

A Master-class with Hope Street Writer in Residence, Thomas Glave:

How Anglophilia conceals Britain's bloody past

By Kaya Purchase

On Tuesday 9th March 2020, Dr Lucienne Loh hosted an online masterclass with gifted writer, Professor Thomas Glave, focusing primarily on Glave's essay, 'The Blood People Redux: just a few short notes on memory.' The essay is a searing, honest exploration of the silence maintained by British institutions when it comes to discussions of colonial history. The class began with a summary from Professor Glave about the inspiration behind the essay. He explained that it was written during his time as a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge University. Whilst there, he observed that certain issues, namely those which centred on racialised realities, were met with discomfort and disengagement by fellow intellectuals. '2012, the year I was there, the British high court was hearing cases about the atrocities perpetrated against the Mau Mau by the British colonial regime - the awful tortures of these people, some executed by colonial authorities,' he explained. 'The documentation [of these atrocities] had been locked away for years - with the Queen's knowledge, of course. Finally, this material was being made public and these people were actually going to court and talking about it. It seemed as though whenever I brought this up in a very polite, calm way at dinner, people became very uncomfortable, other Fellows. I began to realise there was a way in which people wanted to maintain a kind of silence and they were very discomforted by my bringing up these racialised topics.' Defying such silence, Glave sat down to write 'The Blood People Redux', the final essay in his book 'Among the Blood People: Politics and the Flesh.'

The book's title was born from reflection on family blood-lines, but also the dark undertone of blood-shed that often accompanies ancestral histories. 'I learnt that I had white ancestors, coming from Yorkshire going back to the 17th century. We found the graves of some of these ancestors who went to Jamaica in the 19th century, like my great-great-grandfather, a blood relative; I carry his DNA in my veins. This, to me, was a literal

embodiment of history, colonialism and connections to slavery and so I was beginning to make connections between all these episodes of violence, between the idea of blood-people and of blood-shed.’ These inextricably woven aspects of colonial legacy emphasise the personal effects of such historical decimation. Recognising them creates a locus for such violence within the human body itself and individualises the inherited trauma and grief that persists through generations. A similar example that Dr Loh highlighted is the prevalence of diabetes in the black population. This has now been linked to slavery, because sugarcane was often a desperate means of getting some kind of food within the slave community. Lucienne commented on, ‘the cellular effects of commodification on the most marginalised communities. It’s not only about built structures, it’s biological as well.’ This is a crucial point because this is what Glave appears to be doing, linking the concrete and commercial infrastructures of the British Empire to the physical and emotional trauma of human beings all over the world. He mentioned the acute similarity between the ‘towering chapels and stately college buildings’ of Cambridge, Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace in London and the British colonial buildings in the colonies. You can trace these buildings all across the globe, a network of visible examples of the grand, awe-inspiring products of the British Empire, but their purpose to impose authority and supremacy over the colonised is not often discussed. The anguish and brutality connected with such infrastructure is not visible; it remains a stain purposefully concealed beneath every brick, column and roof slate.

Speaking of his time in Cambridge, Glave discussed how English values of excessive civility and etiquette are encouraged in such elite environments and how this directly results in a tendency to sweep aside certain difficult topics. The flipside of prioritising manners means that ugly, uncomfortable truths are denied interlocution. This prompted a discussion of what is often meant by ‘Englishness’ and what each student thinks of when confronted with the word. Is such civility intentionally manifested in order to cultivate an environment of silence and denial? Or is it that when Britain's colonial past is raised England cannot reach beyond immobilising feelings of shame and guilt? What followed was an engaging and illuminating discussion on hypocrisy, Empire, Imperialism, class division, injustice, slavery and the denial of British culpability, but most centrally, Anglophilia. Glave seemed keen to dissect this complex notion of Anglophilia. ‘The word that kept coming to me over and over again was Anglophilia and that Anglophilia doesn’t really work if one looks honestly at British history,’ he said.

Several students appeared to agree. One student raised the fact that ‘Anglophilia can be seen right through the Anglo-sphere.’ Glave agreed, reflecting on his own family living in Jamaica. ‘I think that anyone living under colonial rule, as my parents and grandparents have, have been indoctrinated into Anglophilia, into loving the monarchy. I wasn’t going to dismiss my parents’ Anglophilia, but I had to contend with it at the same time and try to be compassionate.’

So what is this concept of ‘Englishness’? What sort of images and traits do people tend to visualise when they think of ‘Englishness’? What is it about Englishness that is so revered? Students touched on some geographical associations with Englishness, the type of locations that are promoted as tourist attractions, stereotypical icons of quintessential English character, such as castles, National Trust locations, museums and the countryside. They noted the misleading promotion of such places which paints an apolitical idyllic picture and ignores the history of how they came to be. Lucienne found the concept of English countryside particularly tricky. ‘The idea of English countryside is not actually detached from what Glave is discussing in relation to bloodlines, the question of who has the right to claim that countryside, for their culture, tradition, inheritance. It’s a space that seems quite neutral. Nature seems quite neutral, but not so.’ It is easy to criticise the more genteel stereotypes of Englishness that ignore class and racial diversity (what Glave calls the ‘Downton Abbey’ impression of England), but it is much more difficult to associate natural beauty with bloodshed and human rights abuses. As Glave says, however, colonialism and slavery are ‘what made the English countryside possible.’

Other areas we’d like to believe to be neutral, such as the arts, are still tangled in this horrific past. Lucienne shared how both the London and Liverpool Tate galleries are associated with overseas slavery, despite being opened after the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. They were founded by Henry Tate, of Tate and Lyle, the sugar company, whose sugar (and therefore Tate’s source of funding for the galleries) was from sugar plantations across the Caribbean. Whether we want to admit it or not, slavery and violence is engrained into the very streets that we walk down every day, especially here in Liverpool which played such a significant role in the North Atlantic slave trade. We need to be honest about this. As Glave said himself, ‘living in fear of acknowledging the truth of that history is simply not of any use.’

One of the culprits of upholding this devious ideal of 'Englishness' is the current British government which continues to promote an archaic, outdated form of patriotism, in some cases glorifying the Empire. A student raised the point that Boris Johnson recited Rudyard Kipling whilst visiting a Myanmar temple, representing what Glave defined as a 'certain blitheness within [Oxbridge] culture of respecting others' sovereignty, individuality and personhood.' Lucienne agreed with this and made a comment with which I resoundingly agree: 'Johnson's foppish, boyish banter conceals the fact that he is such an arch-imperialist. He is able to sway a large number of the population with his use of imperial verve and what is basically banter. It's quite cleverly conceived.'

This type of 'Englishness' is incredibly toxic, an ostentatious display that harnesses the potent power of manipulation. The facade that Johnson presents is, I believe, as Machiavellian as Priti Patel's use of criminalising language when referring to refugees and asylum seekers. However, Johnson's design only works because there already exists a racist psychology to mobilise. Similarly, tabloid newspapers may redirect working-class frustration towards immigrants, but this does not mean that those stirred by such headlines (eg, balaclava-clad followers of the EDL and their predecessors, the National Front) are less culpable of racism. Johnson's facade is successful because it taps into a generationally-inherited disillusionment that Englishness is a paradigm of honour and glory. It feeds an already-kindled nostalgia for a time when whiteness was associated with impenetrable power and affluence and not only justifies such nostalgia but makes it emblematic. This trivialises the genocide and slavery orchestrated and inflicted by the British Empire throughout its history. I do not believe that everyone in this country idealises a nationalistic, Imperialist notion of England. However, such an attitude is so deeply ingrained in English society that it is the responsibility of those who do not prescribe to such hypocrisy to outwardly and actively oppose it. Thomas Glave's essay was an attempt to intervene in the English narrative of denial, one that refuses to acknowledge the truth of its own responsibility. It is a declaration that he does not consent to Britain's racist infrastructures. This essay is my own declaration that I also do not consent. I am grateful to the master-class for providing the space for me and fellow students to share our ideas about these issues, but am aware that the discussion does not end there. These conversations should not be limited to a class environment, but taken into everyday life. For now, I thank Thomas and Lucienne for such an integral and thought-provoking discussion.