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"Telling Her a Story": Remembering Trauma in Andrea Levy's Writing

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Abstract

Focusing on the narration of traumatic histories of slavery and colonialism in Andrea Levy's recent novels, *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), *Small Island* (2004), and *The Long Song* (2010), this article argues that Levy's interest in bringing these histories to light is brought about by the loss of commemorative and narrative tradition caused by post-war migration. On the one hand, the dominant regimes of representation have positioned and constructed the West Indian colonial experience as external to mainstream British history. On the other hand, however, post-war West Indian migration to Britain was often accompanied by a desire to forget the traumatic histories of slavery and colonial subordination. Such postcolonial amnesia, this article argues, is confronted by Levy in passing on stories. In order to engage critically with the remembering and commemoration of trauma, this essay begins with a discussion of how collective traumas can be understood and memorialised. The notion of postmemory, as articulated by Marianne Hirsch, serves as a starting point for a dialogue about the relations between contemporary trauma theory and certain aspects of black British cultural theory. Bringing these two perspectives together can help to elucidate Levy's approach to the representation of repression and trauma. Ultimately, this article suggests that Levy's writing *in itself* is a performative act of postmemorialisation.

“Telling Her a Story”: Remembering Trauma in Andrea Levy’s Writing

Ole Birk Laursen

In her recent fiction, particularly *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), *Small Island* (2004), and *The Long Song* (2010), Levy has been concerned with exploring the traumatic collective histories and legacies of slavery, colonialism, and post-war migration to Britain.¹ In this article, I argue that this interest is brought about by the historical rupture of post-war West Indian migration to Britain—symbolised by the arrival of the MV *Empire Windrush* in 1948—which caused a loss of commemorative and narrative tradition. The dominant regimes of representation that positioned and subjected black people as Others within the categories of the West continue to haunt the postcolonial era in the form of modern racism, leaving certain traumatic histories such as slavery, colonialism, and post-war migration outside mainstream British history. At the same time, on the part of the migrant, the attempt to start a new life in Britain was frequently accompanied by a desire to forget the histories of slavery and colonial subordination. Confronting such historical silences and thinking about how traumatic histories can be mediated, I will argue that Levy’s work addresses this rupture through the form and content of her writing. In this sense, Levy’s works should not merely be examined as socio-historical texts but as an aesthetic oeuvre that memorialises the experiences of slavery, colonialism, and migration.

These observations relate to Levy’s motivations for writing *The Long Song*, which revolves around the daily lives of slaves and slave-owners in Jamaica around the time of the Baptist Wars (1831-1832) and Emancipation (1834). Responding to a young girl’s question about how she [the young girl] could be proud of her Jamaican roots when her ancestors had been slaves, Levy asked herself: “Could a novelist persuade this young woman to have pride in her slave ancestors through telling her a story?”² Addressing the question of how memories of traumatic collective experiences are memorialised, trauma theorist Marianne Hirsch theorises the concept of “postmemory,” which “characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by events that can neither be understood nor recreated.”³ Her argument relates to Paul Gilroy’s claim that the telling and retelling of stories of loss, exile, and migration serve as nodal points in the social memory of black people. The continual narration of traumatic histories of slavery, colonialism, and migration, he says, serve to “invent, maintain and renew identity,” thus creating a collective, shared cultural identity.⁴ Although developed in relation to the commemoration of the Holocaust, Hirsch argues that the concept “may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences.”⁵ However, while examining Levy’s writing—and specifically the memorialisation of traumatic events—through the concept of “postmemory,” this article will complicate and extend the term to suggest that, in Levy’s writing, memories of slavery, colonialism, and migration are *not* necessarily passed on

from one generation to the next. Rather, I will argue that Levy's writing *itself* constitutes a form of postmemory.

In order to engage intellectually with the notion of trauma, the absence of collective memory and the memorialisation of slavery, colonialism, and migration in Levy's writing, in the first part of this article, I will briefly define and explore the term trauma and its historical context. Considering issues of repression, the processes of working through trauma, and the belated nature of traumatic experiences, I will examine how these ideas have served to advance certain traumatic experiences as paradigmatic at the expense of others. In the last twenty years, drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, a literary-critical fascination with the unspeakable nature of trauma and its belated effects has developed through an emphasis on the Holocaust. Thinking about traumatic experiences outside the Euro-American context, I will briefly map the critical engagement with trauma in postcolonial studies. Building on critical inquiries, especially the work of cultural critics Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and Homi Bhabha, I will highlight the complex issue of narrating collective traumas in contemporary black British literature. In particular, I will examine how the historical rift of Windrush has caused a belated sense of trauma, which demands a remembering of the past in order to make sense of the present.

Theorising Trauma: The Politics of Remembering

Since the late nineteenth century, the concept of trauma has taken on a psychological meaning, which places primary emphasis on a wound to the mind rather than the body. In this article, the term trauma is used in this sense, meaning an experience, or a series of experiences, that alters the state of mind of the victim. For J. M. Charcot, Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, trauma is understood as an experience that shatters the victim's capacity to cognitively comprehend what happened; indeed, the traumatic event is repressed, and the victim is unable to represent it. Consequently, this leads to an "identity crisis" on the part of the victim. Attempting to treat the disorder, Charcot applied hypnosis, while Breuer developed his "talking cure," and Freud drew on Charcot's and Breuer's procedures to develop his own form of psychoanalysis where the patient would reconstruct the traumatic event through interpretation and free association. This is referred to as *mimesis*, where the patient through words mimics the traumatic event with the help of the psychoanalyst. Another characteristic of traumatic experience, Freud says, is the reliving of the experience in flashbacks. In this sense, trauma is both the initial blow to the mind and the conscious reliving of the experience later.⁶ These understandings of trauma—and the treatments of it—are relevant for exploring trauma in literature. However, while influential, the early clinical work of Freud and others left some areas unexamined: first, non-European experiences of trauma and, second, collective traumatic events.

In the 1990s, a new literary-critical fascination with the unspeakable nature of trauma occurred—particularly within United States-based academia—which developed into the critical field known as Trauma Studies. While Freud focused primarily on personal mental disorders, trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth have given considerable attention to the long-term impact of collectively experienced traumas such as the Holocaust.⁷ Within

Trauma Studies, the Holocaust has occupied a prominent place, prompting Andreas Huyssen to call it a "master signifier" of the "culture of memory" and critics Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman to argue that it represents "the watershed of our times," the unspeakability of which has led to a "*radical historical crisis in witnessing*."⁸ Yet, despite this supposed crisis of witnessing, Laub and Felman stress the importance of language for experiencing, recognising, and understanding trauma. This is echoed by Cathy Caruth, who argues that the processes of speaking and listening are essential for understanding the "inherent belatedness" of trauma.⁹ Drawing on Freud, Caruth claims that it is only through this belatedness that trauma is experienced in the first place. In relation to the Jewish history of displacement and the Holocaust, Caruth argues that, since the sheer scale and terror of the Holocaust leads to a crisis in witnessing, "it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time."¹⁰ This insight is illuminating for understanding contemporary black British trauma narratives, especially for Levy who explores the connections between her present location in Britain and the histories of the Caribbean under empire.

Caruth's notion of belatedness is developed further by Marianne Hirsch, whose concept of "postmemory" is instructive. Conceived with particular reference to the Holocaust and using photographs as a medium, she says that

postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their own birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated.¹¹

Postmemory is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection."¹² Hirsch's concept presumes both a linear progression and a generational difference between those who experienced the Holocaust and the children of those who survived. In the face of the possibility of historical extinction, the retelling of stories of the traumatic nature of the Holocaust establishes a modern, post-Holocaust collective identity for Jewish people. These stories are, according to Hirsch, passed on from one generation to the next in mediated form. Moreover, as Hirsch goes on to claim, "I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences."¹³ Gilroy's argument that the telling and retelling of stories of collective traumatic experiences are essential for cultural identity is particularly useful when considering the role of narrative as a means of working through the trauma of empire.

The centrality of trauma to the understanding and overcoming of slavery and colonialism has long been noted by influential thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said.¹⁴ More recently, Leela Gandhi has argued that "postcolonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past."¹⁵ In a similar vein, in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy acknowledges the work of

Fanon but still asks why critics have been reluctant to consider a correspondence between the histories of blacks and Jews. Taking up the challenge, Gilroy argues that within black cultural production—and here Gilroy refers particularly to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) but also to the work of C. L. R. James and W. E. B. Du Bois—the desire to return to the traumatic history of slavery and explore it imaginatively offers “a means to restage confrontations between rational, scientific and enlightened Euro-American thought and the supposedly primitive outlook of prehistorical, cultureless and bestial African slaves.”¹⁶

Some critics have considered how we might analyse various collective traumatic experiences without resorting to a hierarchical and competitive ideology. Michael Rothberg proposes that “we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative.”¹⁷ In this sense, memory is conceived as a discursive space where cultural identities are formed in dialogical interactions with others—not silencing histories, but displacing them. Looking beyond the age of decolonisation, this article brings Rothberg's insights into the realm of contemporary black British literature. A similar interest in postcolonial trauma is found in Sam Durrant's *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (2004).¹⁸ While his study does not engage with trauma in the black British context, it provides a useful model for thinking about the memorialisation of collective traumatic experiences such as slavery and colonialism. Building on Gilroy's work in *The Black Atlantic*, Durrant says that postcolonial narratives are caught between two commitments: on the one hand, the recovery of the individual subject, where mourning is a process of attaining closure, and, on the other hand, the remembering of collective traumatic experiences that foster a sense of cultural identity. He argues that “postcolonial narrative enables us to work through our *relation* to history; it is not a communal act so much as an act of creating community.”¹⁹ As such, black British trauma narratives might also be said to foster a sense of community, especially in the context of diasporic identity formation.

Diasporic Trauma: Collective Memory and Cultural Identity

The narration of personal and collective traumas in black British literature is complicated by and through the history of diasporic formation. In Gilroy's view, unspeakable terrors such as slavery and colonialism are inherent to the black Atlantic diasporic experience. He argues that cultural identity hinges on “remembrance and commemoration defined by a strong sense of the dangers involved in forgetting the location of origin and the tearful process of dispersal.”²⁰ Echoing Hirsch's notion of “postmemory,” Gilroy suggests in *The Black Atlantic* that the retelling and commemoration of slavery and serve a mnemonic function that organises the social memory of the group. However, a close reading of Levy's writing suggests that the transmission and sharing of memories is a more complicated process than Gilroy suggests.

If the historical rupture of the Holocaust led to a crisis in witnessing for the Jewish diaspora, the Second World War also prompted other kinds of historical ruptures that may be considered in dialogue with the Holocaust. We might consider the trauma of Partition

in South Asia and the painful processes of decolonisation throughout Africa and the Caribbean alongside the promise of migration to Britain—as symbolised by *Windrush*—and the voluntary separation from a common, shared collective identity elsewhere.²¹ According to Stuart Hall, post-war migration has led to two ways of thinking about cultural identity: first, as “one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.”²² His understanding relates to the shared experiences of slavery and colonialism that have been brought to light in order to establish an essential “black” identity in the name of anti-colonial and anti-racist movements, for instance. This view offers an “imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas.”²³ Second, however, Hall also offers another position that recognises that, “as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather—since history has intervened—‘what we have become.’”²⁴ By contrast to Durrant’s point that individuals seek closure, in psychoanalytical terms, Hall posits that the differences between people are crucial for understanding the traumatic character of the colonial experience. He observes:

far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.²⁵

Hall’s comments highlight the intricate connections between various histories that place the individual in the collective history: the personal life story becomes a part of the collective, shared memory.

Contemporary black British writers of Caribbean descent have increasingly engaged with the traumatic experiences of slavery, colonialism and migration in their writing. Briefly put, this has tended to take two forms: first, in various ways, Levy’s *The Long Song*, David Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999), Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), S. I. Martin’s *Incomparable World* (1996), and Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge* (1991) revisit the history of black people in Britain before the Windrush generation.²⁶ Establishing a long history of black people in Britain, these texts return to and re-imagine the traumatic history of slavery in order to maintain, invent, and renew black British identity, to echo Gilroy. Second, in *Fruit of the Lemon*—as well as in work such as Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara* (1997), Lucinda Roy’s *Lady Moses* (1998), and Jenny McLeod’s *Stuck Up a Tree* (1998)—a return to the shared, collective history of the Caribbean is presented as problematic or not viable.²⁷ This, in turn, causes a crisis of identity, in the Freudian sense, which can only be resolved by re-imagining the initial event. In this context, it is useful to consider how Levy’s aesthetic oeuvre has travelled from struggling to engage with a collective black history to commemorating and retelling traumatic histories of slavery, colonialism, and migration.

Empire's Child: Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*

In the concluding pages of *Fruit of the Lemon*, the narrator, Faith, proclaims, "I am the bastard child of Empire and I will have my day," after returning from Jamaica where she has discovered her ancestry.²⁸ Faith's declaration, which points as much to the past as it does to the future, is crucial for understanding Levy's interest in the traumatic histories of slavery, colonialism, and migration. In the context of the black British experience, I propose that Jamaican migration to Britain in the post-war years produced a historical rift between the collective, shared memory of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean, and the experience of racism in contemporary Britain. In other words, I argue that the generation of West Indians who grew up in societies shaped by the historical experiences of slavery and colonialism did not pass on those histories to their children. As a consequence, I suggest, the children who grew up in Britain at that time may have little understanding of how modern racism is rooted in the traumatic histories of slavery and colonialism.

Throughout the novel, the main character, Faith, is subject to a number of racist experiences that deny her subjectivity and agency, and place her in a collective history—to which she has no immediate access—outside of British history. In response to the fracturing of memory and history, Levy explores the links between Jamaica and Britain, especially through the experiences of slavery, colonialism, and migration, throughout her work. In what follows, I attend to the question of how the protagonist negotiates her individual experience of growing up in Britain with the collective history of slavery and colonialism in Jamaica. Moreover, I address how, through writing, Levy is able to work through trauma. Attending to these questions, this section will first introduce Levy and work. The analysis will then focus on *Fruit of the Lemon* in order to examine how a series of racist experiences eventually lead to Faith's breakdown, which initiates a process of working through trauma.

Born in London in 1956 to Jamaican parents, Levy grew up on council estates in North London. Her father served in the RAF during the Second World War and returned to Britain on the SS *Empire Windrush* in June of 1948 with her mother following shortly after. Levy worked in the Royal Opera House and the BBC costume departments before turning to writing in her mid-thirties. Inspired by African American writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker and books published by feminist presses, such as Virago and The Women's Press, Levy wanted to write the novels that she, as a young black woman, had always wanted to read: "I was desperate to go into a bookshop, pick up a book and read about being Black in Britain and not having come from somewhere else, of actually being born here and having to create your own identity."²⁹

Levy's fictions about the children of Windrush and the black British experience draw on many aspects of her own coming-of-age experiences and family background. For instance, after attending a creative writing class, Levy drew on her own experience of council flats as well as the death of her father as inspiration for her first novel, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994).³⁰ Set in the North London of the 1960s, Levy's debut novel revolves around the young Angela, who relives her childhood years as her ailing father

goes through the National Health Service. Her second novel, *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996), also set on a council estate in North London, details the adolescence of two very different sisters, Vivien and Olive, in the 1970s.³¹ In those two novels, Levy narrates her subjectivity into the national story of Britain in relation to her parents. In *Fruit of the Lemon*, however, Levy extends her aesthetic gaze beyond the present when she explores her past:

The first three [novels] I see as a baton race, passing the baton on to the next person. I suppose it was about exploring aspects of my life, although in fiction. I didn't research it, obviously; it was there in my head for those three books. [...] with *Fruit of the Lemon*, I started that backward look, when Faith goes into her family, once I had actually asked my mum about our family and gone to history books and had a look. Before I wasn't so interested in the link between Jamaica, the Caribbean and Britain. I was much more, "we're black British, we're here, and how are we going to move on?" And that's absolutely part of what I do, too, but I didn't think that looking backwards was so important, whereas now I think it is absolutely important and so fascinating.³²

From the outset, Levy challenges racism in contemporary Britain through claims of citizenship: "we're black British, we're here."³³ This assertion sheds light on Levy's exploration of her collective history and cultural identity: "how are we going to move on?"³⁴

These complex issues of postcolonial identity formation are dramatically presented through the story of Faith who experiences an identity crisis on account of experiences of racism in Britain. At school, two kinds of racism are shown to be at play, Faith, is bullied by boys who tauntingly say, "Your mum and dad came on a banana boat" (3). Faith is unable to respond to their remarks because her parents have not shared with her their stories of migration to Britain. Moreover, at an institutional level, her history lessons at school have taught her nothing about the West Indian migration to Britain in the post-war years. Subsequently, Faith is surprised when her mother remarks, "We came on a banana boat to England, your dad and me. The Jamaica Producers' banana boat" (3). Remembering the illustrations of slave ships from her history lessons, Faith pictures them "curled up on the floor of a ship, wrapped in a blanket perhaps, trying to find a comfortable spot amongst the spiky prongs of unripe bananas" (4). On one level, this wilful repression—or "postcolonial amnesia" as Gandhi calls it—happens because of the parents' desire for self-invention in Britain. On another level, her parents have repressed their history in Jamaica because it is too traumatic to be told:

My mum and dad never talked about their lives before my brother Carl and I were born, they didn't sit us in front of the fire and tell long tales of life in Jamaica—of palm trees and yams and playing by rivers. There was no 'oral tradition' in our family. Most of my childhood questions to them were answered with, 'That was a long time ago,' or 'What you want to know about that for?' And if mum ever let something slip—'You know your dad lived in a big house,'—then I was told with a wagging finger not to go blabbing it to my friends, not to repeat it to anyone. (4)

This separation from family history renders Faith unaware of her own collective cultural identity.

In less obvious ways, however, the tension between her individual cultural identity and the collective experience of the black diaspora is evident in her workplace experiences. Her employer, Olivia, remarks as follows: "Your work has an ethnicity which shines through A sort of African or South American feel which is obviously part of you" (31). In what is both a form of intimacy and distancing, Faith's cultural identity is described as different from that of Olivia. Unaware of this African or South American feel, Faith responds: "As I was born and bred in Haringey I could only suppose that I had some sort of collective unconscious that was coming through from my slave ancestry" (31). In this case, Faith is made to bear a cultural history that bears no relation to her own experience as a British citizen or her parents' own cultural background.

In a later episode, when working for the BBC Television costume department, the complexities of her cultural identity are again exposed. Although now working for the BBC, an institution that might be seen as a guardian of British social and cultural identity, she is hampered when she wants to apply for a job as a dresser: "But they don't have black dressers" (70), says her new boss, Lorraine, and continues, "Oh sorry, ... I don't mean to be horrible but it's just what happens here" (71). This institutionalised racism is not directly aimed at Faith. In fact, Lorraine encourages Faith to apply anyway: "you'll probably be all right because everyone likes you" (71). Nonetheless, Faith is invariably interpellated as black, but not like other black people, while Lorraine identifies herself as white, but not like other white racist people. Relating to Hall's second notion of diasporic cultural identity, in these instances, Faith does not position herself in the narratives of the past. On the contrary, in the words of Hall, Faith is "positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation", which simultaneously disavow and affirm a sense of racism in Britain.³⁵

Eventually, Faith realises that her sense of a collective black diasporic cultural identity is as important to her as the intersections of gender and class. She accompanies her roommate Marion and Marion's father to a poetry reading, which includes a presentation by a black poet at the end of the evening. When Faith sees him, she becomes aware of her own black cultural identity:

Suddenly, as I looked up at this black poet I became aware that the poet and me were the only black people in the room. I looked around again—it was now a room of white people.

I became nervous waiting for the poet to start. I was thinking, 'Please be good, please.' The poet became my dad, my brother, he was the unknown black faces in our photo album, he was the old man on the bus who called by sister, the man in the bank with the strong Trinidadian accent who could not make him understood. He was every black man—ever. (92)

Faith internalises this nervous condition of black people, so when Marion's father comments happily on the poet leaving the stage, Faith realises that his racist remarks are just as much aimed at her as they are at the black poet. Suppressing the issue of race,

Marion excuses her father's remarks, suggesting that it is "a cultural thing" (93). Marion invokes her working-class background, goes into a Marxist and feminist rant. She assures Faith: "all racism would be swept away after the revolution. As a feminist we were all sisters" (94). Marion continues:

These things can be so easily internalised and I wouldn't want you to. I mean as a woman in this society I think I know how you must feel. I can understand that you might be angry by what you heard in my house today, for example. It's going to take time but the working classes are already forming allegiances with a lot of black organisations... (94)

Realising that racism cuts across gender and class, Faith finally shouts: "Oh shut up Marion!" (94).

Awakening to the sense of a collective black diasporic cultural identity, based on the shared, common experiences of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean, Faith confronts those intricate connections between Britain and Jamaica. When she visits the countryside with her friend Simon, they go to a pub where they meet a man, Andrew Bunyan, who asks Faith:

'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 from Jamaica.'

'Well, you see, I thought that,' he began. 'As soon as you walked in I thought I bet she is from Jamaica.'

'Just my parents are,' I added but he went on. (130)

When Bunyan tells her about going to Jamaica and meeting a man who shared his last name, Faith retorts: "Well, the thing is, that would have been his slave name, you see Your family probably owned his family once" (131). In this instance, Levy demonstrates that the history of slavery should not be "allocated exclusively to the victims"—in Gilroy's words—but acknowledged and confronted by the white British as well.

Levy engages with racism in 1970s Britain. Faith and her friend Simon witness a racist attack on a black woman who works in a bookshop that carries gay and lesbian and black and "Third World" fiction. Adding to the shock of the experience and telling of the period, the police brush off the attack: "They say they're National Front but they're not, they're just a bunch of thugs" (154). When Simon protests, the police officers blame the bookshop for bringing this onto themselves: "We've told them not to have people in their shop on their own. I mean, they're just asking for trouble" (154). In the wake of the assault, two different stories emerge: indicating that the event shatters her capacity to comprehend fully what has happened on a cognitive level, Faith is unable to remember significant parts of the assault. By contrast, Simon appropriates the event and relates the story to their roommates:

The story sounded different when Simon retold it. It gained more menace with hindsight. It was now a fact that three men walked into a bookshop in daylight and hit someone over the head with a blunt instrument because they didn't like them. It was real. Not something skipped over in the local paper or tutted about at the dinner table (155).

Racial difference and racism emerge as fundamental themes as Faith and her friends work through the traumatic event. Crucially, Faith interrupts Simon's story twice to remind her friends that "the woman that was struck on the head was black like me. And both times Simon and Mick had looked at me and nodded" (156). Consequently, unable to share the experience in the company of her white friends, she resolves, "What it all comes down to in the end is black against white. It was simple. It was so simple" (159). Hoping to relate the story to her parents, Faith returns to her parents: they would understand how she felt - black on the outside and cowardly custard-yellow on the inside" (158). However, she is not met by an understanding family at her home. Instead, she is surprised to meet another family: her brother's 'black' girlfriend, Ruth, has come with her 'white family' members to pay a visit. This episode demonstrates how the histories of Britain and its colonies are intertwined, and the impossibility of constructing essential white or black family histories. Realising that family narratives constructed along racial lines are inadequate, Faith's perception of the world crumbles: "I couldn't look into [Ruth's] eyes. It was simple. I felt dizzy. It was so simple. I ran" (160). The episode suggests that, as she was hoping to return to the comfort of a collective black history through her parents, such perception of an essential "black" collective cultural identity is also untenable. Indeed, it is only through an understanding of the hybrid nature of Jamaica that Faith can come to terms with her own place in that history.

Throughout the first part of the novel, Faith undergoes a transformation that eventually leads to her breakdown. Growing up in 1960s and 1970s Britain, she has no desire for a homeland elsewhere and her experience of diaspora is different from that of her parents. Faith does not have a sense of a black diasporic cultural identity that hinges on the memory of the shared, collective experience of slavery and colonialism. Instead, she is positioned within the dominant regimes of representation that makes her see herself as other. Subject to these racist experiences, she gradually awakens to a sense of essential "black" collective identity, but Levy shows that this position is untenable too. In other words, these racist experiences cause a wound to the mind that she—at the time—is unable to register or, indeed, represent. This leads to a "crisis of identity" which she attempts to resolve by denying her black cultural identity altogether:

I got into bed. But as my eyes adjusted to the dark I could see my reflection in the wardrobe mirror. A black girl lying in a bed. I covered the mirror with a bath towel. I didn't want to be black any more. I just wanted to live. The other mirror in the room I covered with a tee-shirt. *Voila!* I was no longer black (160).

Following her breakdown, Faith's mother encourages her to go to Jamaica because, as she says, "Child, everyone should know where they come from" (162). In the second part of the novel, Levy challenges those dominant regimes of representation that position her outside British history and shows the intricate connections between British and Jamaica.

Through the interweaving of histories, Levy's novel can be seen as enabling the processing of working through trauma.

Considering the narratological part—the way Levy memorialises the experiences of slavery, colonialism, and migration—the structure of the novel is significant. In the absence of memories passed on from her parents, Faith's experience of diaspora is not dominated by narratives that preceded her birth. Those narratives, however, are related to her in Jamaica by family members. As she has little knowledge of her family history, upon arrival in Jamaica, Faith's family tree is limited to herself, her brother and her parents. Her experience of growing up in Britain contrasts with her experience of arriving in Jamaica: "everything was a little familiar but not quite. Like a dream. Culture shock is how the feeling is described" (169). If, in Britain, Faith's sense of belonging hinged on her being black, then, in Jamaica, Levy shows that being black does not necessarily mean that she is at home there. Indeed, the notion of belonging hinges also on the process of narrating subjectivity into the past. Moreover, for Faith, a sense of belonging is linked to the need to be accepted by indigenous Jamaicans, especially family members. Hence, Faith's sense of belonging in Jamaica occurs through the narration of her family history by family members. In Jamaica, Faith gains a sense of her family history through the "oral tradition," a tradition which has been silenced or forgotten by her family in England. Her family in Jamaica tells stories by family members *of* family members: "Coral's Story told to me by Coral," "Wade's Story told to me by Violet," and "Cecelia's Story told to me by Vincent" are among the many examples. These narratives trace trajectories to the black diasporic community of Harlem, New York City, through the history of skilled Jamaican labourers who worked on the construction of the Panama Canal, and to ancestors and family members in Cuba and Scotland. She learns of her slave ancestry while also discovering a story of a plantation owner from England and learning about relations to others of Scottish, Arawak, and Indian descent. This rich family history attests to the hybrid and transnational nature of Jamaican identity. The telling and retelling of these family stories serve as nodal points in the collective socio-cultural identity of Jamaica. Importantly, these personal stories highlight differences within a seemingly coherent black experience in Jamaica. As memories of her past are revealed, Faith forges a connection with her shared, collective Jamaican cultural identity. Yet, she remains aware of her English cultural identity as a black British subject, which forms one branch of a wider narrative web.

Before she went to Jamaica, Faith believed that her history began when her parents arrived in Britain on a banana boat: "I thought that my history started when the ship carrying my parents sailed from Jamaica and docked in England on Guy Fawkes' night" (325). In Jamaica, however, she is introduced to a shared history of slavery, colonialism, and diasporic identity, which includes black Jamaican relatives in the United States as well as Jewish and white English ancestors. In short, she gains a sense of a wider history, which was kept from her because the memory of it was too traumatic to pass on. Faith observes:

The country where I live, among people so unaware of our shared past that all they would see if they were staring at my aunt would be a black woman acting silly.

Let those bully boys walk behind me in the playground. Let them tell me, 'You're a darkie. Faith's a darkie.' I am the granddaughter of Grace and William Campbell. I am the great-grandchild of Cecelia Hilton. I am descended from Katherine whose mother was a slave. I am the cousin of Afria. I am the niece of Coral Thompson and the daughter of Wade and Mildred Jackson. Let them say what they like. Because I am the bastard child of Empire and I will have my day (326-7).

This testimonial, taken from the final pages of the novel, bears witness to Faith's transformation in Jamaica. She asserts a collective, shared history of slavery, colonialism, and migration among all Britons, black and white alike. Having discovered a collective history, Faith reclaims a wider history, acknowledging the hybrid nature of Jamaica. In doing so, she is able to confront and overcome the trauma of modern racism in Britain.

Passing On Memories: *Small Island* and *The Long Song*

The aesthetics of remembering and narrating traumatic collective experiences, which also surface in *Small Island* and *The Long Song*, might be analysed in the light of Hirsch's notion of postmemory. Where Hirsch places emphasis on the role of the photograph, arguing that the ghostly traces of family members provide a mode of passing on memories of collective traumatic experiences, I want to focus on the role of oral storytelling, which has been essential to the creation of cultural identity and the passing on of memories in West Indian societies. Without setting up a hierarchical relationship between photography and literature or orality and literacy, I want to think further about but how Levy memorialises collective traumatic events in her writing and, indeed, how literature functions as a mode of passing on memories. This is particularly pertinent when considering the inherent belatedness and impossibility of representing trauma.

Following on from *Fruit of the Lemon*, where family members tell stories of other family members to Faith, Levy employs a non-linear narrative structure and four narrators in *Small Island* to tell the story. In doing this, she addresses the historical rupture of the Windrush—symbolised in the novel by its division into two sections entitled "Before" and "1948"—and complicates the notion that the history of migration belongs only to those who migrated. Bringing together the histories of two Jamaicans (Gilbert Joseph and Hortense Roberts) and two white Britons (Queenie and Bernard Bligh), Levy confronts the silences that often accompanied West Indian migration to Britain. Moreover, however, this narratological strategy equally prompts Britain's white English population to reassess the history of post-war national identity. Each of these characters has a distinct voice and a personal story to tell: the individual tales are both intricately connected and interdependent. Specifically, I will focus on how each narrator experiences and represents three specific issues: colonialism, the Second World War, and migration.

Colonialism impacts each of the characters in different ways. For Hortense Roberts, the colonial education and her light skin—"the colour of warm honey" (38)—has instilled

in her a particular sense of class identity. She sees herself as superior to other West Indians: "My recitation of 'Ode to a Nightingale' had earned me a merit star and the honour of ringing the school bell for a week" (16-17). Trained as a school teacher, she yearns to migrate to England, partly because she believes that her refined and well-behaved manners are typically English. She has internalised colonial values, viewing herself as superior to other, darker-skinned West Indians. For Gilbert, colonialism entails an immense sense of feeling British. His colonial education has taught him to revere the Mother Country: "this relation is so dear a kin that she is known as Mother" (139). This intimate bond inspires him to join the Royal Air Force when the War breaks out. Through their colonial education, both have attained sense of Britishness that does not correspond with reality.

Giving voice to Queenie and Bernard, both of whom are white English subjects, Levy depicts life in Britain before the War. The novel is prefaced by the young Queenie's visit to the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, where she encounters a black man for the first time. This meeting instils in her a curiosity and open-mindedness towards black people. In contrast to Hortense, Queenie is barred from education by her father who wants her to work on his farm. Seeking to escape life on a farm, she seizes the opportunity to work in her aunt Dorothy's sweet shop in London where she meets Bernard Bligh. Although she dislikes him from the outset, she is forced to marry him after her aunt dies. A product of an imperialist upbringing, he remains a deeply racist character throughout the novel. However, in giving voice to him, Levy implies that this racism stems from his colonial education.

Bernard's experience of violence in post-Partition India (1947) illuminates how the Second World War was linked to the Partition of India. In many ways, the Second World War and the Partition of India precipitated the dismantling of the British Empire and the instantiation of the British Nationality Act of 1948, which conferred British citizenship to its colonial subjects. Upon his return to Jamaica after the War, Gilbert finds that there are few opportunities for him there. Now a British citizen, he decides to return to Britain, but needs money. Entering a marriage of convenience—much like Queenie and Bernard—Hortense lends him money so he can travel to England on the *Windrush* and set up a home for them so she can join him six months later. Faced with racism, Gilbert struggles to find both a job and proper accommodation; he finally calls on Queenie, who takes him in as a lodger. As Hortense joins him later and Bernard returns unexpectedly from India, their stories become inextricably entangled. As an aesthetic exercise in narrating the collective experience of migration to Britain, Levy's strategy of employing four narrators complicates the notion that *Windrush*—as a collective experience and a historical rupture—belongs only to Britain's black community. Instead, in re-imagining and reliving the event through four distinct narrators, *Windrush* is imaginatively experienced anew as central to British history. In this sense, *Small Island*, a carefully crafted work of literature, functions as postmemory in itself.

Set entirely in the nineteenth century, Levy's most recent novel, *The Long Song*, adopts a different narratological strategy to tell the story of slavery in Jamaica in the years around Emancipation. The impetus behind Levy's motivation for writing the novel—

"telling her story"—speaks about the silence surrounding Britain's history of slavery in Jamaica. Drawing on a wealth of archival material, personal testimonies by plantation owners, and slave narratives, Levy gives voice to the people who endured slavery. "Writing fiction", she says, "is a way of putting back the voices that were left out."³⁶ In exploring histories that she had only hinted at in *Fruit of the Lemon*, Levy delves deeper into the beginnings of the intricately connected histories of Britain and Jamaica. Yet, considering the silences and gaps in history, how can the story of slavery, as experienced by a slave, be passed on?

Employing the strategy of the unreliable, reluctant narrator, the novel is told by July to her son Thomas in the late nineteenth century. Resembling the scene of Freudian psychoanalysis, where the patient reconstructs the traumatic event through interpretation and free association. Playing with the boundaries of narrator and protagonist, the story of July is told in the third person, and it is not until later it is revealed that the narrator and the protagonist are one and the same. In several instances, the son points out the inaccuracies in his mother's story. Psychoanalytic critics and trauma theorists often note that the original traumatic event cannot be entirely reconstituted, thus posing issues with respect to representation, Levy's responds to the crisis of representation by offering a creatively re-imagined history, which constantly calls attention to issues of representation in highly self-conscious ways. From the outset, Levy establishes a complicated relationship between the main character, July, the narrator, her son Thomas, and the reader that bears on the difficulty of narrating trauma. The tale takes the form of a framed narrative: set within *The Long Song*, there is another book, told by Thomas. On the inside cover of the novel, Thomas addresses the reader of the book (his book, the story he is told by his mother) and explains that she is passing on those stories to her son so that he can put them into writing: "Her intention was that, once knowing the tale, I would then, at some other date, convey its narrative to my own daughters" (1). The metafictional transcription of an oral narrative also provides a forum for passing on memories. This duplex narrative strategy enables Levy to give voice to those who have not been heard in dominant narratives of that era. Moreover, Levy reclaims the story of everyday life in Jamaica during the colonial era, offering a history that supplements and complicates our understanding of the horrors of slavery.

While the notion of postmemory is at play in the novel, the aesthetics of *The Long Song* also serve to confront historical silences and challenge dominant histories. The telling and re-telling of the story of slavery, as Gilroy says, serve to reclaim a wider and more complicated sense of the history of colonialism. However, initiating the difficult process of re-telling this complex history in *Fruit of the Lemon*, and continuing in both *Small Island* and *The Long Song*, Levy extends these insights and shows that the collective experiences of slavery, colonialism, and migration should be conceived as part of a more expansive history of Britain. As Levy has become increasingly interested in exploring and narrating the complexities of Britain's colonial past, her work continues to confront the silences of the past. As such, by working through the traumatic narratives of the past, her aesthetic oeuvre serves as a communal act of recovery for fostering a wider sense of community in modern-day Britain.

Endnotes

- 1 Andrea Levy, *Fruit of the Lemon*. London: Headline Review, 1999; Andrea Levy, *Small Island*. London: Headline Review, 2004; Andrea Levy, *The Long Song*. London: Headline Review, 2010.
- 2 Andrea Levy, "The Writing of *The Long Song*": www.andrealevy.co.uk [accessed 5 February 2011].
- 3 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1997, 22.
- 4 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993, 198.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 22
- 6 For more on Charcot and traumatic hysteria, see Mark S. Micale, "Charcot and le névroses traumatiques: Scientific and Historical Reflections," *Revue Neurologique* 150 (1994): 498-505. For Breuer's and Freud's psychoanalytical models, see Sigmund Freud, Josef Breuer, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, James Strachey, and Alan Walker Tyson, *Studies on Hysteria*. By Josef Breuer and S. Freud; Translated under the General Editorship of James Strachey in Collaboration with Anna Freud, Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. [with a Portrait.], *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 2. London: Hogarth Press, 1955. See also Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, James Strachey, and Alan Walker Tyson, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology, and Other Works*. Translated under the General Editorship of James Strachey in Collaboration with Anna Freud, Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18. London: Hogarth Press, 1955, 12-23.
- 7 See the special issues of *American Imago*, 48.1-2 (1991); *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, eds. New York; London: Routledge, 1992; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- 8 Andreas Huyssen, "Trauma and Memory: A New Imaginary of Temporality," *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*. Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy, eds. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 16; Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, xiv, 201, italics in original.
- 9 Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," *American Imago* 48.1-2 (1991): 10.
- 10 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 17.
- 11 Hirsch, 22.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 2007 (1952); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 2003 (1978). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon engages in a critical dialogue with Jean-Paul Sartre's essay "Anti-Semite and Jew" (New York: Schocken Books, 1948 [1946]), making valuable comparisons between the history of the Jews and the history of black people. His anti-colonial manifesto, however, is invested in the specific historical context of liberation struggles in the Caribbean and Africa. It evokes the traumatic experiences of slavery and colonialism in order to unite black people in their struggles for independence. As such, there is a specific strategic purpose to Fanon's inquiry.

- In *Orientalism*, widely considered the founding text of Postcolonial Studies, Edward Said discusses the discourses shaping imperialism and observes that "anti-Semitism and [...] Orientalism resemble each other very closely" (27-28).
- 15 Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998, 4.
 - 16 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 220.
 - 17 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 3.
 - 18 Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris and Toni Morrison*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004. See also Mairi Neeves, "The Negotiation of Trauma in Postcolonial Culture" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2009); Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy's edited collection, *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003 and the recent special issue of *Studies in the Novel* 40 (2008), edited by Stef Craps and Gert Buelens. These studies and collections seek to promote closer connections between the critical fields of Trauma Studies and Postcolonial Studies.
 - 19 Durrant, 11.
 - 20 Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures, and the Allure of Race*. London: Allen Lane, 2000, 124.
 - 21 For more on the trauma of Partition, see for example, Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
 - 22 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Jonathan Rutherford, ed., London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, 223.
 - 23 Ibid., 224.
 - 24 Ibid., 225.
 - 25 Ibid., 225.
 - 26 David Dabydeen, *A Harlot's Progress*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1999; Fred D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1997; S. I. Martin, *Incomparable World*. London: Quartet, 1996; Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991.
 - 27 Bernardine Evaristo, *Lara*. Speldhurst: Angela Royal, 1997; Lucinda Roy, *Lady Moses: A Novel*. London: Virago, 1998; Jenny McLeod, *Stuck Up a Tree*. London: Virago, 1998.
 - 28 Levy, *Fruit of the Lemon*, 327.
 - 29 Kesewa Hennessy, "A Girl from Nowhere," *Voice* 6 August 1996, 24.
 - 30 Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*. London: Headline Review, 1994.
 - 31 Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere*. London: Headline Review, 1996.
 - 32 Susan Alice Fischer, "Andrea Levy in Conversation with Susan Alice Fischer," *Changing English* 12 (2005): 362.
 - 33 Ibid.
 - 34 Ibid.
 - 35 Hall, 225.
 - 36 Levy, "The Writing of *The Long Song*."