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

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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 "Prologue" in Levy's *Small Island* in order to think through the formation of discursive identity through the encounter with others and the necessity of accommodating difference. *Small Island* forecloses the possibility of addressing modern multiculturalism as a purported 'happy ending' in light of Levy's formulation of the *Windrush* moment as disruptive, violent, and overwhelmed by flawed characters. Yet, through the space of writing, she also invites the reader to experience moments of encounter and negotiate the often competing claims on nationhood, citizenship, and culture.

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Alicia E. Ellis

Windrush migration sparked new encounters among peoples as well as debates about citizenship, access to public spaces, housing, and employment, transforming British society and culture in the process.¹ Andrea Levy's work responds to the literary and historical genealogies of exile and Windrush migration, but she frequently challenges accepted accounts of the socio-historical processes of identity (re)formation in Britain and thus also contests prevailing accounts of Britishness. As I will demonstrate, Levy represents Windrush migrants and their descendants, including herself, as *epigones*, a term referring to followers or "those who are born after." *Epigones* also refers to "that which comes after." I take this meaning of the term to Windrush as an historical event that not only marks the rise of multicultural Britain (at least, in the popular imaginary) but also follows a long history of migrations to Britain, especially on the part of Afro-Caribbean and other colonial subjects, and encounters on the island among peoples from different places. *Small Island* brings together four intersecting stories, including those of Queenie, a white British woman; Bernard, Queenie's husband, Gilbert, a black Jamaican migrant; and Hortense, the wife of Gilbert, an Afro-Caribbean woman who follows her husband to Britain. Through the space of writing, multiple identities converge. Levy's work serves as an act of reconstruction, a belated intervention, which is both sequel (*epigones*) and prologue to the story of the Windrush Generation. As I will show, *Small Island* presents multiple, often contesting, representations of a fraught historical moment of racial/ethnic and gender conflicts, but at the same time the discourse functions as a space of potential reconciliation among various competing views.

Andrea Levy's *Small Island*² moves back and forth between 1924 and 1948 and across national borders and cultural moments, including the Empire Exhibition of 1924 at Wembley³; London immediately before the outbreak of World War II; Jamaica during the war years; the England and America of the Jamaican airmen during the war; and Calcutta after VJ Day (Victory over Japan). In this article, I argue that Levy's "Prologue" in *Small Island* foregrounds many of the novel's central concerns about space, race, libidinal impulses, and language. At the Empire Exhibition, as I will show, Queenie's cultural, ethnic, and political imagination are inscribed through an imagined encounter with Africa and a real encounter with a man that Queenie perceives as African. These moments of contact make a lasting impression on Queenie as a child and have a profound impact on how she interprets difference as an adult. This defining event in the life of Queenie frames both her subjectivity and identity as an adult in the aftermath of World War II. The brief but significant interaction in the "Prologue" not only structures Queenie's personal narrative but also tells part of a greater story of historical encounters in Britain and throughout empire. Levy's novel is "essentially an essay about the inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas."⁴ Significantly, Levy begins her novelistic representation of the

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 Act⁶ 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 didn't realise that he was making history at the time. But I do know that, when he boarded the ship, he knew himself to be a British citizen. He travelled on a British passport. Britain was the country that all Jamaican children learned about at school. They sang God Save The King and Rule Britannia. They believed Britain was a green and pleasant land - if not the centre of the world, then certainly the centre of a great

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 this account of her father's experience, Levy asserts a generational connection that aligns her own biography with that of her parents who were 'formed' as subjects under the direct influence of immigration, exile, and disillusion. Her father and mother emerge as pioneering figures, among the first post-war immigrants whose presence prompted the introduction of hyphenated language to describe identity and express a sense of plurality (examples include words such as multi-cultural, multi-racial or multi-cultural-ism). This essay helps to set the stage for my reading of *Small Island* as a novel that addresses issues of cultural transformation, shaped by migration histories and dialogues between past and present.

Small Island is structured around four competing personal narratives—each laying claim to historical truth—and temporal shifts through space and time. Levy's novel takes place during two time periods: "Before," a nebulous period of time before World War II, and "1948," a year that marked the advent of multiple ethnic immigrations to Great Britain from her current and former colonies. The novelistic discourse traverses multiple geographic locations, including Jamaica, the racially segregated United States, India, and London. This accumulative and overlapping approach to time and space defies a singular articulation of the experience of migration and empire while suggesting instead a plurality of moments, locations, and perspectives. The form of the novel, with its shifting perspectives, does not privilege a particular subject position over another. The novel tells the story of interracial encounters and brings together disparate perspectives—voiced by black and white characters—but it resists the tendency to suggest a seamless collective. Instead, this structuring device calls attention to the gaps, fissures, and differences that underpin race thinking. Identity is seen as a provisional and negotiated construct, shaped by the pressure of political necessity, an ever-changing product of cultural encounters. Reflective of the instabilities of identity formation, Levy's novel moves through space, occupies contested locations, and stands in the intervals.¹⁰

At the same time, we can also see a certain unifying tendency. The structure of here-and-there and past-and-present links the experiences of black people in London and Jamaica, calling attention to the wider Black Atlantic experience. In the words of Paul Gilroy, Levy's *Small Island* explores "[...] the special relationships between 'race,' culture, nationality, and ethnicity which have a bearing on the histories and political cultures of

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 Britain¹¹ 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, especially when language itself is bound up with nationality and national belonging.¹⁷ Likewise, Levy's *Small Island* depicts the struggles of four protagonists whose discourses share a similar mark of anxiety in the form of a distressed language that faces two ways at once, reaching back into the past to write the

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 novel, Levy documents the reconstruction of the “enigma of arrival,” to borrow a term from V. S. Naipaul, in relational terms: Hortense, Queenie, Gilbert, and Bernard function as agents in social and historical roles that compete with and supplement the authorial voice. Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write and to represent the past in fiction and in history is to open it up to the present.¹⁸ In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* Linda Hutcheon uses the term “historiographic metafiction” to refer to texts that are highly self-reflexive, which offer a pluralistic interpretation of the past.¹⁹ Hutcheon posits that the interaction between history and literature is at the very core of questions of subjectivity and identity. Her postmodernist theory of historiography and literature sheds light on our reading of Levy’s work, which questions the relationship between storytelling and history. *Small Island* presents a multi-perspectival network of interrelated and fictionalised testimonial accounts, brought together through the discourse as a space of encounters, which calls attention to various, sometimes conflicting, views about Britain’s multicultural formation.

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.²⁰ Notably, the multi-vocal composition of the novel reflects Levy's careful response to and reformulation of literary influences from the Windrush era, such as Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and George Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954). Even if we acknowledge that Levy's novel follows the conventions of social-literary realism, which tend to represent chronology and location as fundamental for an understanding of origins, the text persistently defies linearity.²¹ In the "Prologue" and elsewhere, the historical novel's reliance on chronology and the documentation of 'known' facts are undermined by Levy's clever undercutting of narrative expectations. The prologue as a literary device derives from the Greek *prologos*—*pro* (before) and *logos* (speech)—and functions as an explanatory first 'act.'²² I want to argue that Queenie's prologue serves as a double introduction because it reflects Queenie's perspective as a child, but the account is also saturated by the adult's retrospective perspective. Through this slippery sense of temporality, looking forward and backward at the same time, Levy's "Prologue" establishes a dualistic perspective concerning Queenie as well as the social and political milieu of the novel: "Before" and "1948."

The question of empire and spatial (dis)location comes to the foreground in the neo-realistic account of Queenie's trip to Africa, which suggests that Queenie, our first speaker, does not know where she is. Her disordered perspective is evident in this passage:

I thought I'd been to Africa. Told all my class I had. Early Bird, our teacher, stood me in front of the British flag—she would let no one call it the common Union Jack: 'It's the flag of Empire not a musical turn.' And I stood there as bold as brass and said, 'I went to Africa when it came to Wembley.' It was then that Early Bird informed me that Africa was a country. 'You're not usually a silly girl, Queenie Buxton,' she went on, 'but you did not go to Africa, you merely went to the British Empire Exhibition, as thousands of others did.'²³

This first paragraph's performative structure is remarkable. As readers, we enter the text at the moment of retrospection when Queenie reflects on her mistake in thinking that she had actually visited Africa when, in fact, she attended the British Empire Exhibition. Queenie's confession of her error is central to the articulation of a new understanding of the past, reinscribed through retrospection. This backward glance, which is framed by the word "prologue," is further framed by her account of the experience in the classroom. Her testimony and the correction by her teacher, Early Bird, call attention to Queenie's negotiation of time, space, and naming. The meaning of words and names is shown to be shifting and unstable. The failure to name things correctly or make distinctions is the primary feature of the novel's opening conceit. Queenie calls her teacher "Early Bird," but her name is actually Miss Earl.²⁴ Queenie does not acknowledge, in this moment, that "Early Bird" is a partial idiomatic construction: "The early bird catches the worm." The figurative nature of this passage with its idiomatic and metonymic features overwhelms and inhibits literal meanings, calling attention to the problematic construction of 'reality' through language.

Error or misunderstanding is built into the very structure of the opening episode. As we have seen, through idiomatic language, the teacher has been presented as a figure of speech: she is named Early Bird. This is somewhat ironic given the teacher's objection to the certain uses of rhetorical and colloquial language. For instance, Early Bird argues that the term "Union Jack" should not be used to refer to the British flag. Instead, she insists that the term "Union Jack" refers to a song. Ironically, her insistence on the meaning of the term entails another kind of rhetorical substitution: the British flag becomes a metonym for "the flag of empire." Through her allusions to the Union Jack, Levy's novel asks us to consider the interplay between rhetorical, literal, and colloquial uses of language to refer to nation and empire. Even as Levy highlights the contested, pluralistic understanding of meaning through the English language—the language of empire—she leads the reader through several (broken) chains of signification: linking the flag and the song, the country of Africa and Wembley Stadium, and the British Empire Exhibition with the wider territory of the British Empire. Thus, the opening to the novel denies the possibility of referential meaning through signs that are emblematic of the British Empire. The contiguity of associations, based on substitutions, figurative language, and rhetorical strategies, all serve to create a dualistic cultural discourse that affirms certain 'truths' even as it falters in the linguistic realm.

Elsewhere, the inability to understand the meaning of events is also seen as symptomatic of imperial ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. For example, Bernard does not seem to comprehend fully his collusion in the violent upholding of empire while serving in India near the end of the war and after the war had officially ended. He observes: "I'd not wanted a war. None of us had. And I never wanted to be out in India. But (I admit) it put a rod in the back and spring in the step of this middle-aged bank clerk who'd thought his life was spent...now I was part of a team."²⁵ Interestingly, while in Calcutta, Bernard uses the word "chocolate"²⁶ to describe the browning of his skin. "Would Queenie have recognised her husband now? Molten and brown as a warm bar of chocolate."²⁷ These direct references to chocolate are crucial points of visibility in *Small Island*. This moment, when Bernard perceives himself as dark-skinned and perhaps unrecognisable, reminds the reader of Queenie's encounter with this sweet ration as a child at the Empire Exhibition: "That's when we got lost in Africa. We wandered in, following the syrupy-brown smell of chocolate."²⁸ The deeper significance of chocolate for Queenie transforms Bernard's 'innocent' question into the refrain of the central problem of the text: knowledge formation, language, and identity. Similarly, Queenie, as will be seen, is unable to connect her early childhood experiences to her adult erotic interests. In this opening paragraph, which Levy writes with such virtuosity, an entire world, a host of experiences and understanding, is shown to be founded on a crumbling linguistic and cultural edifice. The role of the prologue is to offer background; the very first page of Levy's novel, a 'Prologue,' presents the reader with information that is both partial and erroneous. Thus, Hutcheon's problematisation of historical knowledge and narrative genres is embodied in the very opening to *Small Island*.

The Butchers' Association trip allows Queenie to take an imaginary journey to Africa, a defining moment in her early life, which becomes the only *real* space that exists for

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.

The "Prologue" sets the stage for the subversion of realism throughout the novel by showing that the so-called realities of history are underpinned by pre-existing colonial discourses, myths, misnomers, and fictions of identity. Queenie's narrative account of a trip to 'Africa' sets the stage for the novel's wider critique of Empire as a problematic form of 'pre-knowledge' about history, society, politics and identity. This defining moment in Queenie's life betrays a naïveté and bewilderment about space and place but also testifies to the power of the colonial gaze. Through the British Empire Exhibition, a staged spectacle, Levy calls attention to empire itself as a form of spatial production and identity formation. To offer a specific example, I would like to consider the description of the African man at the Exhibition:

An African man. A black man who looked to be carved from melting chocolate. [...] A monkey man sweating a smell of mothballs. Blacker than when you smudge your face with a sooty cork. The droplets of

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 multiculture" "distinguished by some notable demands for hospitality, conviviality, tolerance, justice and mutual care."³⁹ Gilroy argues that the aftermath of British imperialism is still present in the national political life and contends that colonial history has left its ongoing mark on the political and social complexion of Britain as an "enduring consequence[s] of empire."⁴⁰ In Gilroy's view, the colony "can be recognized as a laboratory, a location for experiment and innovation that transformed the exercise of governmental powers at home and configured the institutionalization of imperial knowledge to which the idea of 'race' was central."⁴¹

As we have seen, Levy structures her narrative in ways that make it appear ripe for a multicultural co-existence before and after 1948, particularly through the relationship to Michael and the birth of the multiracial child. As an adult, Queenie offers her own frame for an alternate reading of the “Prologue”:

There are some words that once spoken will split the world in two. There would be the life before you breathed them and then the altered life after they'd been said. They take a long time to find, words like that. They make you hesitate. Choose with care. Hold on to them unspoken for as long as you can just so your world will stay intact.⁴²

There are some words once spoken split the world in two. Before you say them and after.⁴³

Queenie begins to posit what it might mean to speak doubly, to understand doubly, and the dangers associated with these pluralistic processes in a world that is on the brink of acknowledging other realities and ways of being. In these two passages, which open and close one of the last sections of the novel, Queenie expresses anxieties about speaking, indicating that she has now thought deeply about what certain linguistic utterances could mean and how they could shatter the foundations of the known ‘realities’. She seems to be fearful of making an untimely gesture, which would open up linguistic crevasses that would destabilise all previous forms of knowledge and representation. This passage calls attention to Levy’s own metafictional strategies. She disrupts the reading of history by exploring the histories of contact and relation that traverse the supposed divisions of 1948. The “Prologue” stands as an encounter that invites a double reading, prompting Queenie and the reader to look backwards and forwards through history. This episode serves as a form of “reorganized relationality,” to borrow an expression from Gilroy, which emerges through retrospective acts of reading, listening, and interpreting relations between peoples, times, and spaces.

In the introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha’s epigraph from Martin Heidegger’s essay entitled “Building, dwelling, thinking”⁴⁴ serves as a way of thinking through problems of cultural visibility and belonging-ness:

A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which *something begins its presencing*.

Bhabha acknowledges a kind of disorientation associated with the boundary. I argue that Levy’s *Small Island* is located at a similar kind of boundary:

[at] the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement [...].⁴⁵

Levy is preoccupied with the transformation of people and of places. Through techniques of textual dislocation and disorientation, she portrays a society undergoing a metamorphosis, showing a Britain at the threshold of change, torn between discourses and practices of inclusion and exclusion. Arguably, Levy’s novel attempts to resolve the

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 years just after the end of the Great War. For more information, see the following website: <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conInformationRecord.86> [accessed 31 May 2011].
- 4 Paul Gilroy, "Preface," *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, xi.
- 5 David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones, eds. "Second World War" in *Oxford Companion to Black British History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 436-437.
- 6 The complete document of the British Nationality Act, 1948 (11 & 12 Geo. 6.). See chapter 56: <http://www.uniset.ca/naty/BNA1948.htm>.
- 7 The historical information contained in this first section represents a synthesis of information found in Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain since 1504*. London: Pluto Press, 1984 and *Empire Windrush: Fifty Years of Writing About Black Britain*. Onyekachi Wambu, ed., London: Phoenix, 1998.
- 8 Irene Pérez Fernández, "(Re)Mapping London: Gender and Racial Relations in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*," *Interactions*, Special Issue: "The Role of Female Voices in Constructing Fictional Maps of Contemporary Britain." 19.1-2 (2010): 29.
- 9 Andrea Levy, "This is my England," *The Guardian*, 19 February 2000. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/feb/19/society1> [accessed 31 May 2011].
- 10 My use of the term "intervals" is taken from Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, a citation of Heidegger's lecture on the meaning of home and homelessness in the 1951 lecture, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" in *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* David Farrell Krell, ed., San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977, 343-363.
- 11 Fryer, *Staying Power*, 1-13; 33-66; 298-371. These geographies move from the era of Shakespeare, to the era of the abolition of the British slave trade and slavery, the 1900 Pan-African Conference in Westminster Town Hall, the 1917 and 1919 race riots in Cardiff, Nottingham, Liverpool and the creation of the League of Coloured People in 1930.
- 12 To offer an example, the English Romantic painter, J.M.W. Turner depicts the 'black hero' in some of his early paintings, such as *Shipwreck* (1805), *The Rescue* (1802), and *The Deluge* (1805).
- 13 In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy's epigraphs are taken from the works of Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Frederick Douglass, and Édouard Glissant.
- 14 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. New York: Vintage, 1974, 180-181.
- 15 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 3.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 1.

- 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: Gender and Racial Relations in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*," 32 -33. She focuses on the spectacle and the dehumanisation of the Black body under the colonial/imperial gaze.
- 32 Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1995, 159.
- 33 Sarah Brophy, "Entangled Genealogies: White Femininity on the Threshold of Change in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 4.2(2010): 109-10.
- 34 Ibid., 240.
- 35 Ibid., 244.
- 36 Ibid., 248-9.
- 37 Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia: The Wellek Library Lectures*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005; Published in the United Kingdom as *After Empire: Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia*. London: Routledge, 2004.

- 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.