ENTERTEXT

Identity as Cultural Production in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

Author: Alicia E. Ellis

Source: *EnterText*, “Special Issue on Andrea Levy 9,” (2012): 69-83.

Abstract

Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004) presents a counter-history of the period before and after World War II (1939-1945) when men and women from the Caribbean volunteered for all branches of the British armed services and many eventually immigrated to London after the war officially ended in 1945. Her historical novel moves back and forth between 1924 and 1948 as well as across national borders and cultures. Levy’s novel, written more than fifty years after the first *Windrush* arrival, creates a common narrative of nation and identity in order to understand the experiences of Black people in Britain. *Small Island*—structured around four competing voices whose claims of textual, personal and historical truth must be acknowledged—refuses to establish a singular articulation of the experience of migration and empire. In this essay, I focus on discrete moments in the

Identity as Cultural Production in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

Alicia E. Ellis

EnterText, “Special Issue on Andrea Levy,” 9 (2012): 69–83.

processes of hybridisation in Britain with an act of misreading on the part of the young Queenie. I argue that a close reading of this scene can help to elucidate the ways in which the novel renders problematic the mythologised history of Windrush, a moment seen as symbolic of the rise of multicultural, multiracial Britain. I will begin by offering an account of Levy's approach to Windrush history and then turn to a closer reading of the "Prologue" in *Small Island*, showing that it is part of a wider strategic representation of the British colonial/postcolonial imaginary.

Pre-/Post-Windrush Contexts

Levy's *Small Island* focuses on the period before and after World War II (1939-1945) when men and women from the Caribbean volunteered for all branches of the British armed services with the majority of those Caribbeans serving in the Royal Air Force.[5] In 1948, an advertisement in a Jamaican newspaper offering inexpensive transport on the ship to anyone who wanted to come and work in the UK, lured many to the 'Mother Country.' At that time, there were no immigration restrictions for citizens from one part of the British Empire moving to another part since Britain's 1948 Nationality Act[6] gave UK citizenship to people living in her colonies, including the West Indies. The arrival of MV *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury Dock in London on 22 June 1948, with its 492 West Indian passengers, is regarded as a landmark event in British post-war history, marking the beginning of immigration to Britain from Commonwealth countries and colonies.[7] Many of those on board had been posted to Britain during the war and were promised that jobs would be waiting for them, and some looked forward to joining (or rejoining) the Royal Armed Forces (RAF). Others were just curious to see the 'Mother Country.'

As a second-generation migrant, born in Britain, Levy is firmly entrenched in the 'we' of British identity. Yet, her sense of identity has also been shaped by her family's migrant history from Jamaica to Britain during the Windrush years. Irene Pérez Fernández, observes that Levy's "dual cultural heritage becomes the mediating lens by which she understands and negotiates her writing."[8] We can see evidence of this in Levy's article in *The Guardian* (2000), which offers an account of her feelings about Windrush migration and British identity:

> Identity! Sometimes it makes my head hurt - sometimes my heart. So what am I? Where do I fit into Britain, 2000 and beyond?
>
> My dad came to this country in 1948, on the Empire Windrush ship. He was one of the pioneers. One of the 492 people who looked around the old British Empire colony of Jamaica, saw that there were no jobs, no prospects, and decided to chance his arm in the Mother Country. […]
>
> I don't know what my dad's aspirations were when he arrived in Britain - he certainly dion,0uTJ0ch8d1(r)-28of t

> and important Empire that spanned the globe, linking all sorts of countries into a family of nations. Far from the idea that he was travelling to a foreign place, he was travelling to the centre of his country, and as such he would slip-in and fit-in immediately. Jamaica, he thought, was just Britain in the sun. […]
>
> When you look at family trees—anybody's family tree, people's individual histories, not the winner-takes-all history of nations—the question of identity becomes very complicated. It would be nice and simple if we were all pure…Any history book will show that England has never been an exclusive club, but rather a hybrid nation. The effects of the British Empire were personal as well as political. And as the sun has finally set on the Empire, we are now having to face up to all of these realities.[9]

Levy's testimony about her father's arrival places emphasis on hybridity, filiation, and the notion of empire as a "family of nations." Through

Britain's black citizens." (3). Levy complicates our understanding of the Windrush era as a turning point in British cultural history by calling attention to the pre-history of Windrush. Thus, like David Dabydeen's *Turner: New and Selected Poems* (1994/2002), to offer an example, her work foregrounds a long history of black presence in Britain, which is also attested to in histories of Britain[11] and its artistic production.[12] We might read Levy's work alongside these other histories of black British identity. The structure of the narrative, with its shifting voices and time periods (before and after), indicates that her narrative seeks deliberately to complicate the prevailing approach to Windrush history as a moment of rupture. Instead, Levy reclaims a pre-history of discourses and events that inform and even shape Windrush and post-Windrush encounters.

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* presents a framework through which to examine the formation of political and philosophical paradigms based on the Atlantic as a place of transit and exchange. In the opening chapter, "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," Gilroy attempts to find new ways to talk about culture and identity, which are relational rather than hierarchical. Gilroy's opening epigraphs in *The Black Atlantic* [13] call attention to the plural and hybrid processes of intercultural and transnational meaning-making that are embryonic testimonies of movement, loss, travel and relocation. In this context, Gilroy's citation of Friedrich Nietzsche is especially noteworthy:

> We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us—indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us...Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more freedom—and there is no longer any 'land.'[14]

This excerpt from *The Gay Science* (1882) is profoundly emblematic of the modern experience of mobility: 'home' no longer exists as a place to which one might readily return.

The Black Atlantic shows that cultural and national identities are shaped through the interplay among language, knowledge, and homelessness. Gilroy writes of his own study:

> This book addresses one small area in the grand consequence of this historical conjunction—the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering that I have heuristically called the black Atlantic world. This chapter is therefore rooted in and routed through the special stress that grows with the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once.[15]

Gilroy calls attention to the notion of an "unfinished identity," one which is forced into poly-vocal and poly-visual postures, leading to a form of double consciousness that is both black and European.[16] He highlights the role of writing as a means to intervene, negotiate, and contest culture, essand[(sietu)5—(ucinb0m1nti5b.d[(sietwh6(ope)5.5()-25.4(o)-6(ayat is)]TJ

way forward. Through highly self-conscious uses of language, Levy calls attention to the unfinished and ongoing process of identity formation in Britain.

Reading the "Prologue"

In *Small Island*, the narrative perspective moves back and forth—across time and geographical locations—and presents intersecting historical trajectories and cultural knowledge. Following the "Prologue," the cyclical repetition of section headers (the names of the main characters), marked by temporal signifiers ("Before" and "1948"), creates a sense of rhythm or cadence, suggesting unity through repetition and return. While the term "1948" calls attention to the moment of Windrush, the term "Before" elicits a threshold of temporal elusiveness, a pre-history. The section titles of the work are chronological and symmetrical: the "Before" / "1948" structure is repeated four times. Within each section, the chapter title reflects the shifts in narrative voicing as the point-of-view switches from one character to another:

Prologue: Queenie
1948: Hortense; Gilbert
Before: Hortense; Hortense; Hortense; Hortense; Hortense; Hortense
1948: Queenie; Hortense
Before: Gilbert; Gilbert; Gilbert; Gilbert; Gilbert; Gilbert; Gilbert; Gilbert; Gilbert
1948: Hortense; Gilbert; Hortense
Before: Queenie; Queenie; Queenie; Queenie; Queenie; Queenie; Queenie
1948: Gilbert; Hortense; Gilbert; Hortense; Queenie
Before: Bernard; Bernard; Bernard; Bernard; Bernard; Bernard; Bernard; Bernard; Bernard; Bernard; Bernard
1948: Bernard; Queenie; Bernard; Bernard; Hortense; Gilbert; Bernard; Hortense; Gilbert; Queenie; Gilbert; Bernard; Queenie; Hortense

As we can see from this structural outline of the nov s form

While Levy's narrative style is indebted to the late nineteenth-century realist novel, its postcolonial and postmodern techniques of shifting narration undermine an omniscient rendering of history.

Queenie: this misinterpreted and confused encounter is a formative event, which shapes her understanding of race, nation, empire, and the exotic. The trip and her encounter with the African man orders her reality, 'enabling' her to dismiss versions of reality that are not in her line-of-sight, an approach to space and vision that is symptomatic of imperialism. In this context, the name "Queenie" is especially significant. This affectionate diminutive or nickname links her to the Queen Victoria, also the Empress of India, a person who is associated with the greatest 'triumphs' of the United Kingdom. The name "Queen Victoria," referring to a figure who ruled over the British Empire at the height of its reach and power, has been replaced by a kind of anodyne nickname, Queenie. The full import of the name is disclosed when the teacher reveals Queenie's actual name, Victoria Buxton. Queenie's name is emblematic of her parents' monarchical leanings as well as the child's internalisation of imperial perspectives.

Levy's emphasis on naming, referentiality, and misnomers gestures towards the underdeveloped and infantile processes of colonial thinking. The metonymic function of the name "Queenie" reinforces the associations with sovereignty already implicit in the girl's legal name, Victoria. In the second paragraph, Queenie corrects her own narrative account: she is quite lucid about the premises of the outing as a holiday, an annual social event. Yet, her ability to correct herself by telling the truth—"I'd thought I'd been to Africa"—remains stylistically in the past as if she were still the young Queenie rather than an adult who is offering a corrective to a faulty story:

> Every year there was an outing organized for the butchers, the butchers' wives and children and even the butchers' favourite workers. A day out. Mother liked to go. 'It's like a holiday,' she would say to father.[29]

Thus, Levy presents Queenie's story from a double perspective: the tale is told from the perspective of an unknowing child and the knowledgeable perspective of an adult. Queenie tells us about her visit to the Empire Exhibition through her child's eyes. Her inability to recognise that her trip to Africa was a family outing, a constructed exhibit, a spectacle of empire, even after she returns home, demonstrates a paucity of hermeneutical agility, which also threatens the reader's understanding of what s/he is witnessing and experiencing in Levy's novel.

> sweat on his forehead glistened and shone like jewels. His lips were brown, not pink like they should be, and they bulged like bicycle tyres. His hair was woolly as a black shorn sheep. His nose, squashed flat had two nostrils big as train tunnels. And he was looking down at me.[30]

Queenie's encounter with this African man, who spoke in "clear English" but whose "lips could have swallowed [her] up," is depicted through a series of sensual markers. In this initial encounter, she describes the black man as a confection: a spoil of empire that cuts across Africa, the Americas, and Asia. Her discourse represents the black man in superlative terms, but he is also viewed as a primate, a domesticated animal, and a locomotive. He smells like a garment stored out-of-season. For Queenie, the African man is depicted as a hieroglyph in need of interpretation: a subject both domestic and foreign, human and animal. In her world, this black man is overburdened with meanings that both maintain and disrupt the binaries of colonial discourse. Queenie only belatedly (and never wholly) understands that this man is part of an imperial exhibition, a spectacle, a show. As a child, she takes in the appearance of the man and re-orders his features, relating them to her own limited set of experiences in the world, filtered through a provincial perspective and the kind of ethnographic language associated with colonial discourses.[31]

When discussing the "Prologue," some scholars, notably Sarah Brophy and Irene Pérez Fernández, have argued persuasively that the Exhibition exists as an ambivalent but simultaneously highly charged space, which stages moments of "colonialism and the desiring machine," to borrow from Robert J.C. Young's *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*.[32] Brophy argues that this episode in *Small Island*, which explores the commodification of difference, implicates Queenie (and her family) as part of this colonial admixture:

> Queenie's equation of the African man with the chocolate insinuates, moreover, that the crowds were being invited to consume not only the goods but also the Exhibition staff, as commodities that offer pleasure to the visitors, but which are granted no significant material histories of their own. Here, Queenie is fabricated by the Exhibition and by her family's interaction with it as a sexual subject, whose public significance is, confusingly, bound up with a visible and tangibly embodied arousal: the feeling of the "blood rising in [Queenie's] face, turning [her] crimson," combines fear, excitement, and shame […].[33]

As a result , there is something that is not at all child-like in Queenie's exchange with the African man, which hovers at the threshold of knowing and not knowing. The retrospective language of the "Prologue" is both innocent and highly charged by desire.

Levy's "Prologue" sets the stage for the next section of the text, leading us to the moment when the nation itself will become a site of ongoing interracial and cross-cultural encounters: "1948". Years later, in her relationship with Michael Roberts, a Jamaican member of the RAF, the encounter with the African man remains an important reference point, shaping Queenie's understanding of cultural, racial, and erotic identities. When Queenie opens the door of her home to Roberts, childhood memories come flooding to consciousness and inform her interpretation of events:

> The RAF man's hand was raised almost in salute, ready to knock at the door once more. But that wasn't the first thing that I noticed. I was lost in Africa again at the Empire Exhibition, a little girl in a white organza frock with blood rising in my cheeks turning me red. He was coloured.[34]

Here we can see that the encounter with the African Man at the Empire Exhibition in "Prologue" predetermines Queenie's interest in interracial relations with Michael Roberts. Significantly, their intimacy develops when Roberts offers Queenie a much-coveted orange and "a bar of American chocolate."[35] Thus, the importance of commodities, particularly ones associated with colonial production, underpins Queenie's desires. Furthermore, Levy's description of their erotic encounters shows the way in which colonial discourses and histories of interracial encounters under empire give narrative shape and form to their accounts of desire for one another:

> It wasn't me. Mrs Queenie Bligh, she wasn't even there. This woman was a beauty—he couldn't get enough of her. He liked the downy softness of the blonde hairs on her legs. Her nipples were the pinkest he'd ever seen. Her throat—he just had to kiss her throat. This woman was as sexy as any starlet on a silver screen. The zebra of their legs twined and untwined together on the bed. Her hands, pale as a ghost's, caressed every part of his nut-brown skin.[36]

Thus, Levy shows us that empire serves as a pre-history, which continuously impinges upon the present, pre-scribing desires and relations. Yet, the birth of the child, even if it must be given away for adoption in a society where colonial discourses still persist, heralds the birth of British multicultural identities in the postcolonial world. Queenie's child, just like her own childhood experiences described in the "Prologue," prompts the reader to consider moments of transition and transformation in culture.

The Production of Culture

In closing, I would like to reflect on the significance of Levy's inscriptions of dislocating moments in British culture, particularly through the dialogue between private and public spheres. Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia,*[37] published in Britain in the same year as *Small Island*, offers a useful way to approach space, relationality, and cultural production in Levy's work. Gilroy suggests that the British Empire has forged a common destiny of intimate spheres of affiliation, which exist even in the midst of a social twilight.[38] For Gilroy, a *multiculture* is what the ethnic and culturally diverse society of Britain might become, that is, "a society that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness," an "unheralded multicultu

As we have seen, Levy structures her narrat

racial and ethnic conflicts 'created' by Windrush immigration and the encounter with the 'Mother Country' and make visible "the history of African-Caribbean people in this country."[46] The novel itself is productive of a kind of identity that is relentlessly 'British,' but it does so by calling attention to the unstable historical and social processes of this formation. This structure casts *Small Island* as a new way of understanding multicultural British society, which reorients the prevailing narratives of history and identity. Levy's novel inscribes a new sense of Britishness, born in the colonial space of Jamaica and articulated anew in the mid-twentieth century metropolitan space of London. Levy's novel represents cultural difference and considers new forms of relationality through a pluralistic narrative that seems to aim at resolution and compromise. Thus, *Small Island* is restless, but it is also rooted and routed "through the special stress that grows with the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once."[47] Through historical ventriloquism, Levy reframes the past, highlighting the dynamic, interrelated processes of social transformation. The narrative architecture of *Small Island* provides a retrospective dwelling space, to borrow a term from Heidegger, where Levy houses testimonial accounts and perspectives that might not otherwise be represented.

Small Island calls attention to the boundary moments of social transformation through narrative techniques of disorientation, metafiction, and shifting perspectives. This work of historiographic metafiction resists totalising impulses and exposes fissures of meaning as a means to reconfigure identity. Levy's novel challenges the foundational myth of Windrush migration, typically seen as marking the rise of multicultural, multiracial Britain, by offering a more expansive history of migration and ideological transformation in the twentieth century. In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, her narrative depicts the 'thawing' of imperialism through the fractures of colonialism and the rise of migration:

> The ice that still supports people today has become very thin; the wind that brings the thaw is blowing; we ourselves who are homeless constitute a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin "realities." [48]

Small Island complicates notions of truth, knowledge, and identity by calling attention to the relations between the imagined and the real, the past and the present, home and away. As I have shown in my reading of the "Prologue," Queenie's anxieties about the spatial order foreshadow the motif of dis/location which saturates the novel and the lives of its characters, evident in the movement between here and there, the farm and the city, Jamaica and London, and the home and the world. With the "Prologue," Levy establishes the narrative strategies that shape her approach to the novel as a whole: this self-conscious discourse presents a multi-layered, poly-vocal, and temporally fluid account of history and identity. The narrative brings together multiple, often unreliable representations of encounters, intimacies, and spatial relations under empire. In the end, *Small Island* does show that new ways of belonging must linger in the imaginary until they are ready to be embraced as new realities.

Endnotes

1 For extended discussions of this concept of Britishness, see Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage, 1997; John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. Routledge: London, 2004; and John Proctor, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

2 Andrea Levy. *Small Island*. New York: Picador Press, 2004.

3 There were two British Empire Exhibitions, one in 1924 and the other in 1925, staged as ethnographic shows in order to present a fixed image of the British Empire in the yearr.nUust

17 Ibid., 2.

18 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988, 110-112.

19 Ibid., 109.

20 Hutcheon, 55;61. For a discussion of this mode of writing, see Ian Watt, "Realism and the Novel Form," *The Realist Novel*. Dennis Walder, ed., London: Routledge, 1996, 219-238.

21 For more on issues of temporality, sequence, and progression, see *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*. Brian Richardson, ed., Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002.

22 J. Michael Walton, *The Greek Sense of Theatre: Tragedy Reviewed*. London: Routledge,1985, 1-6. Prologues were composed to introduce Attic drama such as in the work of Euripides or Sophocles. In a book, the prologue is a part of the front matter normally voiced by one of the text's main characters without formal meditation by the author.

23 Levy, 1.

24 Ibid., 201.

25 Ibid., 289. See also Bernard's account of soldiering after World War II, which highlights his participation in the violence of Partition in India: "Thousands were killed in Calcutta. Men, women, children, even suckling babies, it didn't matter who. They called it a riot. Those of us who'd been there in the thick of battle with these bloodthirsty little men knew it was more than that. Muslims butchering Hindus. Hindus massacring Muslims. And who knows what side the Sikhs were on? Rumour said the wounded were too many to be counted, the dead too many to be buried. They were fighting for who should have power when a new independent India comes. Made me smile to think of that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country. The British out of India? Only British troops could keep those coolies under control" (308).

26 Ibid., 300; 301; 304. In addition, Hortense also uses chocolate at several points throughout her narrative telling as well as Gilbert when he is in the United States.

27 Ibid., 291.

28 Ibid., 4.

29 Levy, 1.

30 Ibid., 5.

31 Pérez Fernández, "(Re)Mapping London:

38 From Paul Gilroy, "Convivial Crimes and Convivial Cultures," *Act 2: Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*, Greenland, 22 April 2006, 1-9, 3. Gilroy develops the concept of a 'social twilight' in greater detail in his earlier work, *Postcolonial Melancholia*.

39 Ibid., 108.

40 Ibid., 3.

41 Ibid. 46.

42 Ibid., 407.

43 Ibid., 412.

44 Bhabha, 1.

45 Ibid., 1.

46 David Ward, "Mass Reading Project Tackles the Legacy of Slavery," *The Guardian* 11 January 2007: http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/jan/11/news.davidward [accessed 31 May 2011].

47 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 3.

48 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 338; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 1.