaire (*Microphonies*) (464-5). Cabaret Voltaire's *Microphonies* can be detected in the atmosphere of *GB84*: its discomfiting atmospherics (such as in "Spies In The Wires") make it difficult to comprehend the lyrics; similarly, *GB84*'s menacing atmosphere and often short, blunt sentence structures obscure simple interpretive meaning-making for the reader.

New Model Army's 1984 *Small Town England*'s influence is perhaps more overt, such as in the narrative of Neil Fontaine and in specific echoes and refrains throughout the novel. Song titles from the album reverberate throughout the novel; "The Price" and "Vengeance" are frequent single line refrains which conclude individual narratives ("Operation Vengeance", for example, is "imported from Ulster. Updated for Yorkshire." (127)). The single "The Price" from *Small Town England* explicitly closes out the narrative of right wing assistant Neil Fontaine. His narrative concludes with a nod to the single's final lyrics, "am I paying the price now the wasted years are through? / I swear that those eyes cut deeper into me / Than they'll ever cut into you". The conclusion to Neil's narrative is the paying of his own price for his involvement in the strike through his ritualistic suicide in front of his sleeping employer. He attempts to disembowel himself before slitting his own throat with a knife made of "six inches of Sheffield steel", conjuring images of the medieval execution style of hanging, drawing and quartering for one who has committed treason. It is, as Neil thinks as he dies, the price he pays for his involvement in the shadows of the strike – the things he knows and the things he does not (461).

These brief examples indicate the influence of local music deployed by Peace in *GB84*. By tracing the ways in which it is embedded in the narrative discourse, where it occasionally emerges to disrupt and disorientate the text, the presence and influence of music as source further reinforces the truths that *GB84* aspires to impart to collective awareness of the strike.

## Conclusion

*GB84*'s contribution to Britain's collective recall of the miners' strike responds to and defamiliarizes the readers' prior knowledge of the strike as gleaned from other culturally significant sources with ties to nostalgia, pop music and the mass media. It effectively de- and re-familiarises its reader with this vital yet often under-considered aspect of Britain's recent past. Considering the work of memory texts in the broader sense of collective national memory, *GB84* effectively utilised, in spite of its author's reservations, how nostalgia discourses may be used as a structure of relation to the recent past in order to reframe Britain's engagements with and recollections of itself in the 1980s. This chapter addresses the gap in previous criticism through my interest in how Peace's deployment of pop music within *GB84* engages the reader and contributes to the novel as an act of memory. While readers may typically seek out *GB84* for its treatment of the strike alone, my reading of the novel has also attended to other, less obvious aspects of Peace's reconstruction. My aims in this chapter have thus been twofold. First I sought to locate the more deeply embedded memories of the strike that the novel necessarily invokes in order to reconstruct the Great Britain which produced the event of the 1984-85 strike. The miners' strike, after all, took place in an era which predates social media, the power to create and control the narrative lay predominantly in the hands of the media. Accordingly, the capacity to shape an increasingly polarised nation's perspective of itself is weighted towards, and almost exclusively favours, the powerful. *GB84* is a stark contrast to the power and capacity of smartphones today to provide alternative narratives and challenges to how events are characterised by the media, as videos and photographs can be uploaded to social media and circulated instantly by anyone. Secondly, I have traced the textures and depths added through popular and alternative music produced during the strike as they contribute to *GB84*'s representation of the strike. They overtly and covertly play with and distort the reader's awareness of the strike, colouring interpretative possibilities and potentials for *GB84*'s readers.

### Chapter 3

#### Postimperial melancholic nationalism in *Black Swan Green*

Empires come and go. But the imagery of the British Empire seems destined to go on forever. The imperial flag has been hauled down in a hundred different corners of the globe. But it is still flying in the collective unconscious.

(Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, 68)

Reflecting on his discovery of the precise location of the Falklands Islands in an atlas in the early days of the Falklands War, travel writer Jonathan Raban recalls in his memoir, *Coasting*, that the islands “by a funny twist of chance ... occupied precisely the same latitude in their hemisphere as the British Isles did in theirs” (68). This was not the only similarity he found between the sets of islands, however:

More than that, the Falklands stood anchored off the coast of South America very much as Britain stood anchored off the coast of Europe. You only had to look at the atlas to see that the identity of the Falklanders, like that of the British, was bound up in endless aggressive assertions of their differences from the continental giant across the water. ... The Falklanders *were* us, but they were us in looking-glass reverse (68, original emphasis).

Identity is marked by claims to what something is not just as much as what it is. It is in this vein that assertions of ‘us’, ‘them’, and ‘who we are’ have come to define much of Britain’s political discourse in the decades following Margaret Thatcher’s election as prime minister in 1979. The Falklands War is key to this tendency. As historian Kevin Foster notes, it “represents a critical space – physical, mythic and narrative – in the shaping of contemporary Britain” (2). With Foster’s comments in mind, I read David Mitchell’s *Black Swan Green* as a memory text concerned primarily with the Falklands War’s role in generating a “brash, self-confident nationalism” which has become a significant characteristic of British culture since the 1980s (Foster 2). This nationalism manifests distinctly as postimperial melancholia. From *Black Swan Green*’s outset readers are directed towards a story of place as well as person, with the novel centred on unravelling the myths and beliefs which construct and maintain understandings of place. Attention to the mediation of Jason’s everyday experience of adolescence in a period of rapid social change reveals the constants of this existence even as they manifest as change themselves. Jason’s experience in *Black Swan Green* oscillates between local and national concerns, but can be traced to a national narrative of imperialism.



The village of Black Swan Green is an uneasy community of long-term locals and residents of a recent development, Kingfisher Meadows, where Jason and his family live. Yet these once disparate communities find apparently common ground when faced with the presence of the usually transient gypsy population, which may be given a permanent camp site in the village. *Black Swan Green*, thus, is a novel interested in the representations and negotiations of place and space, how one and one's community can be said to belong to this space, and maintain and project their identities as part of it. Integral to these identities and practices are various media and textual forms which produce and reaffirm these identities: namely the national press in the form of tabloids *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, television, and the local newspaper, the *Malvern Gazetteer*. Concerns begin in a local setting and extend outwards to a national and international one, before returning to take root in local identities and local concerns once again.

### A "benign" novel? "Don't be naïve"

Before delving into the details of *Black Swan Green* itself, it is worth noting that my view of the novel as closely engaged with the politics of the Falklands War<sup>46</sup> is not a perspective evinced in initial popular responses to and reviews of the novel. This is perhaps, in part, due to the novel appearing to be, in Christopher Vardy's words, "a deceptively simple *bildungsroman*" (81). Indeed, popular reviews tended to approach *Black Swan Green* as an archetypal *bildungsroman*, connecting the protagonist's coming of age with the conventional tropes of first cigarette and kiss as indicators of Jason's coming of age.<sup>47</sup> The Falklands War only figures in *Guardian* and *The Observer* reviews from Steven Poole and Adam Phillips, respectively, in terms of locating the novel in its historical setting, and connecting this to Mitchell's heavy deployment of period detail: "Having set it in the year of the Falklands War, Mitchell makes much in the book of getting the songs, TV programmes, the biscuits and cigarettes right"; "Stop me if you've heard this before. A 12-going-on-13-year-old boy narrates his life in a sleepy English village in the early 1980s. Falklands war, Sinclair ZX Spectrum, Men at Work and Talking Heads, cheese-and-onion crisps" (Phillips; Poole). Their reviews locate the novel in the terms of unreflective nostalgia and a

<sup>46</sup> In my sources, the Falklands War is variously referred to as the Falklands War or the Falklands Conflict. For simplicity I have chosen to refer to it as the Falklands War, in keeping with how it is noted in *Black Swan Green*, unless I directly quote from a source which refers to it otherwise.

<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, the two other reasonably well-known fictional representations of the Falklands War are also grounded in childhood experience. Sue Townsend's 1982 young adult novel *The Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 ¾* and Shane Meadows' 2006 film *This Is England* both touch on perspectives young teenage boys have on the war, here the eponymous Adrian Mole and Shaun Fields respectively. Adrian, who keeps a diary, notes the beginning of the war with a mix of excitement and trepidation: "Britain is at war with Argentina!!! Radio Four has just announced it. I am overcome with excitement. Half of me thinks it is tragic and the other half of me thinks it is dead exciting" (173). Shaun, meanwhile, has lost his father in the Falklands, and is the target of school bullies because of this.

simple coming of age story. Thomas Jones of *London Review of Books*, meanwhile, even sees the *Black Swan Green* as not “concerned” with “the legacy of colonialism”, but rather “the everyday difficulties of being a thirteen-year-old boy” (Jones).<sup>48</sup> Joseph Brooker suggests that *Black Swan Green* “does not primarily aim to be a state of the nation address” (*After the Watershed* 215).

Separate to the initial flurry of reviews, to date academic engagement with *Black Swan Green* has been fairly limited, suggesting that attention to the novel may be constrained by the concerns similar to those expressed by its first reviewers. The implication is that *Black Swan Green* is perhaps too simple for critical attention; it does not, for example, take up the complicated multi-perspective narrative structure deployed in *Cloud Atlas*. Yet, as novelist Ali Smith perceptively muses in her review of *Black Swan Green* for *The Telegraph*, simply seeing the novel as “benign” would be “naïve.” She posits instead that:

Under the sweet, simplistic yomping-about of Jason’s local adolescence, standard village life is a hierarchy of bullying, secrets and lies ... *Black Swan Green*’s ‘I love 1982’ nostalgia is a glassy, pitch-perfect, mock-innocent surface through which something rotting might appear ... its wide-open last lines project its youthfulness into the future – or the present – *and wars now, England now, truth and lies right now* (Smith, emphasis mine).

Smith registers in *Black Swan Green* a subtle dialogue between the Britain it depicts and the Britain it is produced in. Put another way, she identifies the resonances between the Falklands War and the 2003 Iraq invasion. In an interview with Alan Franks for *The Times* shortly after *Black Swan Green*’s publication Mitchell observes that, as a thirteen-year-old himself during the Falklands War, the conflict illustrated to him “the cascading nature of history”. Without explicitly referencing the Iraq War, he goes on to comment that

The Falklands fatally taught subsequent administrations that war is good for opinion polls. It is possible that, if we had lost that war, Britain might have become less insular and more pro-European. I hate to say this, but it might almost have been good for us ... it would have had as strong an impact if we had lost, although exactly what impact I don’t feel competent to say. (“Adventures in time and space”)

Political resonances in *Black Swan Green*, then, quietly make themselves present.<sup>49</sup> In addition to the Falklands War, the Troubles in Northern Ireland are brought to bear on Jason’s school: “Gilbert Swinyard says our school and the Maze Prison were built by the same architect. The

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<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that, despite this, Jones goes on to state in the same review that Jason “has somehow managed to absorb the basic argument of *Orientalism*”.

<sup>49</sup> Rebecca L. Walkowitz also suggests that the Iraq War is “implied” by the novel (39).

Maze Prison's in Northern Ireland, where Bobby Sands the IRA hunger striker died last year" (252). Margaret Thatcher's spectral presence throughout the novel is perhaps the most overt example of this, as media interest renders her omnipresent.<sup>50</sup> As a result, Jason initially reveres Thatcher. To him, she's "bloody *ace*. She's *so* strong, *so* calm, *so* sure" (126, original emphasis). To an extent, in the initial stages of the novel at least, Jason's political outlook could solely be considered a product of his family environment. With the exception of his sister Julia, as O'Donnell notes, they "might contradictorily be described as apolitical but strongly nationalistic" (110). His father, Michael, after viewing BBC footage of Argentinian civilians cheering the impending war, declares that they are a "[p]lack of hyenas ... The British'd show a bit of decorum. ... Will you just *look* at them!" (122, original emphasis). Michael's 'us and them' sentiments later re-emerge when he discusses the local gypsy population with Jason, as they are. Meanwhile, Jason's Uncle Brian extolls the virtues of the increasingly neoliberal marketplace he works in, declaring "I'm grateful to that woman in Downing Street for this financial – what's that latest fad? – anorexia. Us number crunchers are making a killing!" (57).

It is clear that a closer reading of the contours of *Black Swan Green* than what is offered in the reviews demonstrates the persistent presence of Britain's wider political contexts. The question then becomes how to account for these resonances: what parameters can effectively contextualise the version of Britain remembered in *Black Swan Green*? O'Donnell, in his reading in *A Temporary Future*, the first monograph published on Mitchell's work, sets the terms of the novel's historical-political context by the Cold War. While he writes that "at first glance" the Falklands War seems to be "the last gasp of British colonialism", he describes the novel's "primary historical referent" as the Cold War (104). O'Donnell therefore reads the Falklands War as an offshoot of the increasingly militarised society that the Cold War came to represent, an unlikely "proxy war" of the Cold War (110).<sup>51</sup> While O'Donnell counterpoints the other critics and reviewers I have mentioned thus far by taking stock of Jason's burgeoning socio-political awareness, he does so by accounting for the Falklands War in *Black Swan Green* in American-centric terms: "For Jason ... the conflict is of a piece with the larger geopolitical war

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<sup>50</sup> Aside from the Falklands War coverage, which I shall examine in more detail shortly, Thatcher is a point of reference for Jason throughout the novel: see, for example, pages 2, 31, 328.

<sup>51</sup> This perhaps misses the fact that Thatcher and Reagan, who were otherwise ideologically very attuned, were not in agreement over Britain's pursuit of war with Argentina. Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, in their history of the Falklands War *The Battle for the Falklands*, note that "[t]here remained one large blot on Britain's diplomatic escutcheon as the task force set sail: the United States" (103). Given the context of the Cold War, the Reagan administration and its nuclear strategists in particular were concerned that diverting attention to the South Atlantic, and therefore away from Europe, would present the "Russians the opportunity for a pre-emptive strike" (103). Furthermore, the US administration considered Argentina a 'friend'. Obviously their divergent views over the Falklands did not ultimately affect the Thatcher-Reagan friendship, as subsequent years in the decade would demonstrate. See pages 103-104 of *The Battle for the Falklands* for further detail.

he reads about in the newspapers; the rising influence of American popular culture, speech and fashion in the European theatre” (110). Vardy, meanwhile, reads these influences as part of a broader recollection of the 1980s by juxtaposing a “selective and seductively nostalgic vision with more troubling memories of the period, particularly the pervasive anxiety over Cold War militarism and potential nuclear conflict, and the increasing brutality of social relations” (84-5). For Vardy, *Black Swan Green* “ambivalently fuses nostalgia with political critique” in its representation of 1982 (84).

While it would be remiss to deny the presence of the Cold War in *Black Swan Green* that O'Donnell and Vardy identify, as well as the increased presence of American culture in Jason's day-to-day experience, it needs to be noted that the Cold War predominantly manifests as a mechanism by which Jason navigates and interprets his immediate and domestic world, such as the deterioration of his parents' marriage. He muses to fleeting confidant Madame Crommelynck<sup>52</sup> that “there's like this cold war over that at the moment” (200). The Cold War predominantly figures in Jason's internal musings<sup>53</sup> or with figures who he engages with in isolation, away from his peer group, as opposed to his conversations with his family or friends who permanently reside in *Black Swan Green*. Thus the Cold War, while certainly providing fertile ground for Jason's imagination, serves to constitute the experience of his private inner world, rather than his public one. Yet the Cold War is so far removed from the everyday public experiences in Jason's life that it only manifests in the novel in his fantasies, or in contexts that do not run the risk of reaching his peers, such as his private meetings with Madame Crommelynck.

Vardy's interpretation of *Black Swan Green* treads a similar path to mine insofar as his essay and this thesis are both concerned with the question of how 1980s Britain has been recollected, and grounded in reading the novels that represent this period as memory texts. However, I want to suggest that the objects that become fetishized or remembered in *Black Swan Green* as part of its evocation of the 1980s also speak to a longer imperial history which helped to produce Thatcherism. We might think, for example, of Jason's Liverpool football shirt (which today would be sold as a retro football shirt), emblazoned with the shirt sponsor Hitachi's logo across the front. Although “HITACHI” is a Japanese electronics company, Jason identifies it as

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<sup>52</sup> Madame Eva Crommelynck, “an old toady lady” who also appears as a much younger woman in *Cloud Atlas*, is “extradited” along with her husband to West Germany (180; 208). Jason, a budding poet, is invited to visit her several times to discuss his poetry and, amongst other things, for Madame Crommelynck to rage against the “the government of Monster Thatcher!” (204).

<sup>53</sup> We might also think here of Jason fantasising about his father's swivel chair being part of the *Star Wars* spaceship *Millennium Tower* that he sits in to shoot a “skyful of Russian MiGs”, or his imagining breathing the same oxygen as a “Red Army sentry on a barbed-wire watchtower shivering in this very same icy wind” (2; 343).

originating from Hong Kong, the former British colony (192). Thus, as Sarah Dillon notes, *Black Swan Green* illuminates one of “Mitchell’s central themes”, that is, “predacity and its associated concerns of colonialism, abusive exploitation, slavery and rampant consumerism” (10). By conjoining consumerism and colonialism, then, we can see in *Black Swan Green* a relationship emerge between objects that on the one hand could simply signify a recourse to childhood, but on the other may indicate an engagement with broader historical forces at work, notably imperialism.

### Postcolonial melancholia in “deathliest England”

The term ‘postcolonial melancholia’ was coined by Paul Gilroy, who argues that, since Britain’s defeat of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany in the Second World War “the life of [Britain] has been dominated by an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances” that the ensuing loss of Britain’s empire “and consequent loss of imperial prestige” entailed (90). The boundaries of memory that *Black Swan Green* gestures towards are necessarily broadened by the neo-imperial impulse that the Falklands War signified. As Paul Gilroy notes, British identity seems to depend upon the idea that victory in the Second World War is the apotheosis of twentieth-century Britain.<sup>54</sup> According to Gilroy, the Second World War re *Black Swan Green* presented the last period Britain could confidently ‘know’ itself: what it stood for as a country, and what it was not. As a result, the war is frequently invoked in order for Britons to “know who we are as well as who we were” (88). These sentiments are echoed in *Black Swan Green* as early as the first chapter when, after discussing *The Great Escape*, which had screened over the recent Christmas and New Year, Jason and his schoolmates are drawn into thinking about possible alternative outcomes of the Second World War, and therefore possible alternative figurations of their present: “If it wasn’t for Winston Churchill *you* lot’d all be speakin’ German now” (10). This recourse to the Second World War as a way of negotiating and reimagining the present is symptomatic of Britain’s tendency towards expressions of postcolonial melancholic nationalism.

To Jason, *Black Swan Green* is both “deathliest England” and, to his frustration, a village “shut on Saturday afternoons”: it is simultaneously a small part of a wider hostile world as well as his own hostile world (210). The oscillation between local and national sites demands attention. Falklands War and Britain’s imperial legacies become a means by which Jason navigates

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<sup>54</sup> As if to illuminate this point, England’s men’s football team played a friendly match against Germany while I was editing this thesis chapter. England’s supporters were heard to chant, amongst other things, ‘Ten German Bombers’.

adolescence and public life. This is signalled from the novel's outset, beginning with the novel's taking the name of its setting as its title. Black Swan Green, the fictional Worcestershire village where Jason lives, echoes that of the Falklands Islands settlement Goose Green, one of the main battle sites in the Falklands War. Goose Green lies on a small land bridge at the centre of the island East Falkland, which was the island originally invaded by Argentine forces in 1982, and the one which saw the most military action during the ten-week war. Goose Green became the centre of the contested space, which is then reproduced as a central motif in *Black Swan Green* in Mitchell's novel. Jason's engagements with his home village are suggestive of the mythical qualities of the Falklands Islands which are transposed into Black Swan Green. Jason explains the village's name on two separate occasions as being "sort of" a local joke: in spite of the name, there are no swans near the village, black or otherwise (82; 215). The almost identical repetition of this joke serves as a reminder of the inherently imagined nature of communities embody and depend upon.

Postimperial melancholia seeps into Jason's everyday experience of 1982, which is enmeshed in the legacies of Britain's past as an imperial power. His metalwork teacher tells the class that failure to finish their term projects will result in their being sent "to the colonies"; he plays an arcade game derived from *The Empire Strikes Back* (327; 213). Even Jason's interpretations of his own experiences are inflected with this language, as he likens waiting to be picked in a game of British Bulldogs to being a slave in a slave market; he describes his stammer (nicknamed Hangman), as "colonising the alphabet"; and he comments that the trainees of the supermarket chain his father manages "colonised the whole lounge of the Hotel Excalibur" (6; 17; 222). In what is perhaps the most overt gesture to the everyday configuration of imperial history and associated anxieties, Jason inherits his grandfather's Omega Seamaster de Ville wrist watch. This was "bought off a real live Arab" in Aden (a former British colony) in 1949, and Jason breaks it the first time he wears it (17; 25). The broken watch becomes a recurring anxiety for Jason, as he is faced with the need to tell his father what has happened to it. The broken watch's significance lies perhaps in what its broken state suggests: its physical state is literally trapped in the time that it was smashed; it cannot 'progress' time. Similarly, in line with Gilroy's thesis, we might observe that Britain cannot move beyond the moments of World War II victory, far less the gradual break up of its empire.

### Aggressive media, aggressive consumerism

Until now I have indicated how postcolonial melancholia manifests in *Black Swan Green* by drawing attention to how it is embedded in everyday experience and otherwise unremarkable events. Attention will now shift to how the Falklands War, and then the local anxieties over the prospect of a permanent gypsy campsite, are figured in the novel, and how these events contribute to the postimperial melancholic Britain that *Black Swan Green* evokes.

Raban observed in his memoir that the Falkland Islands' "blankness was their point: you could make them mean nothing or everything" (113). The blankness of the islands is suggested in *Black Swan Green* to be a canvas for the national press to project an idealised British identity in the face of an apparently feral foe. For Jason and his contemporaries, the Falklands War comes to mean everything. Jason is obsessed with the war; it is inflected in multiple everyday experiences (he imagines drizzling syrup on his dessert as leading soldiers "yomping over custard" to victory in Port Stanley). In *Black Swan Green*, the press constitutes the primary vehicle for articulating and reinscribing the nation and the village, and is highlighted as a locus for British expressions of postcolonial melancholic nationalism. The tabloid papers cited in detail in *Black Swan Green*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, enact what Martin Conboy describes as "the contours of a journalistic lowest common denominator" (10). By building on the language of their readers, Britain's tabloids "provide an explicit sense of place, a textual locus for a popular community". They "police the borders of national identity" and "depend upon a vigorous form of popular nationalist vernacular" (2; 9). In other words, Britain's tabloid media actively draws on Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" of the nation. The newspapers give textual form to the remembered and continually constructed nation, in a concentrated form. The tabloids openly reject nuance, opting instead for a simplistic narrative contingent on supposed underlying beliefs and perceived truths that the intended readers will agree and identify with, and eventually absorb as 'common sense knowledge'. The simplistic narrative provided by the tabloids is embodied by Jason. Mitchell's novel implicitly accepts Anderson's emphasis on the importance of print culture to imagined communities. Print capitalism, according to Anderson "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (36).

The possibility that something nefarious could be occurring in the media sphere is, at this stage, beyond Jason's comprehension. He has taken in Britain's pathology of exceptionalism and greatness, which was particularly disseminated by the press during the war. Thus, we see Jason initially formulated as Thatcher's ideal British citizen. He assumes that the British media actually

does what it purports to do, report the news and tell the truth, and that so too does the government. He eventually becomes aware of and repudiates this: “No prime minister’s *ever* been more popular than Premier Margaret Thatcher in the entire history of opinion polls,” he says after the ceasefire is agreed in the Falklands (145). In the early stages of the Falklands War, Jason uncritically absorbs the simplistic discourses proffered by Britain’s tabloid media, particularly those which glorify the prime minister, her government, and the war. His knowledge of the Falklands War does not so much concern the action on the battlefield as the actions of the British government and tabloid press, and the personality of Margaret Thatcher, as he avidly consumes whatever media on the war he can access:

Mrs Thatcher *frazzled* this twerpy prat in a bow tie on BBC1 this evening. He was saying sinking the *General Belgrano* (Actually we sank the *Belgrano* some days ago but the papers’ve just got hold of the pictures and since the *Sheffield* we’ve got *zero* sympathy for the Argie bastards.) Mrs Thatcher fixed her stained-glass blue eyes on that pillock and pointed out that the enemy cruiser’d been zigzagging in and out of the zone all day. She said something like, “The fathers and mothers of our country did not elect me the Prime Minister of this country to gamble with the lives of their sons over questions of legal niceties. Must I remind you that *we* are a country at *war*?” The whole studio cheered and the whole country cheered too, I reckon, ’cept for Michael Foot and Red Ken Livingstone and Anthony Wedgewood Benn and all those Looney Lefties. ... The *Daily Mail* says it’s typical of a tinpot Latin paper-pusher to make stupid quips about life and death. (125-126, original emphasis)

This excerpt usefully illuminates several issues surrounding the Falklands media coverage registered by *Black Swan Green*. Jason continues in this vein for some time in *Black Swan Green*’s narrative discourse, parroting various other editorial viewpoints from the *Daily Mail*. Tonally, this section marks a departure in Jason’s narrative voice. Whereas throughout the novel his narration is marked by his own poetic insights into what he experiences (for example, he describes a momentary lull in an argument between his sister and their Uncle Brian as “a cow of an awkward pause” mooing, while waking up to an empty house is “[l]istening to houses breathe”, which “makes you weightless” (65; 84)). Yet here his voice hardens as he adopts the language of the media, all “twerpy prats” and “Looney Lefties”. It reads as a tirade which feeds into and out of the tabloid newspaper stories that he has devoured. Incorporated into this tirade are Britain’s domestic oppositions set up by the war. Michael Foot, in reality, supported the Falklands War,



although “Red Ken Livingstone and Anthony Wedgewood Benn” opposed it.<sup>55</sup> Jason, who is yet to develop a critical sensibility, passively absorbs and aggregates the media’s discourse.

Jason’s tirade also fleetingly registers that, while Jason’s enthusiasm for the war is fed by his media consumption, for Britain’s media the war actually represented something of a disaster. This does not seem to have lessened Jason’s interest, however. The Falklands War, notes military historian Stephen Badsey, “is one of the few modern wars in which media issues are virtually always mentioned” (45). As Robert Harris remarked in 1983, the conflict “came to be called ‘the worst reported war since the Crimea’”: many newspaper reports arrived several weeks too late to be used while television footage took, on average, 17 days to arrive in Britain (“the papers’ve just got hold of the pictures”) (Harris 56).<sup>56</sup> The capacity of the press to enable its readers to relate to one another becomes especially pronounced in Jason’s obsessive documentation of the Falklands War. “I’m keeping a scrapbook about the war. I’m cutting out stuff from the newspapers and magazines,” he announces. A classmate

reckons it’ll be worth a fortune twenty or thirty years from now when the Falklands War has turned into history. But all this excitement’ll *never* turn dusty and brown in archives and libraries. No way. People’ll remember *everything* about the Falklands till the end of the world. (127, original emphasis)

Jason anticipates the future of the Falklands War as being on terms similar to that of World War II: a cornerstone of British self-knowledge and identity.

Anderson’s observation that newspapers are characterised by a “profound fictiveness” is particularly prescient here, then: this holds true for them in their physical, material sense (33). Stories are juxtaposed on a page by virtue of the fact that the events they record occurred on the same day, placing them in relationship with one another (even if they have nothing else in common). Yet Jason’s scrapbooking of the Falklands War unsettles this effect by compacting the various media narratives into a singular representation of the conflict and filtering out the stories which might otherwise dilute it. Fragments of the scrapbook appear in the novel, including *The*

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<sup>55</sup> As Hastings and Jenkins observe, Foot (leader of the Labour Party at the time), who “had once proudly proclaimed himself a ‘peacemonger’, found himself bellowing for ‘action not words’ alongside the most rabid right-wingers” (78).

<sup>56</sup> After the Falklands War was announced, most media outlets opted to send their most inexperienced reporters to the South Atlantic, believing the conflict to be unlikely to last long enough for these reporters to actually reach the Falklands (the islands being a three-week journey by sea from Britain). This inexperience, coupled with security-related censorship created the conditions which enabled a ‘propaganda war’, whereby government lines were taken up by tabloid editorials and put to jingoistic ends, while those who refused were accused of being treasonous and/or traitorous by those who did. Not all media outlets were happy to do this, however; the BBC incurred the government’s wrath at its insistence on instructing its reporters to “present events in the most neutral and balanced way possible”, and refusal to refer to Britain and Argentina in terms such as ‘us and them’ (Leggett 16-17).

*Sun*'s infamous "GOTCHA" headline, published after the British navy torpedoed Argentinian submarine *Belgrano* and a patrol boat, and *The Times*' comparatively demure "Ceasefire agreed in the Falklands" (125; 144). These headlines bookend Jason's enthusiasm for the war. While initially his unquestioning obsession with the war's developments see it become "the first thing I think about in the morning and the last thing at night" (128). Yet he becomes somewhat ambivalent towards it by the time Britain's victory is announced, commenting that he "*should* be really happy", but is not (145, emphasis in original).

What is noticeably absent from the media that Jason's consumes is the actual impact of the casualties and deaths incurred by the Falklands. While *The Daily Mail* might move on from the Falklands War and "how Great British guts and Great British leadership won the war" to "whether Cliff Richard the singer's having sex with Sue Barker the tennis player, or whether they're just good friends", but the impact of the war is subtly indicated to continue to influence as part of the novel's wider strategy of gesturing outside its own parameters (145). The death of Tom Yew in the bombing of *HMS Coventry* "killed the thrill of the war," Jason tells us (140). "Make-believe grief is fun. But when someone really dies, there's just this horrible dragginess" (140). Combat deaths reported as aggregated statistics in the press, do not present as 'real' to Jason: they are not ascribed with the name and personality recognition that the government figures such as Margaret Thatcher or Michael Foot accrete. Death is one of the risks associated with war, and so appear. By contrast, Tom's death shatters the projected glory of the war, while its ramifications haunt the remainder of *Black Swan Green*. His girlfriend is revealed to be pregnant. Village responses to the death are symptomatic of how small communities both connect themselves to and differentiate themselves from national narratives.

## Gypsies

While the unique event that the Falklands War represents slips away from both the national consciousness and that of *Black Swan Green*, Jason's attentions return to the parameters of life in his village. It is here that his burgeoning political awareness, initially suggested by the shift in his perspective on Thatcher, comes to the fore of the narrative in the form of the question of belonging to the communities that *Black Swan Green* poses. *Black Swan Green*'s reluctance to accept and integrate outsiders manifests gradually through throwaway comments. It is wryly commented on by Jason's elder sister Julia, in response to their father's puzzlement over their mother's claim to being lonely in the village that the family has lived in since Jason's birth: "Kate

says if you haven't lived in Black Swan Green since the War of the Roses, you'll never be a local" (163).

Links are drawn between the ideas and beliefs that constitute Black Swan Green and the national narrative: the village hall in which the public meeting takes place, Jason tells us, was "erected [in] 1952", the same year Elizabeth II ascended to the British throne (286). Symbolically, the village's meeting point becomes a locus in which national and local narratives converge. The villagers' uproar at the prospect of a gypsy camp being established near Black Swan Green embodies the postcolonial melancholic state that Gilroy detects in Britain. Objections to the presence of the gypsies coalesce in the group's implicit eschewal of the nation, both in its collectively imagined sense, and its bureaucratic one. Being nomadic, gypsies' geographic origins by definition cannot be traced to a particular location, unlike the meeting organisers' "fellow Black Swans" (287). Being so far descended from the original migrants to England, the gypsies are not able to be identified with where they are assumed to have originally come from, yet they are also not identified as 'belonging to' the identities of Black Swan, English or even British. Black Swan Green's collective knowledge of the gypsies renders their origins – and in part, reasons for avoiding accepting the gypsies – ambivalent. Initially Jason asks his father where they are from:

"Who *are* gypsies, Dad?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well... where did they live originally?"

"Where do you think the word 'gypsy' is from? *Egyptian*."

"So gypsies're African?"

"Not now, no. They migrated centuries ago."

"Why don't people like them?"

"Why *should* decent-minded citizens like layabouts who pay nothing to the state and flout every planning regulation in the book?" (281-2, original emphasis).

At the village hall protest meeting, a slightly different account of the gypsies' origins is suggested by the vicar's wife, Gwendolin Bendincks, who describes the group as "Romanies" (288). Now the gypsies are attributed with a term which refers to groups assumed to originally come from the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent. The gypsies frustrate the identifiers that the Black Swan Green villagers attempt to impose upon them. They cannot be 'identified' in the sense of race, as Black Swan Green cannot agree on what the gypsies' origins really are. The villagers are also not entirely in agreement on what it is about the gypsies that is so repulsive, only that they

are repulsive because they are not from Black Swan Green, and cannot be reliably connected to anywhere else. That their collective identity is rooted in transience frustrates the Black Swan Green locals, as vicar's wife Gwendolin Bendincks' articulates:

Indeed, without a permanent site, how will Romanies ever be taught the responsibilities of citizenship? How *else* will they be taught that law and order guarantee their children a brighter future than begging, horse-dealing and petty crime? (289, original emphasis)

Yet she is not concerned enough with this to suggest that the gypsies be welcomed into Black Swan Green and become a permanent part of the local community:

Our village is a finely balanced community! A horde of outsiders, *especially* one of, shall we say, 'problem families', swamping our school and our surgery would tip us into *chaos! Misery! Anarchy!* No, a permanent site *has* to be near a city big enough to mop them up. A city with infrastructure. Worcester, or better still, Birmingham! (289, original emphasis)

## Conclusion

My reading of *Black Swan Green* has been concerned with two tasks: firstly to indicate that there are sufficient grounds for the novel to be read by the terms set by taking the Falklands War as the novel's primary historical referent, and secondly to examine how the novel does this. As a memory text, *Black Swan Green* reconnects its readers with the moment when Thatcher's Britain crystallised as a result of the Falklands War. While on the surface David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* might suggest itself to be a simple recollection of adolescence in the early 1980s, folded into this experience are the broader political concerns of the 1982 as produced by Britain's imperial past: the neo-imperial impulse which drove the Falklands War, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the post-World War II decline of empire. The parallels between the imagined communities of Black Swan Green and Britain are insistently and repeatedly suggested. Writing *Black Swan Green* with the benefit of hindsight, having borne witness to two decades of British politics and the accompanying intensification of postimperial melancholic nationalism, Mitchell presents a society that is perhaps an inevitable precursor to today. It is recalled and parodied through the discourses of tabloid journalism and aggressive consumerism which characterise and link national and provincial public lives.

## Conclusion

Being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, of generations.

(Derrida xviii, original emphasis)

*The dead brood under Britain. We whisper. We echo. The emanation of Giant Albion –*

(GB84 2, original italics)

I began this thesis with a question: Did the 1980s end? The answer is no. A decade on from the publication of *The Line of Beauty*, *GB84* and *Black Swan Green*, issues from the 1980s have insistently resurfaced and reasserted their relevance to contemporary Britain. Over the course of writing this thesis alone, Britain has seen questions asked during the 1980s both answered and re-formed. Political developments during 2016 in particular have provoked the spectres of the 1980s to re-emerge in the present. The Hillsborough verdict in April, in which an inquest ruled that the 96 fans who died after being crushed at the 1989 FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest were unlawfully killed has seen calls for a similar inquiry into police conduct in the Battle of Orgreave during the miners' strike (Conn). But most significant has been the aftermath of the European Union referendum in June. Derrida cites Europe as the site of the original spectre, alluding to the opening line of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*: "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism" (2). The question of Europe has emerged as the spectre haunting Britain, namely Britain's membership in the European Union. While Britain's EU membership was a divisive question during the 1980s, it re-emerged in 2016 with a vengeance as Britain voted to leave, rekindling concerns about the nature of British identity and its relationship with its recent histories. After the EU referendum, Theresa May became the first female prime minister of Britain since Margaret Thatcher, and only the second ever.

While individual events in 2016 demand recollections of the 1980s as spectres upon contemporary Britain, we should also note the trends that have endured since the decade. The casualization of the British workforce marked by the increasingly common practice of zero-hours contracts, coupled with deindustrialisation can be seen as a direct descendant of "Year Zero" David Peace denotes as marking the end of the miners' strike in *GB84* (462). The rise of a xenophobic, misogynist extreme right wing populist politics similarly recalls the emergent neo-Nazi movement of the 1980s traced by *Children of the Sun*, yet over the interim years has seen incarnations in the form of the British National Party, English Defence League and the United Kingdom Independence Party.

To conclude this thesis, then, I would like to suggest a final question: When might we say that the 1980s began? The spectres plaguing the 1980s and the novels that this thesis examines did not, of course, originate in the decade in a vacuum. They reach back to before May 4 1979, when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. They speak to longer histories of Britain. Invoking the legacies of regional tensions and deindustrialisation, of empire and consumerism, and of class and institutionalised homophobia, *The Line of Beauty*, *GB84* and *Black Swan Green* insist that we do not discount the longer histories that make up British history as we think of the recent past. M. John Harrison wrote of *Black Swan Green* that the novel implies “that more is crammed into the book than it can contain”, a comment just as applicable to *GB84* and *The Line of Beauty* (“Remember the Datsun Cherry”). The novels studied here of course have their own places within their authors’ oeuvres, *GB84* as part of Peace’s revisionist psychogeographies of the North of England in the 1970s and 1980s, *Black Swan Green* as part of Mitchell’s imagined universe, *The Line of Beauty* as part of Hollinghurst’s explorations of power and sexuality in Britain. Read together, these novels produce visions of the 1980s as the decade fades from living memory and drift into the realms of history, but account too for the longer histories that enabled the moments that they represent, which might in itself be an intriguing area for future study.

Reading these novels as memory texts allows us to appreciate the slippages between history and memory that these novels invoke. Read on their own terms, within the frameworks of the forms of cultural memory that the novels themselves suggest as most appropriate (heritage, nostalgia, and the conjoining of postimperial melancholia and the mainstream media), yields new understandings of the present that recalls as well as the past that is recalled, and ways of thinking about historical novels as memory texts. English heritage is fundamental to *The Line of Beauty*’s portrayal of the 1980s in high Tory society. *GB84* toys with the capacity of nostalgia to engage readers with the realities of the 1984-85 miners’ strike and the literary structures and strategies that enable the reader to engage with what is a hostile text. *Black Swan Green* evokes the intensification of postimperial melancholia which drove Britain to engage in the Falklands War, and the popular forms of media consumption which contributed to this. As Mieke Bal writes, cultural memory discourses are invoked “to mediate and modify difficult or tabooed moments of the past – moments that nonetheless impinge, sometimes fatally, on the present” (vii). These memory texts, and the memory discourses that they draw upon, enable us to see the multi-layered stories and ghosts which surround and inform representations of the deeply political and insistently relevant decade that is the 1980s, in contemporary British literature.

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