ENTERTEXT

Women Writers and the Windrush Generation: A Contextual Reading of Beryl Gilroy's In Praise of Love and Children and Andrea Levy's Small Island

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The MV Empire Windrush's arrival in 1948 is repeatedly memorialised as the inaugural moment in West Indian immigration to England. In literature depicting the Windrush pioneers, West Indian men are fully represented either as saga boys hustling for a living, or as middle-class males in the midst of an identity crisis.[1] The work of Andrea Levy and Beryl Gilroy addresses the invisibility of women of the Windrush generation in the memorial timeline. Much of Gilroy's writing, including her autobiography Black Teacher

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Atlantic take her to Europe, New York, and Guyana. Melda's birth is the result of an extramarital liaison between her father and her aunt; growing up, she suffers emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her mentally-ill step mother. She has to be rescued by her much loved teacher, Mrs Penn, and leaves her family in rural Guyana to follow her brother Arnie to London. In Britain, she is able to identify with the abandoned West Indian children she comes across whilst teaching and starts to foster and care for them. Arnie has meanwhile met, impregnated, and subsequently married a blonde, blue-eyed East German refugee, named Trudi. Through Trudi, Arnie and Melda, Gilroy explores the growing number of mixed race relationships in the 1950s Britain and the roots of the prejudice these couples faced. With great honesty, she depicts Melda's shock at Arnie's choice of a white partner especially when faced with the physical signs of Trudi's pregnancy. Growing up in the 1940s, Melda is unprepared for the idea of love between mixed races and this provokes anger: "Trudi, her belly now visibly swelling, bought me tea.[…] Trudi was not of the world I knew. She was different to us in every way–made of flesh over stone."[4] The two women struggle to come to terms with a relationship built on jealousy and misunderstanding. The novel explores the triangular relationship of Melda, Arnie, and Trudi. Melda and Trudi both suffer in different ways, having lost their homes and families. Eventually they help each other to heal past wounds.

The setting, broad themes, and conclusions of In Praise and Small Island lead to a similar point of understanding. Thematically, the novels focus on children, girls in particular, whose families gave them away in order to improve their prospects in life. The circumstances surrounding Melda's illegitimacy mean that she is treated so cruelly by her step-mother that she is sent away to Miss Penn. It is precisely because of her own experience of abandonment that Melda can help the children she meets. Hortense is sent away because she is light-skinned and her mother wishes to give her better opportunities. Queenie is sent away to live with Aunt Dorothy because she refuses to accept a life of drudgery on her parents' pig farm. Queenie gives her own mixed race baby to Hortense, believing that this is the best prospect for her child. Thus, in both novels, set in the post-war period, the future of a multicultural Britain is signalled by the birth of a mixed-race child. Moreover, both novels call attention to the prospects, potential, and limits of feminist agency and solidarity in an era of migration and social change. In Small Island, Gilbert, Hortense, and Queenie have a difficult relationship built on prejudice, including a misunderstanding that it is Gilbert who has fathered Queenie's child. In the final section,

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British writing about West Indian arrival. It is important for literary scholars to attend to this socio-historical perspective with its 'winners,' such as Levy, and its 'losers,' such as Gilroy. In this context, Gail Low's case study of published Anglophone Caribbean Writing 1950-1965 is especially noteworthy because she suggests the importance of understanding "… the network of connections between reviewers, publishers, readers, broadcasters and scholars […] to the promotion of the fledgling writers from the new Commonwealth."[5] Nonetheless, although Low examines the phenomenon of West Indian male writers' success in Britain in the 1950s and early 60s, she overlooks the histories of women writers of the same generation, failing to take into account why women writers failed to enjoy the same kind of success as their male counterparts. These occluded feminist literary histories of women writers continue to be reclaimed by scholars such as Evelyn O'Callaghan, Susheila Nasta, Carole Boyce Davies, Alison Donnell, and Sandra Courtman.[6]

To grasp fully the ways in which both Gilroy and Levy challenge our understanding of Windrush migration and its wider symbolic significance, we need to remember that this arrival story has largely been memorialised as masculine. The reasons for this are historical and political. Matthew Mead observes that the cultural memory of the Windrush often fails to represent accurately the far from homogenous group of migrants who came to Britain.[7] Historically, post-Second World War migration from the West Indies was part of a wider crisis in British national identity.[8] With an empire it could no longer afford and devastated by the losses of the Second World War, Britain was in the process of

> procedure, provoked by a nervousness about black immigration, and then appropriated by the Caribbean community and sympathetic others.[10]

A considered account of the facts we know about Windrush's arrival can only suggest the multifarious nature of its passengers and crew, totalling 1027 people, who largely disappear without trace into traumatised post-war Britain. As Mead suggests, knowledge of these factual slippages serves to illustrate that the mythologisation of Windrush's arrival was not only symptomatic of wider socio-cultural anxieties at the time but has also contributed to a reductive chronicle of the actual events. In fact, the pioneers who came, in Louise Bennett's famous words, to reverse the process of colonisation were not all West Indian males.[11] It is not just the "492" number that is reiterated. It must have taken more than a day to process the arrival of Windrush's passengers and although June 22nd is usually given as the historic date of arrival, it would appear that the ship must have docked a day before as June 21st is stamped on some passenger lists.[12] The Windrush's "Summary of British and Alien Passengers" enumerates the number of men, women, and children who are British citizens from the West Indies, alien refugees displaced during the War, stowaways, and members of the forces and crew.[13] Of the 941 adult passengers, 257 were women with 69 of them accompanied by their husbands and 188 travelling alone. Yet this female presence is often reduced to that of the tale of a courageous female stowaway, dressmaker—Evelyn Wauchape—whose relationship to the only other stowaway, Samuel Johnson, remains unknown. It is highly likely that both individuals would have concealed their identity from the port authorities, and Sam King, a passenger on the Windrush, contends that Evelyn's real name was Eva Buckley.[14] In terms of the other women passengers, we know nothing of what happened to the 66 displaced Polish women and children who boarded at Tampico, Mexico to be dispersed in camps and hostels across the UK. Of the 108 first class passengers, there are several women including the famous writer Nancy Cunard. The Windrush's multiple narratives of class, race and gender are occluded within the "492" male Jamaicans.

Although Andrea Levy was born in England, she has a strong personal connection to the history of Windrush through her father's migrant journey. Winston Levy travelled to England on the ship with his twin.[15] He numbered among the men who engendered the kinds of social anxieties that (as we have already seen) were exploited by the media. Yet, by the year of Levy's birth in 1956, media concerns had shifted to reflect the gender demographics of migration. A Picture Post article, entitled "Thirty Thousand Colour Problems," depicts young women arriving in Southampton on May 28th 1956 and disembarking from the SS Irpinia.[16] Images of respectable-looking women, sitting with their suitcases, are at odds with the headline that reads "Trouble and Distress Are Brewing." These young women (photographed by Haywood Magee) seem unlikely victims of a prostitution racket, but this is what Hilde Marchant's report suggests:

> […] with only a vague idea of what job they want to do, and their qualifications are even vaguer, except perhaps for their good looks [author's italics]. It is not unknown that the economics that drove her off the shores of her home have driven her on to the streets of London. A walk round the West End of London or some provincial city like Birmingham, readily confirms it.[17]

With this depiction of young West Indian women as morally slack and opportunistic, Marchant is peddling familiar racial and sexual stereotypes. Underlying a seeming concern for their moral welfare is a discourse of miscegenation-fear, comparable to the sort that percolates through Sam Selvon's The Lonely Londoners. Also published in 1956, Selvon's novel is a stream-of-consciousness narrative, either directly or as reportage, about the experience of a group of West Indian 'boys' who immigrate to London. The narrator's views of the prostitutes who trade in Hyde Park is uncomfortably close to the fears expressed by Marchant:

> […] also lately in view of the big set of West Indians that storming Brit'n it have a lot of dark women who in the racket too they have to make a living […] it have some white fellas who feel is a big thrill to hit a black number and the girls does make they pay big money but as far as spades hitting spades in ain't have nothing like that for a spade wouldn't hit a spade when it have so much other talent on parade.[18]

Aside from the narrator's affair with the city, there are no love stories in The Lonely
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Jamaican Joyce Gladwell’s 1969 autobiography, Brown Face, Big Master, which depicts,

quest for a white partner: “I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilisation and dignity and make them mine.”[30] Selvon also confronts a fear of miscegenation which is at the root of white racism. His characters’ liaisons are not without consequences as they face angry fathers or fear police intervention.

In many instances, male writers do not deal with some of the important personal themes that women authors focus on, such as unwanted pregnancies or successful love

However, the importance of women's stories had been foregrounded by the time Levy was writing about Queenie and Hortense. Her contemporary Caryl Phillips often narrates from his women characters' perspective. Dorothy's point of view is fully represented in his 2003 novel A Distant Shore. Phillips explains that her affair with the Indian Mahmood is unhealthy precisely because she is behaving like one of Selvon's women characters. Dorothy is also complicit in her own silence and passive in managing their mutual desire. He writes that "Dorot

Talented writers such as Eula Redhead, Inez Sibley, Marjorie Brown and

interview, I asked about her own role in developing Caribbean women's fiction and Walmsley remembered the following:

> Was I particularly interested in women writers? I ought to have been. I ought to have said—I'm a woman publisher, I ought to encourage these women to get on and write. But I did for text books—I did a lot of that. Oh dear, talk about falling into stereotypes—I encouraged Jean D'Costa to write for children—but I don't remember very much encouraging women to write fiction—I can't remember anyone who seemed interested in doing that really.[51]

This is, of course, a retrospective view and Walmsley is not the only female publisher to offer an important insight into the male dominated publishing industry of the 1960s. Athill's memoirs of the period, Stet, suggest that she was often treated more like a subordinate than a business partner.[52] In hindsight Walmsley is bound to regret any complicity in maintaining gender boundaries, which may have resulted in lost opportunities to develop fiction writers such as D'Costa and Gilroy. We can only speculate on how Gilroy's earliest manuscripts (In Praise of Love and Children and Sunlight on Sweet Water) might have been received in terms of the dominant literary and publishing apparatus. Gilroy has maintained that the main barrier to her development was not on account of a lack of sympathetic editors, like Walmsley and Athill, but as a result of the role played by "[m]ale readers for publishers."[53] Few British publishers would have been able to place Gilroy's work, even experimentally, on account of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the operational critical standard arising from knowledge of prevailing "modes of expression characteristic of a period, a civilisation or a school."[54]

The complex, hierarchical interplay of gender, race, class, and cultural difference played an especially important role in shaping black women's literary production during the 1950s and 1960s. At this time, the tradition of Caribbean literature was only just being recuperated and established through a body of new work. Gilroy describes how much of an outsider she felt when she tried to introduce her work to British publishing houses in the 1950s: "Talking with some about my writing brought the discussion to a dark and barren place. Their class-education had not prepared them for encounters with colonial minds."[55] It may not surprise us too much that the British publishing houses of the 1960s were resistant to black women's writing, especially as these organisations tended to be dominated by white males of a certain class background. However, Gilroy also met with opposition from West Indian male writers who were employed to read niche manuscripts

structure of In Praise less successful. In answer to a question about barriers to her general development as a novelist, Gilroy replied that a major factor was a "lack of guidance": "Someone to take your novel and say, look try to structure it in this way."[62] The two novels and their relative technical accomplishments are connected to the author's respective relations to a particular literary historical moment and aesthetic tradition. Their success is, in part, dependent on very different responses from publishers, awarding bodies, and readers to the structure of the two novels. Whereas In Praise is largely narrated through a limited first-person perspective, Levy uses her characters and their multiple perspectives as a structuring device for the novel as a whole. This fragmentation foregrounds the subjectivity of each character, leaving the reader to negotiate meaning based in his or her interpretation of each of these voices and their relations to one another in the fabric of the narrative as a whole. Whilst the stories may have some elements in common it is the narrative structure of the two novels which mark each as of its own time. According to David Lodge in The Art of Fiction,

> [t]he structure of a narrative is like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building: you can't see it, but it determines the edifice's shape and character. The effects of a novel's structure, however, are experienced over time—often quite a long time.[63]

The use of narrative structure and the arrangement of time highlight the distinctive ambitions of each writer. Levy explores a personal history that encompasses the experience of her parents' generation, but observes that this has grown into "a slightly bigger canvas in that for me now it's about placing the African-Caribbean experience within British history and how we got here."[64] This is why the white racist Bernard's story is given an equally compelling voice to that of her favourite character, the Jamaican, Gilbert.[65]

The reception of any literary work will inevitably be influenced by the availability of "paratextual framings of text

> exhibitions, competitions and workshops—took place in association with Small Island Read, and at least a hundred stories about the project appeared in the local, regional and national press.[68]

These paratextual contexts help to explain the important place of Small Island in contemporary British fiction, a reputation that was further enhanced by the BBC adaptation of the novel for television in 2009.

In Praise lacked the type of paratextual framings that would help readers understand its context. Gilroy tends to fills these gaps in knowledge with authorial interjections that ultimately compromise an imaginative engagement with the fictional character. For example, Gilroy's account of Melda, a teacher in London, switches from a first-person narrative perspective to a third-person authorial voice in order to offer a wider account of the failure of multiculturalism:

> Some teachers could cope with the white working classes and their concerns, but not with the problems of immigrants. These newly arrived children were co-operative and trusting—until they realised that nothing they did could truly please their teachers. It was as if they were expected to change their culture on the way to school each day, so the teachers could approve of them. Most teachers served only an English meal and if the children could not enjoy it, it was their fault. There were, though, a few teachers who understood that many of these children were culture-shocked. Where there was sympathetic support, it was surprising how quickly the children picked up English and peculiarities of the culture.[69]

This explanation guides its reader, suggesting how to interpret Melda's difficulties in a way that Small Island does not. As Lang asserts when writing about reader responses to Small Island, a reader's experience of the text will include: "the way in which reading is articulated to others in a dialogic process in which meaning is negotiated rather than fixed."[70] However, Reader Response and Reader Re

first-person narrator inevitably restricts her perspective to that of a single character. However, Melda's story strains at the leash of its simple structure through the introduction of flashbacks to Guiana, digressions concerning family members in New York, and authorial interjections, which seem to have little to do with advancing the plot. In many ways, we can see Gilroy experimenting with techniques that have subsequently become staples of postmodern fiction, such as temporal fragmentation and metafiction. Levy's Small Island circles back to earlier times (constantly cycling through the periods of "1948"and "Before") and deviates from linear plot progression. From the 'Small Island Read' research project, it seems that contemporary readers largely accepted the temporal fragmentation in Levy's novel. The project observed that Levy's skills in narrative technique had mostly helped "readers to overcome destabilizing effects such as chronological shifts and use of dialect."[74]

Postmodern Caribbean narratives have established a fictive continuum between past and present by moving much more freely in space and time. For instance, in Curdella Forbes' collection of short stories, Songs of Silence (2002), the narrator explains that these digressions and diversions are integral to her use of a Jamaican cultural form:

esteem, and we might recognise Hortense's affectations as a defence mechanism. Levy uses Hortense's self-regard to provide much needed humour at moments of high drama. Gilroy's use of humour may be less successful; she admits that "[a] lot of people miss the humour in my writing. I think it is excruciatingly funny. All the things I write."[84]

The effective use of humour is just one of Small Island's literary accomplishments in a story made relevant because of its timeliness. Levy observes: "I think this country is kind of ready to listen to that story now. It's been 60 years since the Empire Windrush came."[85] When Levy won the "Whitbread Book of the Year" in 2005, the judges' chairman was Sir Trevor McDonald. Growing up in Trinidad during the Windrush era, he was part of its history.[86] Whilst McDonald denied backing Levy's entry, he told a Guardian interviewer that it "emerged as a clear winner" because "it is a beautifully observed novel of a period of English history which many people seem not to know very much about."[87] Maria Helena Lima suggests that Levy's fictional terrain is personal: "It seems as if a return to the past is required for her protagonists to move on."[88] Whilst Gilroy writes in the heat of the moment, Levy's texts seem to address an audience made ready by their historical distance.[89] Small Island's place is inscribed in the Windrush memorial as a multiple prize-winning novel, a radio production, and a BAFTA-nominated television adaptation. It seems that In Praise has slipped between the cracks—metaphorically speaking—the victim of a shifting literary timeline which saw the promotion of writing by West Indian thatsw therec5.h thldamtatiol of sress

Endnotes

1 The Oxford Dictionaries Online gives the definition of “saga boy” as “playboy.” This term refers to a well-dressed, West Indian male who is a known chaser of women. oxforddictionaries.com/definition/saga+boy [accessed 26 August 2011].

2 Beryl Gilroy, Leaves in the Wind. Joan Anim-Addo, ed., London: Mango Publishing, 1998, 9.

3 Beryl Gilroy, “In Praise of Love and Children,” (unpublished paper, n.d.), 1.

4 Beryl Gilroy, In Praise of Love and Children. London: Peepal Tree, 1996, 55.

5 Gail Low, “‘Finding the Centre?’ Publishing Commonwealth Writing in London: The Case of Anglophone Caribbean Writing, 1950-1965,” The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 37 (2002): 21-38, 25.

6 For example: Evelyn O’Callaghan, Woman Version. London: Macmillan, 1993; Sushelia Nasta, ed., Motherlands. London: The Women’s Press, 1991; Carole Boyce Davies, Black Women, Writing and Identity. London: Routledge, 1994; Alison Donnell, “Heard but not Seen: Women's Short Stories and the BBC's Caribbean Voices Programme,” The Caribbean Short Story: Critical Perspectives, Lucy Evans, Mark McWatt, and Emma Smith, eds., Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011, 29-43; Sandra Courtman, “‘Lost Years’: The Occlusion of West Indian Women’s Writers in the Early Canon of Black British Writing,” Diasporic Literature and Theory- Where Now? Mark Shackleton, ed., Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008, 57-86.

7 Matthew Mead, “Empire Windrush: The Cultural Memory of an Imaginary Arrival,” Journal of Postcolonial Writing 45.2 (2009): 137-149, 137.

8 Mead, 137.

9 Ibid., 140.

10 Ibid., 146.

11 Louise Bennett, “Colonization in Reverse,” The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse. Paula Burnett, ed., London: Penguin, 1986, 32.

12 Names and descriptions of passengers arriving on M.V. Empire Windrush, Tilbury Docks, June 21/22, 1948. PRO/BT/1237/9411. “Moving Here: 200 years of Migration to England”: http://www.movinghere.org.uk/search/hitlist.asp?keywords=passenger+list+of+WINDRUSH&person=no&community=3&theme=0&date_from

22 Joyce Gladwell, Brown Face, Big Master, 2nd edn., Sandra Courtman, ed., Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean Classic Series, 2003. See Courtman's introduction for a discussion of the conditions which facilitated the publication of Gladwell's rare autobiography in 1969.

23 Elsewhere I have written more fully about the conditions which affected these women writers' careers. Gladwell's case is discussed in the introduction to a reprinted edition of Joyce Gladwell, Brown Face Big Master. Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean Classic Series, 2003. See also Sandra Courtman, "Not Good Enough or Not Man Enough? Beryl Gilroy as the Anomaly in the Evolving Black British Canon," A Black British Canon? Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, eds., Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 50-74.

76 Linda Hutcheon, “Telling Stories: Fiction and History,” Modernism/Postmodernism. Peter Brooker, ed. London: Longman Critical Readers, 1992, 235.

77 Busby, BBC broadcast “Caribbean Voices: Fifty Years On.”

78 Roxann Bradshaw, “Beryl Gilroy’s ‘Fact-Fiction’: Through the Lens of the ‘Quiet Old Lady’,” Callaloo, 25.2 (2002): 383.

79 Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. London: Verso, 1993.

80 Bradshaw, 394.

81 Claire Buck, ed. Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature. London: Bloomsbury, 1992, 578.

82 Bradshaw, 391.

83 Ibid., 396.

84 Ibid., 395.

85 “Andrea Levy’s Small Island Looks at Post-war Immigrants,” The Jamaica Observer 17 April 2005, 5.

86 John Ezard, “Small Island Claims Whitbread Prize,”