ENTERTEXT

Crossing Over: Postmemory and the Postcolonial Imaginary in Andrea Levy's Small Island and Fruit of the Lemon

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Abstract

The term "crossing over" refers to the Caribbean relocation of peoples through forced and voluntary migration, whether in the context of the Middle Passage and slavery or in the

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Claudia Marquis

> We live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.
>
> —Ben Okri[1]

Drawing on the work of Andrea Levy and George Lamming, this essay explores what colonial inheritance means for an Anglophone, postcolonial generation of subjects whose history and identity are complicated by the colonised subject's passage 'home' to 'Mother England.' The "crossing over" of my title refers to the migratory subjectivity formed in crossing and recrossing the Atlantic through real and imagined travels. In particular, I situate Andrea Levy's Fruit of the Lemon (1999) and Small Island (2004) as responses to writing by the Windrush generation of migrants, which includes such notable authors as Sam Selvon and Lamming whose texts depict the experience of arrival and settling into Britain. I argue that we need to consider the importance of imagined returns performed by these Windrush authors, particularly Lamming, in order to grasp the wider re-envisioning of black British and Caribbean identity formation. As a means to interrogate the notion of Caribbean (diasporic) textual returns and crossings, I refer specifically to Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin (1953), which purposefully revisits pre-independence Barbados, in particular the riots of 1937 and their consequences, to reclaim a history from below. Like Lamming, whose narrative brings together various subjective perspectives, Andrea Levy, a generation later, brings several modes of narrative into play and offers a number of takes on history. Levy's writing, as I will demonstrate, suggests a radical un-making of history or subversive representation of the past that, according to Linda Hutcheon, is characteristic of postmodern historiographic metafiction.[2]

While I do not want to ignore the influence of modernism on Lamming or postmodern fiction on Levy, I suggest that we might perhaps more fruitfully consider the shared aesthetics of Windrush writing with its criss-crossing manoeuvres through Black Atlantic space and time. In particular, turning to works by both authors, I analyse the ways in which they make use of memory-work, "living" history (as Pierre Nora puts it),[3] in order to reclaim history as an embodied experience rather than as a disciplinary body of knowledge. While Lamming tends to focus on the role of communal memory and cultural formation in a transatlantic context, Levy—like many Caribbean women authors—places

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emphasis on the family chronicle in a late twentieth-century context of migration and exile. Both authors bring together multiple perspectives, foregrounding the problematic

occurrence, acquiring the disturbed, belated chronology of trauma."[13] To offer an example, Maori activist, Tariana Turia claims that Maori culture still suffers from "post-traumatic stress disorder" because, for the Maori, colonialism took the form of a holocaust.[14] We need also consider the erasures of memory brought about through the Middle Passage and the violence of slavery itself.[15] Drawing on the work of Orlando Patterson, Francoise Vergès refers to slavery as a secret "social death," which has resulted in a fragmented knowledge of the past: "Memory is a wounded memory, and the wound seems impossible to heal, to be integrated into history."[16] She also quotes Toni Morrison who describes the need to confront the trauma of slavery as follows: "until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves into other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again."[17] Trauma may entail forms of repression, silencing, and other symptoms of distress, but it also returns, often in disturbing forms until it is confronted and worked through.

Hirsch's work sketches out the possibility of a less disabling relation to the past.

Lamming himself. The coming of age of G, marked by his double passage from village language to well educated Caribbean English and from Barbados to the larger world of Trinidad, shadows Lamming's own history, extending as that did to migration first to Trinidad, 1946, then, in 1950, to England.[24] Aimé Césaire argues that writing the self is an attempt to recapture a place from which one originates, a return home. It enables an imaginative grasp on a world; you have to go out in order to look back. The "backward glance" to use Lamming's own expression,[25] then, is not retrogressive, but, paradoxically, a self-determining effort to press forwards–perhaps an exemplary, modernist project.

Lamming's novel does not submit to the first generic rule of autobiography, however, by which the truth of the narrative of events is effectively underwritten by the constant presence of the author as first-person narra

community, the loss of home can be seen as a repetition of colonial dispossession and exile. Elsewhere, in “Journey to an Expectation” (1960), Lamming reflects on the characteristic conditions of loss and exile that underpin the colonial condition:

> Papa was a colonial; so am I; so is our once absolute Prospero. For it is that mutual experience of separation from their original ground which makes both master and slave colonial. To be colonial is to be in a state of exile.[27]

In both of these texts, we see the Caribbean diasporic writer’s imagination at work, reflecting on repeated histories of exile and dispossession, linking slave culture from the distant past to the more immediate history of colonial rule. Lamming, a migrant living in England as he writes of plantation society, attests to a traumatic chain of exilic moments.

With no memory of family, G tries to come to terms with the problematic nature of his historical situation. He pursues his mother’s memories of the past and attempts to reclaim a story of origins, but cannot find a cohesive, complete narrative. G observes: “for memory I had substituted inquiry” and “[m]emory was again pursuing the line of discovery which inquiry had left off.”[28] The novel repeatedly teases out what memory means and how it functions, especially in G’s relationship with Ma and Pa. As I have noted, Pierre Nora speaks of memory as being “borne by living societies.” History, on the other hand, is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.”[29] This is where analysis that stays with the postmodern and metafictional elements in Lamming’s novel must fail for all its instructive illumination of the novel’s textual play. The desire for historical reclamation is met, in my view, by an approach such as Marianne Hirsch’s, which focuses on sympathetic post-generations as witnesses to the past. Her emphasis on the important work of postmemory, through inquiry, reflection, and imaginative engagement, seems closer to the central practices of a post-slavery, post-Windrush novel like Lamming’s with its persistent interest in picking up the gossip, anecdotes, arguments, and tales of Barbadian culture, recalled by a writer living in exile.

Migration Stories and Rememoration in Levy’s *Small Island*

A similar jostle between competing perspectives occurs in Andrea Levy’s Small Island, and again this characteristic structure seems to focus attention on the novel’s insistent problematisation of history. Levy’s and Lamming’s stories are linked by a shared focus on the transition to decolonisation, albeit in different eras and places. Like Lamming, Levy mediates between storytelling traditions. She does so by deviating from the linear narrative of the domestic novel: she parcels out

Small Island in fact tells the story of the beginning of the diasporic shift that saw thousands of black West Indians migrate from the Caribbean to Britain. Levy's novel, that is to say, published in 2004, recaptures a singular historical moment—1948—and the arrival of 492 West Indians (including Jamaicans) on the S.S. Empire Windrush. Windrush has often been read as an event symbolic

‘Your work has an ethnicity which shines

light-skinned woman, in Jamaica. The mastery she wishes for herself is the mastery she had seen in her British teachers: "those white women whose superiority encircled them like an aureole" (69). Gilbert is less ambitious, more pragmatic. After the war he moves to England, expecting that, as an ex-serviceman, he would find a good job and a decent place to live, but the treatment he receives is very different:

> "So how many gates I swing open? How many houses I knock on? Let me count the doors that opened slow and shut quick without even me breath managing to get inside [...] Man, there was a list of people who would not like it if I came to live–husband, wife, women in the house, neighbours, and hear this, they tell me even little children would be outraged if a coloured man came among them. Maybe I should start an expedition–let me trace it back and find the source of this colour bar [...] Eventually the originator of this colour prejudice would have to stand there before me. And I could say to their face, 'So, it is you that hates all niggers, I presume.'" (215)

In Gilbert's account of his personal experience of late colonial diaspora, raging despair illuminates the extremity of British hostility: colonial superiority, in the 'Mother Country,' proves to be racism.[39] Levy's novel highlights the effacement of subjectivity in Britain as a continuation of the dehumanising dynamics of the colonial era. The West Indian remains outside English community: to be outside is to

“colony society” of the Windrush generation, represented in Levy’s novel, marks a late entry for writer living in contemporary, multic

Stuart Hall has described British Black society of the late 1990s, as marked by a "new ethnicity, a new Black British identity," formed not just in opposition to society at large, but also out of complicated internal differences: confident in black communal identity despite relative socio-economic disadvantages and enduring political hostilities. As an adult, Faith belongs to that "minority of Black people [who] have been able to occupy the interstices of the enterprise culture," especially women, relative to young black men.[43] Yet, she still confronts xenophobia. When Faith is invited by Simon, her white flat-mate, to his country home, she is made to answer a series of questions about her identity:

> 'And whereabouts are you from Faith?'
>
> 'London,' I said.
>
> The man laughed a little. I meant more what country are you from? I didn't bother to say I was born in England, that I was English, because I knew that was not what he wanted to hear.
>
> 'My parents are Jamaican.'
>
> 'Well, you see, I thought that,' he began. 'As soon as you walked in I thought I bet she's from Jamaica.'
>
> 'Just my parents are.' I added, but he went on. (130)

This exchange catches contemporary English racism into the novel quite as clearly as the ranting diatribe from Marion's father. The fact that she was born and raised in Britain makes little difference. Symbolically, she is positioned as an outsider and migrant.

Andreas Huyssen has noted the powerful impetus social and intellectual modernity has given to cultural memory:

> The form in which we think of the past is increasingly memory without borders rather than history within borders. Modernity has brought with it a very real compression of time and space. But in the register of imaginaries, it has also expanded our horizons of time and space beyond the local, the national, and even the international.[44]

This memory without borders translates into acts of "sympathetic memory," when Levy forges associations between the present, the recent past, and remote times. Indeed, she stages the psychic effects of postmemory—memory crossing and re-crossing borders—most cannily when she tells the story of Faith's psychic collapse (Part I) and her journey towards recovery (Part II). At the outset, 'Part II: Jamaica' proposes a rudimentary reconstruction of subjectivity: "Child, everyone should know where they come from" (86). At one level, however, this judgement seems to be supported by the work of the novel's second half, which clearly retreats from the witty social romance of 'Part I: England', with its sharp critique of British multicultural, but racist society. In its place, Levy delivers a narrative of personal, familial, even domestic experience that has a very different depth of history to it, calling for a very different order of understanding.

Faith's point of view and characteristic wit remain intact in the second part of the novel, but the narratorial perspective shifts from the focalising first-person narration of

Part I (almost entirely Faith's perspective) to the mixed narration of Part II. Faith herself becomes a listener and 'reader' as she gives her attention to testimonies or testamentary fictions. The accretion of these memories results in a remarkable portrait of the family across borders. The fragmentary family portrait challenges a sense of formal coherence; since each testimony switches from Faith's perspective to one or more Caribbean family sources. Each family member brings into 'public' memory distinct but genealogically linked histories from past generations. The second part of the narrative consists almost entirely on family voices, family 'snapshots', and memories. Levy's multi-vocal approach

‘No this is where your mummy and me grew up. This used to be our land.’

I had been to Blenheim Palace and stared transfixed at the romper suit Winston Churchill wore when he was planning his strategies for war. I had been to Hampton Court and listened for the screams in the long

In Fruit of the Lemon

She links together the disparate, fragmented histories that have pre-scribed her own, coming to terms with her transnational formation. Memory then, so long after the traumatic event of slave migration, is worked out firstly through the generations, but then proves to take the form of a “retrospective witnessing by adoption.”[52]

Memory’s Ethical Relations

In Fruit of the Lemon and Small Island, Levy calls attention to the ways in which the legacies of colonialism, particularly of slavery and racism, continue to resonate in the present, in both Britain and the Caribbean. Her stories track shifts of consciousness, positioning and repositioning our sense of time and place. By the end of Fruit of the Lemon, Faith knows she will keep her deep, family history alive, including the stories that frame her sense of what it means to inhabit a British ‘home’ that, for most, has been confined to enclaves or “partial belonging.” She knows the Blackness of Britain, that is to say. Jamaica Kincaid speaks of her Antigua relations as possessed of very different attitudes from those of American blacks: her relatives, like Levy’s representation of the Caribbean family, engage in back-chat.[53] However, in so far as back-chat is the response of those who would otherwise be put down, Levy’s response to post-imperial arrogance is to allow Faith to answer back. Where the “bully boys” of her childhood tease her–“You’re a darkie. Faith’s a darkie”–now she has family chronicles to back her refusal to be defined by the playground insult and to support her emphatic counter-attack: “I am the bastard child of Empire and I will have my day” (327).

According to Ben Okri, the stories we live by and tell ourselves have the power to change our lives. Levy’s black British novels open up the possibilities of narrating life anew in several distinct ways. There is, for a start, their sheer inventiveness, the sly, sharp stories they tell, stories of making do and getting by–not least those that bring these novels to their beguiling conclusions. Her acts of narration are often tactical, offering a mode of resistance or negotiation, something of the “surreptitious and guileful movement” that Michel de Certeau identifies as “the very activity of “making do” as a tactic for survival in consumer society[54]—like multiracial, multicultural Britain—or, in a different form, in the colonial Caribbean. More importantly, however, is the way that both of Levy’s novels, by the belatedness that they incorporate into their structures, bind narration to the action of memory. The play of memory always works in her fiction, as in Caribbean culture more largely, to set traumatic history circulating across generations. In this case, however, history pulls a larger, reading public into a sympathetic relation to the Caribbean past. These novels trace out black Caribbean, diasporic memory as a palimpsest of repeated unsettlement. In opening up memory, fiction gives to this history an affective or, in Dominick LaCapra’s term, an “empathic” force.[55] Levy’s work prompts a complex identification with those for whom slavery and exile form the ground of history. Whereas the memory of survivors operates more or less directly through the recollection of personal experience, postmemory as trasngenerational memory works indirectly through representation and creation, extending the survivor’s memory to later and other generations, establishing an ethical relation to a past across borders. For all their detailed pleasures of observation and phrasing, Levy’s representations of Caribbean peoples

crossing and re-crossing the Atlantic bear witness to collective trauma. In performing this kind of witnessing work, Levy's novels get under our skin, catching us into the community of those who remember.

Endnotes

1 Ben Okri, “The Joys of Storytelling,” A Way of Being Free. London: Phoenix, 1998, 46.

2 Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. New York: Routledge, 1988, 105-23: “Historiographic metafictions [...] privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity–multiple points of view and an overtly controlling narrator” (117-18).

3 See Pierre Nora’s introduction to Rethinking the French Past: Les Lieux de Mémoire, vol 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001; also “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” Representations, “Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory,” 26 (1989): 7-25. See also Raphael Samuel, Theatres of Memory. London: Verso, 1994; Samuel charts the formation of “perceptions of the past which find expression in the discriminations of everyday life” (17).

4 Mike and Trevor Phillips,

17 Ibid. Note also Sam Durrant's comments on Morrison's memorialisation of slave culture, and "the impossibility of ever coming to terms with the generation of the Middle Passage" (Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning, 85).

18 Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," Visual Culture and the Holocaust. Barbie Zelizer, ed., London: Athlone, 2001, 215-46. See also Hirsch, "Generation of Memory," 106.

19 Hirsch, "Generation of Memory," 106-7.

20 Hirsch, "Surviving Images," 10-11. See also Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present. Mieke Bal, ed., Hanover and London: University of New England Press, 1999, 9.

21 Mike Phillips, reviewing his experience as novelist in the late twentieth century, cautions against ignoring the significance of historical conditions in a culture formed out of migrancy: "Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, the poets of Negritude, all wrote within a specific historical context and they are part of our history, but partly as a result of this history, the spokesmen and women of migration now tend to trace migrant identity to a pre-colonial and autonomous ethnicity, an autonomous nationhood, an ancient paradise, from which the migrants have been somehow exiled." See his introduction to A Black British Canon? Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, eds. London: Palgrave, 2006, 18.

22 See Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996 and Dominick LaCapra, History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

23 David Scott, "The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming," Small Axe 12 (2002): 107.

24 For a discussion of Lamming's language differentiations, see Claudia Marquis, "'Bombarded with words': Language and Region in George Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin," What Countrey's This? And Whither Are We Gone?, J Derrick McClure, Karoline Szatek-Tudor and Rasa E. Penna, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010, 267-92.

25 Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile. London: Michael Joseph, 1960, 32.

26 Édouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays. trans. J. Michael Dash, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989, 93. For more on the role of the Caribbean writer, see Silvio Torres-Saillant, Caribbean Poetics: Toward an Aesthetic of West Indian Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 275.

27 For this recollection in full, see The Pleasures of Exile. London: Michael Joseph, 1960, 226-29. Lamming puts things a little differently in the interview with David Scott, where he describes Barbados in 1938/39 as "semi-feudal": "It is a Barbados where there is no doubt at all about the location of power. It is a total plantation society and a garrison as well. One of the ironies of geography here is that this poor village is only five minutes walk from where the governor lives" (Sovereignty of the Imagination, 76). See also Mike and Trevor Phillips, cited above, fn.4.

28 George Lamming, In the Castle of My Skin. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, c.1991, 12. References henceforth to this novel are to this edition.

29 See Nora, "Between Memory and History," 3.

30 Andrea Levy, Small Island. London: Hodder Headline, 2004, 43. References henceforth are to this edition. For the original poem, see The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth. E. De Selincourt, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, 216.

31 Levy, 43-44. Jamaica Kincaid also responds critically to Wordsworth's daffodils in Lucy. London: Macmillan, 1994, 29. Helen Tiffin observes: "The gap between the lived colonial or post-colonial experience and the imported/imposed world of the Anglo-written has often been

referred to by Commonwealth post-colonial writers and critics as 'the daffodil gap.'" See "Cold Hearts and (Foreign) Tongues: Recitation and the Reclamation of the Female Body in the Works of Erna Brodber and Jamaica Kincaid," Callaloo "On 'Post-Colonial Discourse': A Special Issue" 16.4 (1993), n.7 and Renu Juneja, Caribbean Transactions, West Indian Culture in Literature. London: Macmillan, 1996, 158.

32 See Victor Ramraj, "Diasporas and Multiculturalism," New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: An Introduction Bruce King, ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 214–29. See also Ashley Dawson, Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007 and Itala Vivan, "The Iconic Ship," Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections. New York: Routledge, 2008, 228.

33 Carol Burns with Andrea Levy, "Off the Page: Andrea Levy," Washington Post. 24 June 24

sky. What they see is England." Nevertheless, they would say, if they are themselves from the Caribbean, "Our children's origins are in us" (Irresistible Rise, 397).

43 Stuart Hall, "Frontline and Backyards: The Terms of Change," Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader. Kwesi Owusu, ed., London: Routledge, 2006, 129. In this regard, when "hustling culture" turns into "enterprise culture," it is also worth paying attention to Levy's Carl, Faith's large brother, and his "plans" ("Big ones, small ones, I never knew"), but also to the "higglers" who cost her some anxiety when she arrives back in Jamaica (Fruit of the Lemon, 172-73).

44 Andreas Huyssen, Present Pasts, 4.

45 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 222.

46 In addition to Hirsch, see also Mike and Trevor Phillips's practice in The Irresistible Rise of Multiracial Britain.

47 Hall, "Cultural Ideology and Diaspora," 225.

48 Black Atlantic crossings continue in various forms. If many migrants, like Faith's own parents, never stop asking themselves whether they should return to the their Caribbean island 'home,' West Indians also enjoy visits to the Caribbean that make them tourists under a different name. This emphasis on continued family relations and on consequential patterns of travel turns up in the narratives reported by Mary Chamberlain: "I like it when I go on holiday, get sort of like a bonding with Gran. We'd talk. She'd tell me about Mum and the other kids, and what it was like bringing them up" (Narrative of Exile and Return, 164).

49 Eva Hoffman, Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe. (London: Vintage, 1999) 36.

50 Hirsch, "Pictures of a Displaced Girlhood," Family Frames, 217, 240.

51 I am struck by the graphic representation of traumatic dehumanisation and impressed by the structural resonance between these representations of slave ship economies and those of the Holocaust, behind the wire. See especially the image from Spiegelman's 'The First Maus' that Hirsch uses in illustration of her account of the family structures at work in postmemory ("Generation of Postmemory," 113).

52 Ibid., 5.

53 Lucy, 86.

54 Michel de Certeau, "'Making Do': Uses and Tactics," The Practice of Everyday Life. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 29-42.

55 Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 78.