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THE AESTHETICS OF DISIDENTIFICATION: POSTCOLONIAL MELANCHOLIA AND QUEER FUTURITY IN NATASHA BROWN'S ASSEMBLY

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Article Info

Abstract

In *Assembly*, Britain's unresolved colonial wound festers, erupting in forms of melancholia that contaminate the social fabric. The novel's fragmentation does not merely reflect aesthetic experimentation; it is the very symptom of a fractured subjectivity, one compelled to negotiate the violence of historical amnesia. The narrator moves through elite institutions like a ghost condemned to wear a mask, and yet she transforms this mask into a weapon. By disidentifying, she exposes the absurd theatre of empire's afterlife and insists on another temporality—one that refuses the stasis of melancholic repetition. Brown's text thereby stages the confrontation between the pathology of empire and the insurgent energies of refusal, offering literature itself as a terrain of decolonial struggle.

Keywords:

Postcolonial Melancholia, Disidentification, Queer Futurity

INTRODUCTION

Natasha Brown's debut novel *Assembly* (2021) has rapidly established itself as a landmark in contemporary British fiction, distinguished by its minimalist precision and incisive dissection of the psychic toll exacted upon Black British subjects negotiating the intersecting terrains of race, class, and colonial inheritance. Drawing upon her own decade-long experience in the financial services industry, Brown crafts a narrative that is at once intimate and expansive, foregrounding the personal while illuminating the structural. The novel's central concern lies in exposing the alienation of a protagonist who, despite outward markers of social and professional success, confronts the deep psychological costs of performing belonging within a nation that remains structurally tethered to its imperial past. Through its fragmented, poetic prose and its refusal of linear coherence, *Assembly* interrogates not only the viability of postcolonial subjecthood in Britain but also the psychic fragmentation that such an interrogation produces.

This paper argues that *Assembly* performs, with striking formal and thematic economy, the theoretical frameworks articulated by Paul Gilroy and José Esteban Muñoz. On the one hand, Gilroy's concept of "postcolonial melancholia" provides the essential vocabulary for diagnosing the structural malaise haunting the British nation. As Gilroy contends in Postcolonial Melancholia, Britain's failure to adequately mourn the loss of empire has yielded a pathological condition in which nostalgia for an imagined, homogenous past combines with hostility toward postcolonial migrants—figures who, in their very presence, embody the repressed return of imperial history. For Gilroy, "the language and symbols of Englishness and Britishness had a tacit racial connotation which made them exclusionary and synonymous with whiteness" (24). In *Assembly*, this melancholic condition materializes in both the overt and subtle violences that structure the narrator's lived reality: the microaggressions and tokenistic gestures that mark her as simultaneously included and excluded, visible yet erased. The novel's fractured narrative form thus not only depicts but enacts the psychic dislocations of postcolonial melancholia.

Gilroy's theoretical project, however, is not confined to diagnosis. He advances "conviviality" as a critical antidote to melancholic exclusion, defining it as the everyday, fraught, and often unplanned processes of interaction that render multicultural coexistence an ordinary, if difficult, feature of Britain's urban life (Postcolonial Melancholia 28). Conviviality, for Gilroy, resists the essentializing logic of race-thinking by acknowledging the messy entanglements of social life. Beyond this, he advocates for a renewed "agonistic, planetary humanism capable of comprehending the universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit upon each other" (32). This planetary humanism represents an ethical horizon beyond the colonial legacy of universalism, one rooted not in abstract sameness but in shared vulnerability and historical responsibility. Yet, as Assembly demonstrates, the melancholic burden of empire may render even conviviality a fragile or unattainable ideal. For certain subjects—such as Brown's protagonist—the relentless pressures of assimilation and the psychological exhaustion of performing inclusion may necessitate more radical strategies: disengagement, refusal, and even self-erasure.

Muñoz's concept of "disidentification" offers a critical lens for understanding the narrator's tactical negotiations of oppressive cultural codes. Disidentification, as Muñoz defines it, constitutes a "survival strategy" for minoritized subjects, one that "tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form" (Disidentifications 12). The narrator's ironic, performative embrace of corporate culture

exemplifies this practice: she inhabits its codes while simultaneously exposing their absurdity, thereby destabilizing the very forms meant to contain her. Moreover, Muñoz's notion of "queer futurity" provides the conceptual vocabulary for interpreting the narrator's ultimate refusal of prescribed medical treatment. This refusal constitutes not a nihilistic withdrawal but a gesture toward what Muñoz describes as a utopian "horizon of possibility" that critiques the "here and now" and insists upon the imagination of alternative worlds (Cruising Utopia 1). Within this framework, the narrator's decision becomes legible as a radical, future-oriented act of dissent, rejecting the melancholic temporality of imperial afterlife in favour of a queer, speculative futurity.

By bringing Gilroy and Muñoz into critical dialogue, this paper contends that *Assembly* simultaneously diagnoses Britain's melancholic entrapment in imperial nostalgia and stages the resistant strategies that enable survival within—and against—such structures. Gilroy's analysis of postcolonial melancholia and his proposals of conviviality and planetary humanism illuminate the national structures that perpetuate exclusion, while Muñoz's theories of disidentification and queer futurity reveal how marginalized subjects tactically navigate and resist those structures. Ultimately, Brown's novel operates as both cultural diagnosis and performative critique: it confronts the psychic devastation of Britain's imperial afterlife while opening onto the possibility of radical refusal and alternative futures.

Literature Review

Julia Siccardi, in her article "Do Not Insert Yourself Into the Main Narrative": Poetics of Belonging and Trauma in Natasha Brown's *Assembly* (2021), foregrounds the role of "fault lines" as both a thematic and formal device. For Siccardi, the novel's disjunctive structure—its textual gaps, silences, and shifts in perspective—mirrors the psychic fractures engendered by colonial violence and sustained by racism. As she argues, "Used figuratively, in this context, the term can refer to the fractures that were provoked by the colonial encounter and sustained by racism" (Siccardi 3). This conceptual framework reveals that *Assembly's* fragmentation is not merely stylistic but diagnostic, registering trauma's disruption of narrative continuity. Siccardi further contends that this structure dramatizes the protagonist's entrapment in a linguistic regime that is complicit in her erasure. The narrator laments, "My only tool of expression is the language of this place. Its bias and assumptions permeate all reasons I could construct from it" (Siccardi 11). Here, language itself becomes symptomatic of domination, forcing articulation through a medium whose ideological structures foreclose authenticity. Siccardi thus demonstrates that the narrator's radical final act—her refusal of prescribed futurity—is inseparable from the impossibility of linguistic and social belonging in a postcolonial nation still haunted by its imperial past.

Complementing this trauma-centered perspective, Tijana Z. Matović's essay "Intersectionality in Natasha Brown's *Assembly"* places the novel at the nexus of race, class, and gender. Drawing on bell hooks and Audre Lorde, Matović explores how Brown portrays the suffocating pressures of assimilation in neoliberal Britain, where "success" demands the erasure of Black female subjectivity. She highlights the narrator's painful recognition of how assimilation is less an act of inclusion than a violent deformation of selfhood: "Assimilate, assimilate... Dissolve yourself into the melting pot. And then flow out, pour into the mould. Bend your bones until they splinter and crack and you fit" (Matović 118). This metaphor of bodily fracture underscores the psychic violence of neoliberal racial capitalism. Matović argues that, in such a system, the narrator is denied access to the "appropriate tools to convey herself," having "no community, but 'only

the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression'" (Matović 120). The absence of community or linguistic resources leaves the narrator isolated, performing an externally validated success that hollows her interior life. Matović therefore positions *Assembly* as a searing critique of intersectional oppression, exposing how neoliberalism commodifies diversity while demanding perpetual self-erasure.

Vanessa Montesi's "Hostile Households: Deportability and Reproductive Geography in Natasha Brown's Assembly and Marco Varvello's 'Brexit Blues'" shifts attention to the scalar dynamics of literature, interrogating how texts traverse the registers of household and nation. Drawing on Bridget Anderson and Sara Ahmed, Montesi argues that fiction not only illustrates but can also "challenge and complicate" existing theories (Montesi 83). She reads *Assembly* and Varvello's text as "scale-bending" works that expose the entanglement of migration politics and intimate life, revealing how national policy materializes within domestic spaces. Montesi situates the narrator's experience of racial surveillance, precarious belonging, and constrained futurity within Britain's "hostile environment" regime, emphasizing how the household becomes a site of political struggle rather than apolitical retreat. Her analysis of reproductive geography shows how anxieties of national identity and racial exclusion infiltrate even intimate relations, transforming the private domain into a battleground of state power. By foregrounding this domestic-national scale, Montesi demonstrates how *Assembly* captures the affective consequences of policy, illustrating how literature both reflects and reshapes debates about migration, belonging, and identity.

The theoretical scaffolding for these readings is enriched by Paul Gilroy's influential critique of Britain's post-imperial condition. In "Joined-up Politics and Postcolonial Melancholia," Gilroy rejects the "mythical notion that Britain has sorted out the discrete issues of 'race' and ethnicity in an exemplary manner and is now a wholly successful multicultural society" (Gilroy 151). Instead, he diagnoses a cultural pathology of "postcolonial melancholia," defined as the nation's inability to mourn the loss of empire and its global standing. This unresolved grief produces nostalgia for a homogenous past and manifests as hostility toward racialized minorities, who become the cipher for national anxiety. As Gilroy argues, "'Race', or rather the presence of supposedly alien peoples for which it supplies the cipher, constitutes the visible link to a cultural pathology that is hard to analyse but which reaches nonetheless into the innermost ways in which British society operates" (Gilroy 162). Such melancholia shapes both political discourse and everyday life, producing exclusionary practices that remain unacknowledged within a superficial rhetoric of multiculturalism. Gilroy's framework provides an essential backdrop for *Assembly*, clarifying how the narrator's alienation is symptomatic of Britain's pathological refusal to confront its imperial past.

If Gilroy offers the structural diagnosis, José Esteban Muñoz supplies a performative grammar of resistance. In his foundational essay "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," Muñoz reframes depression in racialized contexts not as private pathology but as a collective "depressive position," emerging from histories of exclusion and illegibility. He theorizes "feeling brown" as an affective mode irreducible to dominant cultural registers, always "partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects" (Muñoz 679). By treating race as performative rather than ontological, Muñoz foregrounds the tactical practices through which racialized subjects negotiate oppressive contexts. Crucially, he conceptualizes this depressive position as a site of potentiality: an ethical stance from which new forms of identification and

futurity can be imagined. His work thus provides the vocabulary for reading the narrator's ironic participation in corporate life as a form of disidentification, a strategy that simultaneously works on, with, and against dominant codes. The narrator's final refusal of treatment—her radical disengagement from the future scripted by British society—can be read as a gesture toward Muñoz's "queer futurity," a horizon of possibility that rejects the melancholic stasis of the nation-state.

Taken together, these critical and theoretical engagements illuminate *Assembly* as a text that not only diagnoses but also performs the fractures of postcolonial Britain. Siccardi's trauma-centered reading underscores the novel's linguistic impasse; Matović's intersectional analysis reveals the psychic violence of assimilation; Montesi's scalar framework situates private life within hostile state policy; Gilroy identifies the structural condition of melancholia that underpins these dynamics; and Muñoz offers a theory of affective resistance and futurity. *Assembly* emerges as both a literary enactment of psychic fracture and a radical interrogation of belonging, revealing how the legacies of empire, neoliberalism, and racial capitalism shape the most intimate experiences of selfhood. In its refusal to resolve these contradictions, the novel articulates a poetics of dissent—one that demands we rethink the very terms of identity, community, and futurity in contemporary Britain.

Discussion

The aporia at the heart of the contemporary British state, a nation caught between imperial nostalgia and the lived reality of its multicultural present, is a central preoccupation of Paul Gilroy's theoretical work. His concept of "postcolonial melancholia" diagnoses a national pathology wherein Britain, unable to mourn the loss of empire, clings to a fantasized, homogenous past. This repression of colonial violence manifests as an exclusionary national identity, a condition vividly dramatized in Natasha Brown's *Assembly*. The unnamed Black British narrator, a successful financier and Cambridge graduate, embodies the paradox of a nation that simultaneously tokenizes and marginalizes its postcolonial subjects. Her existence in elite spaces is a constant reminder of the country's unresolved history, producing an atmosphere of ambient hostility that Gilroy identifies as a key symptom of this melancholia. The narrator is forced to navigate a world where her success is contingent upon a painful assimilation that demands she "be invisible, imperceptible. Don't make anyone uncomfortable... Become the air" (Brown 47). This psychic burden is the direct consequence of what Gilroy terms Britain's struggle "to come to terms with the disturbing official diagnosis of its institutional racism" (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 24), a struggle rooted in its inability to reconcile its imperial history with its contemporary identity. The narrator's experience thus serves as a literary case study of the psychic toll of this national condition, where the violence of the past is not confronted but instead resurfaces in the microaggressions and systemic barriers of the present.

The fragmented, elliptical style of *Assembly* serves as a formal enactment of what Gilroy terms "cultural memory," the selective and often distorted process through which nations remember and forget their pasts. Brown's narrative eschews a linear, triumphalist arc of assimilation, instead presenting a mosaic of vignettes, memories, and internal monologues that reflect the fractured consciousness of its protagonist. This structural choice mirrors Britain's own fractured relationship with its imperial legacy, a history that, as Gilroy argues, "remains marginal and largely unacknowledged, surfacing only in the service of nostalgia and melancholia" (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 31). The narrator's voice becomes a site of

counter-memory, challenging the national amnesia that erases the brutalities of empire while celebrating a sanitized version of British greatness. The novel's disjointed form resists the smooth, coherent narrative that the nation tells about itself, a narrative in which the narrator is expected to perform the role of the grateful and successful immigrant. Her realization that her life story must be a carefully curated performance—"I recite my old lines like new secrets" (Brown 16)—highlights the inauthenticity demanded by a society that refuses to acknowledge its own history. Brown's formal experimentation, therefore, is not merely a stylistic choice but a political act, one that aligns with Gilroy's assertion that the "buried and disavowed colonial history might become useful at last as a guide to the evasive, multicultural future" (*Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 25). The novel's structure, in its very brokenness, resists this national amnesia and insists on the importance of remembering the parts of the past that the nation would rather forget.

While Gilroy's work often diagnoses the large-scale, structural melancholia of the postcolonial nation, his concept of "conviviality" offers a lens through which to examine the more intimate, everyday failures of multicultural interaction that Brown depicts in *Assembly*. Gilroy defines conviviality as the "processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas" (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 28), a state of being that is lived and negotiated on the ground, often in spite of official narratives. However, in *Assembly*, the promise of genuine conviviality is consistently thwarted by the persistence of racial hierarchies and the narrator's acute awareness of her outsider status. Her interactions, even with her long-term boyfriend and his liberal family, are performances of a carefully constructed self, designed to navigate the treacherous terrain of white, upper-class English society. The garden party at the heart of the novel becomes a stage for this failed conviviality, where the narrator understands that "my engagement transforms the fiction into truth. My thoughts, my ideas – even my identity – can only exist as a response to the partygoers' words and actions" (Brown 53). This is not the spontaneous, unruly multiculture Gilroy champions, but a highly stratified social order where the terms of engagement are dictated by the white majority. Gilroy's hope that an interest in conviviality will "take off from the point where 'multiculturalism' broke down" (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 28) is poignantly challenged by Brown's depiction of a society where true cohabitation remains an elusive ideal, constantly undermined by the unresolved legacies of empire.

In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy postulates "planetary humanism" as an ethical alternative to the exclusionary nationalisms that are the byproduct of imperial nostalgia. This vision calls for a cosmopolitan sense of belonging that transcends the narrow confines of race and nation, embracing instead a shared, albeit agonistic, humanity. Natasha Brown's *Assembly* can be read as a profound, if deeply pessimistic, exploration of this idea, articulated through the narrator's refusal to continue participating in the charade of British multiculturalism. Her decision to potentially forego cancer treatment is not merely a personal choice but a radical political statement: a rejection of a future that promises only continued assimilation into a system that denies her full humanity. The narrator's assertion, "Surviving makes me a participant in their narrative. Succeed or fail, my existence only reinforces this construct. I reject it" (Brown 77), is a powerful disavowal of the very terms of survival offered by the postcolonial state. This act of refusal, while bleak, gestures toward a space beyond the melancholic nation, a space where a different form of existence might be possible. It is a radical enactment of what Gilroy calls for: a "deliberate engagement with the twentieth century's histories of suffering" that might furnish resources for a more peaceful and

just future (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 32). The narrator's choice, in its profound negativity, thus opens up a sliver of utopian possibility, imagining a form of freedom that lies outside the racialized and nationalized boundaries of contemporary Britain, a gesture toward the kind of planetary humanism that Gilroy theorizes as the necessary antidote to postcolonial melancholia.

José Esteban Muñoz's theory of "disidentifications" provides a crucial framework for understanding the narrator's complex strategies of survival and resistance in *Assembly*. Muñoz defines disidentification not as a simple opposition to dominant culture, but as a tactic of "working on, with, and against" its codes and narratives (J. E. Muñoz 11). The narrator of Brown's novel is a master of this practice. She performs the role of the successful, assimilated Black woman in the world of high finance, yet her interior monologue constantly undermines and exposes the emptiness of this performance. She is acutely aware that her presence is a form of "diversity" that must be seen, a token that serves to legitimize the very structures that oppress her. Her ironic engagement with the rituals of corporate and upper-class life is a form of disidentification; she inhabits the spaces demanded of her but refuses to be fully contained by them. When she prepares for the garden party, she is not simply preparing for a social event, but for a performance in which she must navigate the expectations and prejudices of her audience. This strategy, as Muñoz argues, is not about assimilation, but about carving out a space for oneself within a hostile environment. The narrator's disidentificatory stance is a way of "recalibrating approaches to culture and identity so that they are less easily reified" (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 34), a refusal to accept the fixed, one-dimensional identity that the dominant culture seeks to impose upon her. Her fragmented narration and ironic detachment are not signs of weakness, but powerful tools of survival in a world that denies her full and complex humanity.

The conclusion of *Assembly* gestures powerfully toward what José Esteban Muñoz has termed "queer futurity," the idea that queerness is a form of utopian longing for a world that is "not yet here." The narrator's cancer diagnosis and her ambivalent response to it can be interpreted as a radical rejection of the imperative to survive within an oppressive and life-denying system. Her choice is not a simple death wish, but a profound refusal to invest in a future that is predicated on her continued assimilation and participation in a society that inflicts constant psychic violence. Muñoz argues that queerness functions as a critique of the present, a way of imagining and striving for "worlds that are not yet here, a restructuring of the social that is a profound imagining of a collective, future-oriented, and public Utopian potential" (J. E. Muñoz 186). The narrator's refusal of treatment, then, is not an endpoint, but a radical opening onto a different kind of future, one that lies beyond the suffocating confines of Britain's racialized and melancholic order. By contemplating the cessation of her own life, she is, paradoxically, imagining a form of liberation. Her declaration, "I've walked quite far, I realize" (Brown 77), signifies not just a physical journey, but a psychic and political one, a journey that has led her to the brink of a radical and transformative choice. This gesture, however bleak, embodies the utopian impulse at the heart of Muñoz's theory: a refusal of the present in the name of a future that is yet to be imagined.

The theoretical frameworks of Paul Gilroy and José Esteban Muñoz, when read together, provide a powerful and multifaceted lens through which to analyze Natasha Brown's *Assembly*. Gilroy's work offers a structural diagnosis of the national condition, identifying the "postcolonial melancholia" that haunts Britain and shapes its racialized social landscape. Muñoz, on the other hand, provides a theory of

individual and collective performance, detailing the "disidentificatory" strategies that marginalized subjects employ to survive and resist within that very landscape. *Assembly* dramatizes the collision of these two forces: the weight of the past, as theorized by Gilroy, and the performative struggle for a future, as articulated by Muñoz. The novel's unnamed narrator is a subject caught in the grip of Gilroy's melancholic Britain, a nation that has failed to mourn its imperial past and thus continues to reproduce its violences in the present. As Gilroy states, this inability to mourn leads to a situation where "the country's huge disproportionate black prison population grew and the total of suspicious deaths in custody kept on mounting" (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 27). It is in response to this oppressive structural reality that the narrator deploys the disidentificatory tactics that Muñoz describes. Her ironic performance of success, her fragmented narrative, and her ultimate refusal of assimilation are not simply individual acts of defiance, but performative responses to a collective, national pathology. When she asserts, "I am everything they told me to become. Not enough" (Brown 39), she is articulating the core tension between the assimilationist demands of the melancholic nation and the impossibility of ever truly belonging.

The convergence of Gilroy's diagnosis of the past and Muñoz's theorization of the future finds its most compelling expression in the ambiguous conclusion of *Assembly*. The novel does not offer a triumphant vision of liberation, but rather a quiet and profound refusal. This refusal, however, is not an act of despair, but a gesture of radical hope, a turn toward what Muñoz calls a "future that is not yet here." Gilroy's framework helps us to understand the immense weight of the historical forces that lead the narrator to this point. Her exhaustion is not merely personal, but historical, the culmination of generations of "sacrifice; hard work and harder living" (Brown 20) within a system that promises inclusion while relentlessly practicing exclusion. Her potential rejection of a future defined by the terms of the present is a direct response to this history. It is here that Muñoz's work becomes so crucial, offering a way to read this refusal not as a failure, but as a form of utopian striving. Muñoz argues that for marginalized subjects, the future is often a site of "hope and promise," a "horizon of possibility" that energizes resistance in the present (J. E. Muñoz 1). The narrator's turn away from the future that is offered to her is thus a turn toward a future of her own making, a future that is not yet visible, but that is nonetheless worth striving for. Reading *Assembly* through the combined lenses of Gilroy and Muñoz, then, allows us to see the novel as both a searing indictment of Britain's postcolonial melancholia and a powerful testament to the enduring human capacity to imagine and strive for a more just and equitable world.

Conclusion

Assembly dramatizes the collision between a nation enthralled by its imperial ghosts and a subject who refuses to be consumed by its melancholic narrative. Drawing on Gilroy's theory of postcolonial melancholia and Muñoz's politics of disidentification, this research reveals the narrator as a figure of radical artistry, transforming the pressures of assimilation into a theater of defiance. Her fractured voice, her ironic compliance, her final withdrawal—each is an act of subversion that unsettles the certainties of language, belonging, and futurity. Brown's novel therefore functions simultaneously as autopsy and prophecy: an autopsy of Britain's pathological attachments to empire, and a prophecy of alternative modes of survival beyond the nation's terms. Withdrawal here signifies not erasure but the deliberate unmaking of imposed identities; not resignation, but the audacious opening of life toward other possibilities. In this act resides both the most incisive repudiation of the multicultural illusion and the most radiant affirmation

of narrative sovereignty. *Assembly* thus stands as a work of rare consequence, recasting survival not as mere endurance within structures of domination, but as the sovereign refusal to be conscripted into the nation's demand for a coherent, assimilable self.

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