



Introduction

When Was Brexit?

Reading Backward to the Present

Antoinette Burton

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Fifty years from now Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county [cricket] 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.”

—John Major, speech to the Conservative Group for Europe
(22 April 1993)

Crisis is not a condition to be observed . . . it is an observation that produces meaning.

— Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (2013)¹

Abstract • This introductory article lays out the stakes of thinking through the temporalities of Brexit history across multiple fields of vision. It makes the case for books as one archive of Brexit subjects and feelings, and it glosses all the articles in the special issue.

Keywords • archives, Brexit feeling, empire, European Unionism, history-writing, immigration, temporality, Whiteness

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Anyone who has a subscription to AcornTV or BritBox—streaming services that bundle up “new and classic mysteries, dramas, comedies, and documentaries” originating in British production companies and focusing mainly on British subjects—should be able to see that Brexit has been coming for quite some time.² In fact, it is almost impossible to consume either the legacy series or the more contemporary programming in these virtual spaces without witnessing all manner of Brexit themes in storylines, narrative arcs, and subject matter galore. From *The Pallisers* to *Poirot*, from *Midsomer Murders* to *Father Brown* to *Endeavor*, from *Upstairs Downstairs* to *All Creatures Great and Small*: British television as curated for export by these entertainment licensing enterprises is a major delivery system not just for British cultural production but for many intimations of Brexit as well. You might expect the nativism of Anthony Trollope to surface in the televised version of *The Pal-*



lisers (1974), or that the social and racial tensions of the period would be on display in retrospective crime dramas like *Endeavour* (2013–). What is striking is that regardless of whether they dramatize English classics or pull plots from headlines then and now, what we might call Brexit dramas—tense and tender scenes that touch on everything from imperial nostalgia to the criminality of immigrants (whether ex-colonial or East European) to the threat of globalizing forces—have unfolded in countless British-based TV series over the last five decades. They do so against the backdrop of the presumptive Whiteness of “Deep England” that has underwritten contemporary desire for Brexit, with its complex, contradictory, brutal, and often deadly nostalgia for the glory days of the White man’s world.³

Like all archives, AcornTV and BritBox are always already selective: in this case, they are just a slice of postwar British television chosen specifically for a US-centric Anglophone global audience and “peddled profitably” to those who can afford the subscription.⁴ Yet we can and should read them as documentary evidence not just of the coming of Brexit, but of its immanence as well. If 2016 marks the electoral victory of Brexit politics, it is hardly the beginning of Brexit history. For as half a century of British television alone makes clear, there have been regular, even ordinary, intimations of embryonic Brexit experiences and protean Brexit subjects across many fields of vision. In this special issue, we draw attention to the ways that structures of Brexit thinking and feeling have been anticipated in a series of greater- and lesser-known texts: sites where antecedents of Brexit identities can be seen and the anteriorities of Brexit subjectivities today are on display. Our purpose is not only to show how embedded structures of Brexit and its ethos have long been in aesthetic and cultural forms, but also how naturalized—how unseen and unremarked upon—these precursors of Brexit 2016 are. If the casual Brexitism of British televisual history points to a long tail of Brexit ideologies and orientations, we must begin to read more intentionally backward toward the present.⁵ It is neither that Brexit has always been with us, nor that all roads lead inexorably to it (how could they?). It is rather that we should cease to see Brexit as some kind of break with the past or as the effect of the unfinished business of 1970s European Unionism and decolonization at home. In fact, it may mean acknowledging that (like Western liberal democracy itself) Britain in/as Europe was the anomaly rather than the inevitable or secure outcome of the march of history. If Brexit seems baffling to many (Remainers and even some Leavers), historians are now obliged to develop a new set of narratives large and small that enable us to see more clearly that Brexit and its histories have been hiding in plain sight.⁶

To do that, we can look to the way that Brexit themes puncture the surface of a host of social, political, and cultural forms—novels, political debates, community protest literature, academic writing—in a continuum of Brexit antiphonies from the Victorian period onward that requires us to re-think how we tell the story of modern Britain at home and in the world. For now, the articles that follow offer a modest start to such a project by ad-

addressing the question “When was Brexit?” in order to suggest how we might reframe 2016 and thereafter as a symptom of longer, deeper, and very British histories. We hope that this assemblage of texts and their contexts offers methodologies for thinking more precisely about the annals of Brexit and, equally, about its time and temporal logics, its tense and aspect: the *when* as well as the *where*, the *how*, and the *why* of Brexit’s history.⁷

There are many ways of approaching this kind of narrative challenge. Assuming that books, like television, are archives of both fact and fiction, we have identified a subset of titles that might be said to anticipate the realities (material and psychic) of Brexit today. In considering a book, contributors were invited to focus on its origins, its conditions of production and circulation, its arguments and reception, its author and/or its impact on local, regional, national, imperial, and/or global audiences. Or, where a book may have flown under the radar, to signal how and why its significance is only legible now in light of contemporary history. The call was less to look for predictions than to read for symptoms, embedded or highly visible, of the turn toward Brexit thinking, political and affective. What are some intimations of Brexit that we need to appreciate, not simply to understand the current moment but to rethink the histories we write of colonial and post-colonial modernity? And how might this excavation exercise help us refine our historical definitions of Brexit itself?

Because of the way we read now in the context of digital journal access, readers need take up the ensuing articles in no particular order. That said, I have organized them against the grain of conventional chronology, starting with those which treat the books most recently published and ending with those whose books are the oldest. So, we begin in the mid-2000s and finish up in the late 1860s. It is a backward-looking orientation that may seem counterintuitive but that I hope underscores the importance of thinking about the present as a crooked line to the past and of reading contemporary histories of the psychic life of Brexit as linked in reverse rather than in some kind of forward, let alone progressive, timeline.⁸ This out-of-jointness, this apparent untimeliness, is akin to queer temporalities: what Heather Love calls “feeling backward.” The gesture to “backward” here is a means of bringing forward aspects of the past that “don’t fit into our progress narrative”—and, in the case of Brexit, that reveal our ambivalence about seeing, and accounting for them, in British history.⁹ If “the rise of right-wing nationalism across the West, for example—which is epitomized by the election of Donald Trump and Brexit—is more often described as a personal pathology rather than as a product of history,” the challenge we take up is how to read backward through the psychic lives of Brexit before it had its name in order to read those structures of feeling as Brexit’s histories.¹⁰

We begin, then, with Marc Matera’s examination of Paul Gilroy’s 2006 *Postcolonial Melancholia*, a book that insists on constructing histories of Brexit “beyond the usual narratives of reversal, unexpected rupture or liberation” precisely because Gilroy sees Brexit as an underlying condition that we

can read through the symptoms of melancholia and, more explicitly, as a by-product of empire and its afterlives. Brexit as symptom is also evident in Kennetta Perry's reading of *The Heart of the Race* (1986), where she shows us how the authors, Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, make a relentless case against the racializing technologies of the postwar welfare state. In the process, Perry reminds us of what the "buried archive" of Black women's lives tells us about the long and recent histories of internal border control policymaking in the interest of protecting the White nation against multiple Windrush generations. For those who wish to understand the work of the 1970s in generating reservoirs of Brexit feeling, a return to the novels of Barbara Pym is arguably a place to start. In my article, I show how *Quartet in Autumn* (1977) prefigures nostalgia for a pre-global Britain that has underwritten much of Brexit's affective appeal, including the gendered and racialized articulations of today's Little Englandism (and Orwell's and Major's as well). Stuart Ward, for his part, gives new meaning to the shock of the 1970s as he recovers New-Zealand-born historian J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) in order to materialize the deep and abiding anti-EEC ethos of Pocock's famous call for a new subject of British history. The "funerary" aspect and "irrepressible yearning" that Ward hears in Pocock's lament for "our historic existence as neo-Britains" can be heard in Pym as well, anticipating Fintan O'Toole's brilliant diagnosis of Brexit as a paean to heroic failure.¹¹

Charlotte Riley's examination of *Must Labour Lose?*, a 1959 assessment of the party's defeat at the polls written by Mark Abrams, Richard Rose, and Rita Hinden, takes us appropriately back to electoral politics in the postwar era to resurface uncannily familiar debates about why people voted the way they did and what it meant for political elites in a world with shifting class identities and alliances. While the original text largely sidesteps questions of race and empire, Riley insists that we read backward through those critical lenses if we are to appreciate how foundational political questions (Britain's global role, prosperity for all, and the future of Labour itself) were conditioned by anxieties about postcolonial immigration and, of course, by the specter of Whiteness under threat at home. Perhaps unsurprisingly, variations on these concerns are visible in all three of the Victorian books in our suite of Brexit history conveyances. Danielle Kinsey reads W. T. Eady's *I.D.B or the Adventures of Solomon Davis*, an 1887 novel about the rise of an ambitious Jewish diamond magnate, as a touchstone for the subtle-and-not-so-subtle anti-Semitism at the cultural heart of Brexit's market capitalist discourses, cosmopolitan or otherwise. Porscha Fermanis uses Samuel Butler's 1872 utopian novel *Erewhon* as the basis for an extended meditation on the presentiments of racial self-interest, social degeneration, and "ontological insecurity" in this White settler story—unearthing the tight links between Brexit's material and affective structures from a vantage point (the 1870s) that seems unlikely only if we think of the 1970s as Brexit's takeoff point. Last, but certainly not least, is Dane Kennedy's treatment of that Victorian

Brexit urtext: Charles Dilke's 1868 *Greater Britain*. Kennedy resists the temptation of easy equivalencies, emphasizing instead the ways in which Dilke's text foretells that complex combination of confident imperialism, anxiety about non-White immigration, and anti-Black (and anti-Irish) sentiments that have comprised many strains of Brexit ideology in and around 2016. There is no direct line from there to here, but there are patterns and paradigms of thinking and feeling (which surely predate *Greater Britain*) that are too conspicuous to ignore.¹² To do so is to turn away from the critical task of working through the past, which is incumbent on all historians.

Here, I mean "working through the past" in the sense that Theodor Adorno invokes it: not as a way of exorcising demons or externalizing the regressive past from the progressive present but as a mode of muscular historical *seeing* that recognizes how and why the past inheres in the present, rather than either before or beside (or, for that matter, beyond) it.¹³ "When was Brexit?" is thus as urgent as a disciplinary and a methodological question as it is as a world-historical one. Whether it is conceived of as high politics, social revolution, economic revanchism, imperial revivalism, or cultural crisis, Brexit can only be understood as an unanticipated disruption of the contemporary order if we fail to grasp its antecedents across a variety of domains. To that end, we need to begin to recognize how and why the histories we currently have contribute to the ghosting of Brexit's past—and how those histories have allowed global political elites, including academics, to fail to see Brexit and its racialized kin-groups as the future tense of the last century and a half.¹⁴ In both the short and long run, we need to reframe the story of modern Britain, its empire, and its postcolonial condition so that the Brexit histories that always already reside therein are more legible to undiscerning or denying eyes. These "buried, erratic workings of history" constitute what Bill Schwarz calls "the inner forms of the nation."¹⁵ In his Coda to this special issue, Schwarz wonders whether Brexit has discredited the very possibility of a political future as we have come to know it. Even in the face of such disarray and despair, the imperative to see and to act on those erratic workings is the ineluctable possibility, if not the inevitable power, of Brexit histories whose time has come.

To be sure, there are caveats, especially when it comes to what we take *a priori* to be a Brexit subject with a history. As Gurminder K. Bhambra has recently noted, narratives about White working-class devastation that are staple features of both Brexit and Trump's MAGA discourses have been accepted at face value as short- and long-term explanations for Brexit feeling well beyond the confines of the political right per se. Yet these accounts—an uncanny echo of Gilroy's melancholia—require more scrutiny. In fact, as Bhambra notes, "the category of 'class' [in these narratives] is not being used as a neutral or objective one, but rather as a euphemism for a racialized identity politics that is given legitimacy through this evasion." She calls this methodological Whiteness, a practice that reproduces the logics of White privilege and exceptionalism, effectively decoupling it from the structural

racism that conditions Black, immigrant, and Indigenous lived historical experience in Western societies—and helps to obscure labor exploitation across class and color lines under capitalism as well.¹⁶ We can and should be alert to the seductions of methodological Brexitism—of narratives that simply rehearse rather than radically retemporalize Brexit history. It is surely a fine line between writing Brexit history and doing anti-Brexit Brexit histories.¹⁷ Needless to say, it is the latter that our experiment in understanding Brexit in and as “British” history aims for here. Our sample is modest, but it is a provocation nonetheless. For if we understand Brexit to be iterative (repetitive rather than singular or completed), then we can expect to find many more Brexit histories immanent in the deep past, the fractious present, and, of course, the eminently foreseeable future as well.

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Notes

Thanks to all the special issue contributors for their feedback on this introduction, and for their intellectual and political labor in fleshing out the “intimations” concept. I am also grateful to Paul Arroyo, Peggy Brennan, Jenny Davis, Tim Dean, Doug Jones, Laura Mayhall, and Renisa Mawani: critical interlocutors all.

N.B. The capitalization of all the Ws in whiteness, white, etc. in this essay is the editorial policy of the journal and its publisher, Berghahn Books. The debate about this usage is evolving. I myself am still learning but am disquieted by the possibility that some readers may associate it with legacies of its use by white supremacists, i.e. as a sign of anti-Blackness, rather than a de-naturalization of w/Whiteness as the default or unmarked category. I’d welcome your feedback at aburton@illinois.edu.

1. Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
2. AcornTV began in 1994; BritBox began in 2016.
3. See Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (London: Penguin, 2018), 202. It was called by one critic “the first great Brexit novel.”
4. Hazel Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2019), 315. That selectivity reflects savvy screening for various reasons of aesthetics, politics, and much more; see “BritBox: ‘Inappropriate’ Classic UK TV Shows to Be Kept Off Service,” *The Guardian*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/nov/07/britbox-uk-networks-plan-to-tackle-netflix-amazon-and-apple-tv>. With thanks to Charlotte Riley.
5. I riff here on Carolyn Betensky’s “Casual Racism in Victorian Literature,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47, no. 4 (2019): 723–751, doi:10.1017/S1060150319000202.
6. To wit, Tony Blair in 2005: “I hear people say we have to stop and debate globalization. You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer.”

- William Davies, "New-Found Tribes," a review of *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics* by Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford, *The London Review of Books*, 4 February 2021, 14, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n03/william-davies/new-found-tribes>. "Like detectives working their way backwards from a crime scene," Davies writes, "Sobolewska and Ford track the various forces which built, over seventy years, to the detonation of the traditional categories of class and party allegiance exemplified in 2016." With thanks to Laura Mayhall on these points.
7. I refer here to Jenny L. Davis's talk, "Manifesting Pandemic Destiny: Parsing the Tense and Aspect of Settler Immunopolitics in Indian Country," delivered at the Humanities Research Institute, University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign, 20 November 2020.
 8. Robbie Shilliam's recent work is a related example of how this crooked line approach works. See his "Enoch Powell: Britain's First Neoliberal Politician," *New Political Economy* 26, no. 2 (2020): 239–249, doi:10.1080/13563467.2020.1841140. With thanks to Doug Jones.
 9. Interview with Heather Love, *Omnia* (25 April 2012), <https://omnia.sas.upenn.edu/story/feeling-backward-move-forward>. See also her *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). With thanks to Peggy Brennan.
 10. Maya Binyam, "An Intimate History of the British Empire," *The New Yorker*, 8 October 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/an-intimate-history-of-the-british-empire>.
 11. Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018).
 12. It is perhaps a life's work to trace these lineages backward to the early modern period and even, as Andrew Gardner suggests, to Roman Britain as well. See his "Brexit, Boundaries, and Imperial Identities: A Comparative View," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 17, no. 1 (2017): 3–26, here 20–26, doi:10.1177/1469605316686875. With thanks to Porscha Fermanis.
 13. Theodor W. Adorno [1959], "The Meaning of Working through the Past," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, ed. Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 89–103. It is cited in Harry Harootunian, "A Fascism for Our Time," *The Massachusetts Review*, 6 January 2021, <https://www.massreview.org/node/9428>. With thanks to Theodore Jun Yoo.
 14. My use of "ghosting" borrows particularly here from Anna McClintock; see her "Monster: A Fugue in Fire and Ice," in *E-Flux Architecture*, part of the "Oceans in Transformation" series: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/oceans/331865/monster-a-fugue-in-fire-and-ice/>. With thanks to Renisa Mawani. Here, the links with Trumpism are stark, especially with respect to the White revanchist politics they share; see Daniel Geary, Camilla Schofield, and Jennifer Sutton, "Toward a Global History of White Supremacy," *The Boston Review*, 6 October 2020, <http://bostonreview.net/race/daniel-geary-camilla-schofield-jennifer-sutton-toward-global-history-white-supremacy>. Courtesy of Porscha Fermanis.
 15. Bill Schwarz, "Introduction" to *The Caribbean Comes to Britain* (forthcoming), Courtesy of Bill Schwarz.
 16. Gurminder K. Bhabra, "Brexit, Trump and 'Methodological Whiteness': On the Misrecognition of Race and Class," *British Journal of Sociology* 68, S1 (2017):

S214–231; here, S219, doi:10.1111/1468-4446.12317. That decoupling, in turn, plays readily to White middle-class resentments—resentments that move, in their turn, quite happily across party political lines in Western democracies, as we have seen over the last two decades at least.

17. For examples of attempts at anti-imperial empire histories, see Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso, 2019); Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and John Newsinger, *The Blood Never Dried: A People's History of the British Empire* (London: Bookmarks, 2006).