

ENTERTEXT

Representations of Ageing and Black British Identity in Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight*

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Abstract

The article focuses on representations of ageing and black British identity in Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) and Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987). Offering a comparative analysis of representations of ageing experiences for the first Windrush generation, I explore areas of these two texts that have received relatively little attention from critics. Specifically focusing on representations of ageing and the body, and on uses of memory in story-telling, the article examines the use of memory writing in the novels, suggesting this discourse as a subjective means by which individuals may (re)connect with and recast their personal and collective histories of race, class, and gender marginalisation. I examine the ways in which Levy and Riley's novels document the voices and life stories of ageing black British men and women, using a fictional form, thereby creating spaces for those hitherto marginalised accounts and characters in contemporary British fiction. The article furthermore analyses Levy and Riley's portrayals of ageing characters, their relationship to families and communities, and their exhausting and difficult struggle to reject victimisation whilst retaining subjective agency and personal dignity. In their representations of ageing and the body, Levy and Riley explore the impact of illness, isolation, loss of social status, and the treatment of elderly black British individuals by the health system and local communities. In conclusion, both novels reject the story of silenced victimhood for their ageing characters by foregrounding intergenerational connections as a celebration of continuity that sustains postcolonial and black British identities.

“Or perhaps I should describe the old, wild-haired man”¹: Representations of Ageing and Black British Identity in Andrea Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and Joan Riley’s *Waiting in the Twilight*
Dr. Charlotte Beyer

Introduction: Ageing and Marginalisation

Beryl Gilroy has said about Western society that it has “developed various ways of casting aside the lives of the old.”² In fiction, elderly characters are frequently stereotyped and marginalised, according to Mike Hepworth.³ Certainly, the word “twilight” in the title of Joan Riley’s novel seems indicative of this relegation of old-age fictional characters. However, fiction is also a rich “source of ideas about the ageing process and... our individual subjective experience of growing older in contemporary society.”⁴ Until recently, however, discussions of black British narratives of ageing and marginalisation have been relatively absent from literary scholars’ debates. Offering a comparative discussion of the ageing experiences of the first Windrush generation in Andrea Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* (1994) and Joan Riley’s *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987), I explore areas of these two texts that have received relatively little attention from critics.⁵ Specifically, this essay focuses on representations of ageing and the role of subjective memory in storytelling, suggesting the figure of the ageing black body as a powerful figurative representation of the larger collective history of migrant experience. Through an examination of the authors’ use of realist forms of memory writing, I demonstrate that Levy and Riley retrieve historical experience, examine the construction of identity discourses, and introduce narrative strategies that promote reader identification. As will be seen, Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and Riley’s *Waiting in the Twilight* explore the problematic of ageing and race in their art and celebrate those lives cast aside by British society.

Strategies of Memory Writing

Andrea Levy and Joan Riley are two of the most important black British women authors to have emerged in recent decades. Their popularity has coincided with black British history and culture deservedly achieving a much more prominent place in the collective imaginary. Yet, both writers were once seen as marginal figures. Laura Niesen de Abruña observes that Riley’s realism did not always find favour with critics;⁶ likewise, early in her career, Levy too “struggled to get published in a climate where magical-realist fiction dominated.”⁷ Perhaps, they may have simply been ahead of their time, if we are to judge by the recent interest in the reclamation of black British voices through initiatives such as “Caribbean Histories Revealed” (National Archives),⁸ “The Separation and Reunion Forum,”⁹ and

“Mapping Memories: Reminiscence with Ethnic Minority Elders.”¹⁰ These projects focus on personal histories and the uncovering of the past, employing the very kind of narrative techniques used by Levy and Riley in their fictions.

Both Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and Riley’s *Waiting in the Twilight* explore and retrieve black British individual and collective histories using a fictional form. I want to begin my analysis by examining the narrative techniques and formal processes that Levy and Riley employ in order to express the black British collective experience through the lens of the individual, particularly through the use of memory writing and a daughter-mediator character. These aspects of Levy’s writing (and, I would argue, also of Riley’s) “have not been addressed; in particular, its formal intricacies and its treatment of historical silences have not received adequate attention” from critics.¹¹ This essay explores such formal intricacies by looking at Levy and Riley’s recasting of individual histories through narratives of ageing: stories which use subjective and partial memory writing as formal processes to access those past experiences and emotions which do not otherwise ‘translate.’

According to Cesar and Sharon Meraz, black British women writers have taken on the task of representing the “reality of aging for the West Indian immigrant in London [...] and experiences of ‘displacement and disconnection.’”¹² This is long overdue, as Maria Helena Lima argues, “it used to be that to be Black and British was to be unnamed in the official discourse.”¹³ Similarly invisible in literature is the issue of old age, Hepworth concludes: “Old age has been described as the ultimate challenge for the novelist because it is about people who are living through the final period of their lives.”¹⁴ Representations of old age add nuance and complexity to conventional novelistic plots constructed around individuation and life journey, such as in the *Bildungsroman*, the developmental narrative model which, according to Mark Stein, is prevalent in a significant number of black British texts.¹⁵ Of course, neither *Light in the House Burnin’* or *Waiting in the Twilight* is a *Bildungsroman* in the traditional sense, nor are Levy and Riley’s ageing characters afforded the luxury of white middle-class spiritual ‘journeying’ in old age.¹⁶ On the contrary, their characters are subjected to marginalisation and sub-standard treatment, not simply because they are old but also because they are black. Discussing her own experience, Gilroy shows how such categories of oppression intersect: “I am thinking about my being Black and growing old in Britain. Will my old age, I wonder, be a calamitous plunge deeper into the underclass, or simply part of the general heritage of the struggling old, regardless of race or class?”¹⁷ Gilroy’s choice of words—“calamitous”, “deeper”, “underclass”—underlines the negative expectations associated with black British ageing also reflected in Riley and Levy’s fictions.

In recounting fictional histories of post-Windrush individual working-class men and women, their alienation, losses, and resilience, Levy and Riley’s novels demand our engagement. Using retrospective memory writing, which encourages readers to identify with the ageing characters’ journeys, *Light in the House Burnin’* and *Waiting in the Twilight* reappraise late 1960s-early 1980s British cultural geographies, and redress the silences surrounding portrayals of black British ageing experiences. Pam Schweitzer reminds us of the significance of life-story telling for the re-visioning of historical

discourses: "Sharing stories with people of the same generation or with much younger people helps to develop a sense of oneself as a participant in the great social and historical upheavals of the last century."¹⁸ Chris Weedon echoes this point in her assessment of black British writing: "[Fiction] allows for the imaginative exploration of experience as it is lived by individuals and social groups and of the possibilities of living differently."¹⁹ Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight* therefore enrich recent black British social and cultural history from a fictional perspective, through such intergenerational sharing of stories.

Levy and Riley's fictions recount past events through flashbacks, as well as introduce episodic or anecdotal reminiscences, to explore the circuitous and subjective routes of memory. Riley's omniscient narrator allows access to Adella's thoughts and memories, as Weedon explains: "[Riley] writes the voices of the characters into the text. The immediacy of this technique forces the reader to engage with difference and with the impact of racism and patriarchy on both white and Black subjectivities."²⁰ Adella's memories of the past are central to the narrative: "her act of re-membering constitutes the novel and is a final attempt to gain control of her life."²¹ In Levy, the daughter-mediator uses memory writing to narrate the story of her father; which mingles with her own childhood recollections. This demonstrates the connectedness of their stories, and that the boundaries of individual narratives may blur in relation to one another, as well as to collective histories. *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Waiting in the Twilight* draw on a range of realist narrative techniques, such as retrospective reflection, internal monologue, first-person and omniscient perspectives, and episodic narrative structure. The novels use dialogue and dialect to foreground the processes of linguistic and cultural mediation and exchange, through memory-sharing and story-telling, between individuals and the community. These strategies enable the narratives to capture the rhythm and feel of black British vernaculars, thereby lending the prose a sense of vibrancy, immediacy, and authenticity, and foregrounding the effects of 'voice'. Using such strategies, both novels, in their differing ways, seek to explore and clarify the relationship between past and present for individual characters and their families, through realist narrative conventions and complex portrayals which avoid nostalgia or idealisation of the past.

Levy and Riley's novels rewrite recent historical master narratives through the revisionary processes of memory writing. In both texts the theme of 'light' and references to (in)visibility function as prompts for this process. Both Levy's *Every Light in the House Burning'* and Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight* make references to themes of light and visibility, as an aspect of their representation of experiences of marginalisation and ageing, issues which Stuart Hall and Beryl Gilroy have also spoken about.²² Riley's novel uses the theme of light to expose the "hidden reality"²³ of black British ageing. Levy too is clearly aware of the significance of visibility, as a theme and effect, in relation to her work:

for me the starting point of writing books has always been about wanting to make the unseen visible, wanting to show the experience of my parents' generation and the children that came after, having to live in this country, quite a hostile environment, and how [they] cope with that.²⁴

It has been said of Levy's writing that her characters are: "just people who, save for the accident and drama of race, would be invisible."²⁵ Both *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Waiting in the Twilight* therefore use the idea of 'light' to interrogate issues of (in)visibility in relation to gender, race, and age, and to voice the unspoken. Riley highlights the risks writers take in interrogating such topics: "Granted there are questions, uncomfortable questions. But questions which create debate, however hostile, keep a normally hidden reality uncovered and raise the possibility of change."²⁶ Similarly, Levy's novels "confront silences in that they insist on the importance of remembering and speaking of one's own past, however painful a process this might be."²⁷

The painful aspect of the process of delving into the past is foregrounded by the fact that Levy and Riley's ageing characters still harbour secrets, surprises, and painful silences at the time of their deaths. Riley's Adella feels that motherhood outside wedlock means she shamed her family; "The shame sat on her, pushing her down further into her chair, the room suddenly full of disturbing scenes and memories from long in the past."²⁸ She is overwhelmed with regret, as she remembers the lengths poverty drove her to: "If only she had not needed those other men... all Beaumont knew how she had managed with the children."²⁹ These revelations are important, as they let the reader understand the implications for Adella of patriarchal and colonial oppression, and how it makes individuals feel responsible for their own exploitation. Or, as Weedon says: "[racism] produces arrogance in its perpetrators and humiliation and anger in its victims."³⁰ Adella's repressed anger and feelings of humiliation contribute to her physical ailments and strokes, as she embodies the damage inflicted by colonialism and patriarchy.³¹ Thereby, her ailing, ageing body takes on a symbolic dimension, representing black British working-class women's suffering.

In Levy, too, painful family secrets are suggested in the revelation that Angela's father has a twin brother whom he lost contact with, and who since died: "First, I find I have an uncle in this country. Second, that he's my dad's identical twin and lastly, that he is dead. I had learnt more about my dad in those few minutes than in most of the years that got me to that point."³² Similarly, the background to his Jewish name—Jacobs—is not explained. Such family 'silences' and repressions highlight the problematic nature of migration. These 'silences' speak of the migrant's difficulties of reconciling cultural and ethnic differences, when the personal and collective histories of the past do not 'translate', and therefore become unspeakable: "He never talked about his family or his life in Jamaica. He seemed only to exist in one plane of time—the present."³³ Evidently, Levy and Riley's ageing characters have experienced fractured familial relationships and painful or shameful secrets. Therefore, the process of uncovering layers of characters' personal history, some repressed and impermissible, takes on an archaeological function of unearthing and re-appraising lived experience, thereby recasting history from a different angle. The two novels use memory writing as a narrative strategy and a formal tool which serves to strengthen and celebrate communities, and their capacity for survival and resistance. Memory writing within these texts is a formal process which releases powerful emotions and bodily identifications, as Beryl Gilroy insists: "memory is a child of the guts and the emotion, of the brain and heart and the lips. It is the dresser of time."³⁴

In Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight*, fictionalised life-story telling and memory writing transmit and share experience in a contemporary society where fragmentation of communities hinders oral inter-generational transmission of knowledge:

Many cultures rely on oral history as a means of educating the next generation and continuing their cultural heritage of stories, experiences, and knowledge. In Western society, knowledge is often transmitted in written forms.³⁵

Both texts use the narrative device of the daughter as mediator between the older black British character and society, a link connecting the generations in history and real-time, Carol in Riley: "She still had Carol, Carol who had never disappointed her, and who she knew would always be with her,"³⁶ and Angela in Levy: "I don't know what we'll do when you're not here', my dad said."³⁷ Both quotes reflect a neediness, in emotional and practical terms, on the part of the ageing characters, as well as highlight the responsibility borne by the daughter in mediating those needs. The daughter-mediator thus becomes a highly significant figure, for her character enables the continuation of intergenerational and community bonds, and embodies the processes of female individuation and subject-formation.

Portraying such intergenerational relationships is crucial to black British women writers, says Myriam Chancy:

By focusing on the effects of a legacy of British colonialism and concurrent racial discrimination and marginalization in the lives of the elderly and the young, it becomes apparent that a crucial facet of West Indian life in Britain is the rupture of cross-generational bonds.³⁸

The figure of the daughter-mediator in Levy and Riley represents the evolution of black British identity and a younger generation successfully negotiating black Britishness. In *Waiting in the Twilight*, Adella proudly muses: "She liked the way people talked about her daughter. The way they had to say how she had respect and didn't let the big job change her."³⁹ The daughter-mediator represents an embodiment of younger women's ability to devise survival strategies in patriarchy,⁴⁰ and establishes an emotional link between the reader and the ageing characters, as she makes use of her understanding of British society to assist the older generation. Thereby, the daughter-mediator characters provide the reader with an additional perspective on the profound effects of ageing, illness, and race marginalisation on families and family relationships. The novels foreground desperate experiences of loneliness, and the pain of loss. This is evident in the texts' portrayals of the importance which companion animals have for these elderly characters, for whom pet cats and dogs provide an emotional outlet and non-judgmental companionship. Such themes are part of the difficult, yet necessary, fictional recasting of individual and community histories taking place in Levy and Riley's novels, through the processes of memory writing. Lai comments:

Ethnocultural minorities often face the danger of losing their cultural assets if their stories and experiences are left untold. Through life review and reminiscence, older adults from minority groups can pass on their

experiences and cultural knowledge to the next generation and build a stronger ethnic identity for their ethnic group.⁴¹

Individuals and communities are thereby able to not only claim ownership of their history, but to share it with others, too, as Pam Schweitzer argues: “Reminiscence is also a means of celebrating difference, bringing communities with different racial, cultural and religious backgrounds together to exchange life experience.”⁴²

Andrea Levy and Joan Riley’s memory writing recasts issues of identity and agency, and generates intimacy and emotional engagement. Gilroy comments on the importance of memory to the experience of ageing and retaining a sense of self/identity: “How right she had been about memory. It is right to double-take, leave out, accentuate, and change.... We can do what we like with the chameleon of memory.”⁴³ Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* suggests that the act of telling someone else’s story whilst also telling your own is a bearing witness, which can effect change, as Lima notes: “[Levy] chooses realist conventions because of her faith in the power of representation—because of her belief that if you can represent reality, you can attempt to change it.”⁴⁴ Levy and Riley’s fictions voice the life stories of ageing black British men and women, thereby creating spaces for such hitherto marginalised accounts and characters in contemporary British fiction. Their texts also promote change, by confronting readers with the fictionalised memories, hopes, sufferings, and injustices of those characters, thereby engendering empathy and identification.

Narrating Ageing Bodies

Levy and Riley narrate ageing bodies with humour, anger, compassion, and an acute sense of the exhausting struggle the characters are engaged in, fighting to refuse their own victimisation whilst retaining subjective agency and a sense of personal dignity. In both *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and *Waiting in the Twilight*, the characters’ ageing bodies and physical deterioration are central to their portrayal. Hepworth argues that old age and the ageing body have typically been associated with negativity in Western culture: “there is no doubt (at least in western civilizations) that one of the most disturbing images of later life is that of physical decline.”⁴⁵ The words “waiting” and “twilight” suggest that being black, old and female is merely a half-existence before the end. In their representations of ageing and the body, Levy and Riley explore the impact of illness, isolation, loss of dignity and social status, and the treatment of elderly black British individuals by the health system and local communities. Levy and Riley’s novels thereby incorporate a strong element of social criticism. By refusing to take “the scenic route”⁴⁶, *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and *Waiting in the Twilight* courageously confront readers with painful and sometimes controversial subjects surrounding the ageing body and dying, which challenge societal taboos, and encourage openness around these important issues.

In Riley’s *Waiting in the Twilight*, Adella’s experiences her ageing and illness as degrading, and overshadowed by loneliness, passivity, and decline. Adella sees this coming, but feels powerless to change her situation:

Suddenly the endless stretch of lonely hours filled only by the flickering lights of the television was too much to bear. Since she became sick all she ever did was fill the hours with memories, uncomfortable, half-buried memories; some good, some bad. All left her lonely and bitter, weighed down with the feeling that she had wasted her life.⁴⁷

As an ageing black disabled woman, Adella's experiences in *Waiting in the Twilight* clearly predate equal opportunities and anti-discrimination legislation, as she is sacked from her job when her poor physical condition affects her time-keeping: "She felt weary as she walked down the stairs, her bad leg dragging more than ever as she left the building for the last time. [...] The tiredness weighed on her heavily and she felt old beyond her time."⁴⁸ Loss of physical health and mobility results in loneliness and isolation for Adella, as the disparate urban settings of the 1970s-1980s have little to offer the forgotten elderly in terms of community, neighbourliness, or practical and emotional support. Both Levy and Riley show how institutions, which traditionally offered companionship and cared for the vulnerable, such as the Church and the NHS, are compromised by unacknowledged issues of racism, sexism, and class prejudice. Reflecting on society's propensity to ignore older black people, Beryl Gilroy asserts: "We are patronised by word and gesture and given minimal thought in the distribution of resources."⁴⁹

Riley's portrayal of Adella's ageing in *Waiting in the Twilight* highlights this experience of being patronised and forgotten. Riley's critical account of Adella's treatment echoes other critical interventions against the prevailing "scenario, which represents old age as a time of waiting to die."⁵⁰ In fact, Adella has been exploited and disrespected most of her life, and ageing merely amplifies this experience. Although cast as a victim, Riley also shows Adella's resilience and courage as she copes with migration, motherhood, working life, and domestic violence. She even purchased the family home with her savings. She has worked hard, in an unassuming way, to make her way in a new country, and raised her children as pretty much the sole breadwinner. However, it is the repossession of her home following her husband's abandonment, the loss of her material foothold in British society, which crushes her fighting spirit: "They had pulled the heart out of her when they took her house."⁵¹ Verbally and physically abused by the philandering Stanton, Adella's self-esteem sinks further and she becomes a victim of domestic violence. After her first stroke, Stanton abandons her, and Adella is forced to care for her children as the sole breadwinner, as hardship and exhaustion gradually take their toll. Riley's portrayal of Stanton exposes his weakness, brutality and selfishness, whilst also acknowledging the negative ways in which experiences of migration and racism in Britain challenged his masculinity and sense of worth, and thereby changed him. By allowing her protagonist to remain devoted to the delusion that Stanton will return to her if only she keeps the faith, Riley demonstrates the dangers of denial. Similarly, Riley condemns the escapist fantasy of migration as providing a road to financial success. Adella is racked with regret, as her final thoughts circle around her life's disappointments, and her own perceived shortcomings and failings.⁵² Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight* thus delivers a devastating criticism of a Britain, in which black old age womanhood is experienced as

lonely and invisible, and perceived by others as having nothing valuable to contribute to society anymore.

Representations of Adella's ageing body in *Waiting in the Twilight* emphasise the physical weariness and chronic pain which rob her of self-esteem and quality of life: "She felt older and older, as the pain in her bones increased. She was always lonely now, cut off from the life outside,"⁵³ and "Adella sighed, feeling the ache deep in her back, the burning pain in her legs that got worse as the days slipped by."⁵⁴ The alienation Adella associates with her ageing body is reinforced by her sense of isolation and (to some extent) self-imposed exile. Pam Schweitzer comments on sharing life stories and feeling respected and valued, and how these may work as therapeutic tools: "In reminiscence everyone is the expert on his or her own life and is recognised as an individual with unique experience to impart."⁵⁵ However, isolated and disabled, Adella increasingly depends on her daughters to motivate her to get out of the house, rather than live the shadowy existence slumped in front of the television which she is sliding into: "The only outings she took now were when one of her daughters came by to take her out. They would tuck her into the car as if she was sick."⁵⁶ Adella's dog is her only constant companion, but when she loses physical mobility and becomes housebound, she is unable to meet the animal's needs and becomes increasingly dependent on her daughter taking the dog out for walks. Although she is clearly unwell, the health system fails to understand and engage with Adella's needs. Only when her daughter Audrey takes charge, does she get the specialist appointment she needs, a small victory which ultimately turns out to be too little too late: "It had been good to see the doctor climb down, to know her daughter had made him do so."⁵⁷ However, as the daughter-mediator and the doctor discuss Adella in the third person, their conversation places her in an infantilised position which deprives her of authority and a voice:

Since they started coming with her, things were always better and the man had to listen to them because they could talk like him. The two of them continued to talk and she looked around the bare room wondering why she bothered to come.⁵⁸

Riley's moving and incisive portrayal of Adella's thoughts allows the reader to share both her small sense of victory, as her daughters' insistence forces the doctors to climb down, and her angry frustration at being infantilised and patronised.

The closing chapter of *Waiting in the Twilight* depicts Adella's final demise, with Riley using stream-of-consciousness narration to depict the dying Adella's dream-like state of mind. Riley's storytelling mode matches Adella's drifting in and out of consciousness, as the pace of narration is slowed down, to capture the drawn-out waiting of Adella's last hours. Those hours are spent in agony and dread, first waiting for an ambulance to take her to hospital to be provided with vital medical attention, then waiting on a trolley in a hospital corridor for a bed, then waiting for a doctor to tend to her and give her the treatment she so desperately needs: "Time slipped past, dragging and hanging heavily, but moving on and on."⁵⁹ While Adella's consciousness fluctuates, the reader observes her distraught daughters discussing why the hospital is not doing more to help their mother: "she's been lying here all day, and they haven't even bothered to give her

something to make her feel better.”⁶⁰ The tragedy of Adella’s life (and death) is that the reader is only too aware that Adella’s overriding desire for recognition, expressed in her final words, “All dat respect,”⁶¹ has not materialised, and will not do so after her death. This loss of authority and lack of acknowledgement in old age is a wide-spread phenomenon for black Britons: “Many have not experienced the respectful treatment they expected and hoped for as elders.”⁶² Gilroy echoes this observation: “Some of our young people have lost cultural respect for old age and the ability to recognise the needs of the aged.”⁶³ In Riley’s novel, the ageing black body’s lack of authority mirrors a collective black British experience of marginalisation in old age.

During the course of Adella’s last moments, Riley uses the interplay between fantasy and realist discourses to portray the bleakness of Adella’s dying, and to have Adella’s imagination reward her patience, by conjuring for her the unconditional love and acceptance, which real life could never give her. In her portrayal of Adella’s delirious state, Riley uses fantasy to facilitate some degree of relief for Adella beyond the grim reality of an undignified death. In her imagination, Adella is able to reverse some of her life’s most painful losses, as the fantasy discourse of stereotypical romance imagery permits her a deathbed scene reunion of sorts with a now reformed Stanton: “She saw him through the mist, a faded brown picture, with the painting of coconut palms and a calm sea behind him.”⁶⁴ The contrast between the realist and fantasy discourses foregrounds the grim realities of old age finality for Adella, and highlights Riley’s criticism of that reality, and the need for change to transcend the oppression which underlines it. In other contexts Riley has expressed her reluctance to be seen to unambiguously endorse fantasy, and *Waiting in the Twilight* echoes this anxiety about escapism. The novel’s portrayal of Adella, and her need for vacuous western films and television entertainment, reflects Riley’s ambivalent position regarding the status of popular culture, between on the one hand, fantasy as an alternative to an unbearable and painful reality, and on the other, as destructive self-delusion.⁶⁵ However, such fleeting moments of imagined gratification illustrate the humanity of Adella’s character and the power of language to suggest alternative realities: “She wanted to tell them that she was all right now, that she had not felt better in a long time. Everybody was there and they were not condemning her. They knew she had done her best.”⁶⁶ Despite Riley’s ambivalence towards fantasy, or perhaps precisely because of it, *Waiting in the Twilight* convincingly and movingly depicts a survivor heroine who certainly commands her readers’ respect and affection, as her inner life repeatedly demonstrates her resilience and humanity.

Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* is narrated by the daughter-mediator Angela, a strategy which offers a different and perhaps more emotionally direct reading experience from Riley, by using an overtly personalised narrative perspective, and foregrounding an enduring marriage and family community.⁶⁷ Losing physical mobility, alongside the symbolic loss of status and purpose typically associated with retirement, has a devastating impact on Angela’s father’s sense of self-worth and his masculine identity: “I could tell that my dad was worried by what was happening to his body.”⁶⁸ The issue of black British masculinity has received relatively little scholarly attention;⁶⁹ however, Levy’s complex and emotionally intense portrayal provides us with an

opportunity to explore its construction and representation. Neither a victim nor an idealised character, the multi-faceted nature of Angela's father's character is reflected in the portrayal of him as the family breadwinner, with a fiery temper and a disciplinarian streak.⁷⁰ Angela's father is a proud man, and in taking care of his appearance and making a point of formality, he is upholding the cultural inheritance of the Caribbean 'Sunday Best' traditional dress code as a marker of respectability.⁷¹ He has worked hard and contributed to society, been a good father, husband, and provider for his family – a man of principle, resilient and loyal. However, as the family cat Willie becomes increasingly important to Angela's father in his old age, after his children have left home, his emotional response to the cat's disappearance at the end suggests his unacknowledged (but understandable) neediness. His response also reflects the detrimental effects of emotional repression for black British males struggling to reconcile stereotypes of conventional masculinity with race and class inequality.

Gradually, Angela's father relinquishes his patriarchal authority, as he loses his sense of self, and his ageing body is relegated to a deteriorating and alienated 'other'. When Angela visits her father in hospital, his loss of authority becomes clear to her, as she discovers the doctors have spoken to her mother about his condition and explained the various tests, but not to him. The silence not only reflects his loss of self-determination but also indicates the difficulties of communication within the NHS caused by differences of race and class, issues also raised by Riley in *Waiting in the Twilight*. This perceived loss of personal power is particularly poignant and devastating for Angela's father, whose masculinity is compromised as a result. The father's sense of loss of authority and status in retirement suggests that ageism reinforces the intersecting nature of race, class, and gender oppression. As in Riley, Angela finds herself in the paradoxical situation of having to be the one to speak up on behalf of her ageing parent. Angela receives only impersonal "professional sympathy"⁷² when trying to initiate a discussion about her ageing father's plight, and is met by a patronising dismissal of her request for information about hospice treatment. This passage has a strong affective dimension, encouraging the reader's emotional response to, and identification with, these sad and harrowing experiences.

Levy foregrounds the loss of self in old age, in Angela's account of her father's physical decline: "My dad began to walk with a stick, leaning on it heavily and dragging his leg behind him... he was ageing quickly, like a speeded-up film sequence, almost minute by minute."⁷³ Levy's references here to specific film-making techniques evoke a disturbed sense of chronology and time, a strategy which supports "the idea that the present is always elusive helps us to understand the dilemma at the heart of ageing—namely the problem of making sense of the experience of time passing and coming to terms with change."⁷⁴ Angela's father's loss of mobility conveys both his individual suffering, and the loss of social standing in old age for black Britons. The reactions of Angela's friends to her description of the seriousness of her father's condition are also indicative of the cultural repression of the challenging realities of old age and terminal illness, resulting in isolation and silence. Eventually the severity of Angela's father's illness is mediated through writing, in her mother's letter: "Gradually he is losing his grip

on life. The brain scan showed the cancer had escaped to the brain and caused the paralysis on the left side. The doctor said that because of this they couldn't treat the cancer on the lung."⁷⁵ Having agreed to keep the truth about his condition from Angela's father a little longer, allowing him to go on believing he is only experiencing the after-effects of a stroke and will recover in time, the letter makes it quite clear that he will not and cannot recover. The narrator's response is one of empathy and despair at the failure to find anything but clichés to offer: "Shall I get you a cup of tea, Dad?' I said. I didn't know what else to do. I felt helpless. I wanted to do something, I wanted to take his pain away."⁷⁶ As in Riley, it falls to the daughter to take up a mediating role of helper/translator for her father, to enable communication between him and the white-dominated establishment: "Dad—would you like me to see the doctor for you? See if I can get some stronger pills for the pain?"⁷⁷ This offer of help is gratefully received, as the ageing father presumes his daughter more capable of translating his needs across cultural and racial barriers: "Yes, you go—you know how to talk to him—you know what to say."⁷⁸ This important passage illustrates the reversal of roles between the father and the daughter-mediator, with the latter assuming linguistic control and social authority.

Like Riley, Levy depicts the discriminatory practices surrounding Angela's father's treatment by the medical establishment. The fact that Angela only manages to secure decent home nursing care for her father through her connections; that the hospital ward is large, impersonal, and deprived of resources; that Angela's mother is forced to leave her husband in the casualty department without him having been settled into a bed at a ward, are all indications of understaffed, hectic, cramped health care conditions for ageing black British working-class people: "I always thought you were sent home from hospital when you were fit. Perhaps once, but now they needed the beds."⁷⁹ The humiliation of Angela's father being told to soil himself, because hospital workers are too busy to assist him in going to the toilet, is shocking and scandalous to Angela. The reader experiences the father's dehumanisation through Angela's eyes, which further encourages reader empathy and identification. Angela's vision of murderous rage, as her father is objectified by the nurse's dismissive term, "old man Jacobs,"⁸⁰ exposes the gap between fantasies of anger and the reality of passive despair which relatives of patients in such situations understandably feel. Levy's depictions of Angela's anguish at her father's pained screams, and his subsequent suicide attempt as a last resort to maintain dignity and control⁸¹, are all the more poignant, because they are achieved through an understated, pared-down prose.

In Levy, the physical process of the body shutting down is mirrored in the narrative drive towards closure, in Angela's despairing words: "There was pain there – not physical, not for me, but pain that you can't see coming, that smacks you inside and pulls and rips at you. No aspirin or plaster can help."⁸² Shocked by Angela's burst of raw emotion, and her controversial wish that he may die: "I wanted to let him go now. I didn't want any more memories of him like that... I wanted him dead. I wished him dead,"⁸³ the reader identifies with her wish, seeing that it has its origin in love, not cowardice or denial. Levy courageously portrays taboo in her representation of death. Such complex and difficult emotions in relation to death reject a sanitised glossing-over of the experience:

I could hear my dad crying out, horrible, moaning sobs... I began to get angry with him. Why couldn't he die gracefully, with dignity? Fading silently from life with a gentle smile and a touching last request. So his family could stand round his death bed and weep and mourn their loss. No, he had to die kicking and screaming, being pulled from life, being robbed. The loudest noise he had ever made in his life... The first rail against injustice.⁸⁴

Angela's father's refusal to fade away quietly reflects the book's insistence on his humanity, and insists on his right to be heard, to not be silenced and sanitised, but be real. Angela's gesture of trust and continuity, in insisting on the humanity of touch, transcends the father's ageing and diseased body, ravaged by steroids which had seemed to become an unrecognisable 'other': "I... laid my hand on top of his. His hand that I always held to cross the road."⁸⁵ The image of hands connecting consolidates the emotional and physical bond between parent and child, but also reflects Angela's authority as the daughter-mediator, having to take control.

The endings of both novels underline the difficulty of closure. Where Riley's novel integrates a 'happy ending' fantasy that allows Adella to let go of life, into the closing chapter through sections of stream-of-consciousness, Levy's novel presents an alternative, separate, last chapter for that vision. In this closing chapter, tellingly entitled "The Death," Angela's anecdote of the pet cat Willie's decision to take herself away to die alone, on her own terms, stands in contrast to her father's undignified and shabby hospital death. Levy's 'double ending' powerfully emphasises the significance of self-determination in old age. In their use of fantasy discourse and alternative endings, both *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Waiting in the Twilight* thus resist the shabby finality of their ageing characters' deaths. They insist that their characters' deteriorating physical health and abjection in old age result from their bodies and minds being subjected to the dis-ease of a racist, classist, sexist society. In both novels, the ageing black body stands as a powerful figurative representation of the wider collective history of black British experience. Levy and Riley both resolutely break with the convention described by Brennan, whereby: "realistic literary representations that portray characters until the moment of their deaths are a rarity."⁸⁶ Instead, Levy and Riley's brave and aching beautiful portrayals of the ageing body and dying are complex, passionate, and realistic - and refuse "the scenic route".⁸⁷

Conclusion: Across Generations

Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight* reappraise black British experience, ensuring that ageing black characters' lives have not been forgotten, and that younger generations strive to change their conditions. Examining black British ageing is to engage creatively and emotionally with recent black British history – in Riley's words, not "as something which the dominant ideology decides is history [but] in terms of how it's actually been experienced generationally."⁸⁸ In *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Waiting in the Twilight*, Levy and Riley's uses of realist memory writing and representations of ageing enable marginalised and ignored voices to

be heard across generations. Thereby, both novels reject the story of silenced victimhood for their ageing characters, by foregrounding intergenerational connections, as a celebration of continuity which sustains postcolonial and black British identities in the face of an ever-evolving and diversifying society. Fiction plays an important role in promoting such identifications, and can: “articulate the affective and emotional dimensions of oppression and the processes of resistance and solidarity that produce new forms of subjectivity and identity.”⁸⁹ Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and Riley’s *Waiting in the Twilight* explore ideas of bodily abjection in their depictions of what ageing feels like for their characters, and insist on their ageing fictional characters’ humanity and complexity, their resilience and imaginations. In these two novels Levy and Riley make elderly characters and their histories the main story. They present, at the centre of the story, black British working-class characters whose ageing experiences spur our outrage, and whose histories will not be cast aside.

Endnotes

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- 3 Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000, 23.
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