ENTERTEXT

Stranger in the Empire: Language and Identity in the ‘Mother Country’

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Abstract

This essay offers a reading of Andrea Levy’s 2004 novel, *Small Island*, through the lens of James Baldwin’s classic 1953 essay, “Stranger in the Village.” Although Baldwin and Levy address similar themes and issues—notably, both contest prevailing discourses of race and citizenship—their works diverge in significant ways, which merit close consideration. Baldwin’s essay offers an African-American perspective on race and identity in the mid-1950s while Levy’s novel presents a fictionalised account—written more than 50 years later—of the *Windrush* generation and the experiences of black British people at roughly the same time Baldwin was writing. Baldwin wrote his essay while living abroad, at a moment when African American claims upon full citizenship, intensifying in the changed racial climate following the second World War, would launch the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed the book version of the 1953 essay was published in 1955, the same year Rosa Parks refused to move her seat on the bus and became the emblem of that Movement. In his essay Baldwin speculates on the power differences between a white person arriving in Africa and a Black person arriving in Europe. Levy’s novel describes, in hindsight, the experiences of the *Windrush* immigrants, arriving as colonial subjects in the ‘Mother Country,’ and explores the intersecting experiences of Afro-Caribbean immigrants from British colonies and white, working-class and lower-middle class Londoners during and after World War II. A comparison of these two very different texts about arrival and interracial contact reveals the dishearteningly common and persistent dynamics of imperialism, power, and racism.

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Ann Murphy

> Joyce is right about history being a nightmare—but it may be the nightmare from which no one *can* awaken. People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.
>
> —James Baldwin[1]

In 1953, James Baldwin first published an essay, "Stranger in the Village," which offers an incisive, painful, and enduring examination of racism and American identity. In the opening to the essay, the expatriate Baldwin describes his visit to a small Swiss village whose residents have never before seen a person of African descent. He describes his experience as follows:

> Everyone in the village knows my name, though they scarcely ever use it, knows that I came from America though this, apparently, they will never really believe: black men come from Africa—and everyone knows that I am the friend of the son of a woman who was born here, and that I am staying in their chalet. But I remain as much a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived, and the children shout *Neger*! *Neger*! as I walk along the streets.... there was no suggestion that I was human: I was simply a living wonder.[2]

The thrust of Baldwin's argument concerns what he regarded, in 1953, as the quintessentially *American* struggle of peoples of European ancestry to acknowledge the humanity and shared citizenship of people of African ancestry or, in Baldwin's words, the "necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself."[3] In the course of this complicated essay Baldwin speculates on the differences between a European arriving for the first time in Africa and an African arriving for the first time in Europe.

Baldwin describes these experiences imaginatively, indeed novelistically, using the description of differences to make rhetorical and political points about race relations in the United States. His insights into the varying power dynamics of each encounter may elucidate many of the experiences of people of African descent who were, at that historical moment, arriving in Europe in unprecedented numbers in the post-war counter-migration from former colonies to Europe (though these people were not, of course, encountering white Europeans for the first time). Baldwin's essay thus offers us a perspective through which we can begin to examine Andrea Levy's fictionalised account of the arrival of the *Windrush* generation of West Indians in Britain, in her novel, *Small Island*.

At the same time, Baldwin's essay is equally revealing for what it does *not* say, especially about the sexual dimensions of the colonial and post-colonial encounter. In

discussing the Western imperial movement into Africa and Asia, for example, Anne McClintock refers to the "long tradition of male travel as an erotics of ravishment,"[4] and the "persistent gendering of the imperial unknown,"[5] while Stuart Hall, discussing the counter-migration of West Indians and others to Britain, describes "the problem of the problem, so to speak—the core issue: [as] *miscegenation*."[6] Baldwin, however, in this essay does not directly address the subject of interracial sexuality so essential to the encounter between races; indeed he scarcely mentions women at all. Nor does he address the different ways that race and power intersect for women on each side of the encounter. Yet both of these questions are central to *Small Island*.

Consequently, a comparison of the two texts is as intriguing for the thematic connections between them as for the ways they diverge. Baldwin's essay, of course, is a primary document, recounting the perspective of an African-American man living in France in the mid 1950s, while Levy's is a novel, a fictionalised account written more than a generation later, of the *Windrush* generation and the experiences of African-British people. In drawing on a primary text by an African American male writer living in Europe to explore the themes of a black British female writer of a later generation, I do not want to imply a facile 'universality' of postcolonial themes. Indeed we find many profound and suggestive differences between the two: including sexuality, especially interracial sexuality, which Baldwin (in this essay) elides as well as gender and language, and humour.[7] Despite these significant differences, I propose that a comparative reading of the two texts might allow us to, in Helen Scott's words, "heed Said's call to reunite texts with their 'worldly situation'—one of imperialist conquest and global inequalities."[8] Reading the texts together, I suggest, offers us a fuller understanding both of Baldwin's original insights as well as their limitations and of Levy's subsequent imaginative rendering of an historical experience that both illustrates and challenges Baldwin's claims. While Baldwin was writing at a moment when African American claims upon citizenship were becoming more insistent and the Civil Rights Movement strengthened and accelerated, Levy is describing, in hindsight, through the lens of history, a different crucial and pivotal moment of transition in the intersecting experiences of, and relationships among, Afro-Caribbean immigrants from British colonies and white, working-class and lower-middle class Londoners during and after World War II. The relationship of Afro-Caribbean immigrants to the white world of England is quite different from the relationship of African-Americans to the nation that had enslaved them, though the dynamics of imperialism, power, and racism in the two texts are dishearteningly similar.

Set against the upheaval of a cataclysmic war fought—at least ostensibly—against the racist ideology and imperial domination of the Nazis, Levy's novel explores the cruel and dehumanizing ways that class, race, and gender constitute barriers to human community in the waning days of the British Empire. Built on the interlacing of four different first-person narratives, the novel also shifts back and forth in time, weaving a rich cumulative portrait of five individuals: Hortense, Gilbert, Queenie, Bernard, and Michael (although we never hear Michael's voice directly). These characters are often blinded or dominated by the ideologies of race, class, and gender that have shaped their lives; they sometimes appear dangerously, indeed tragically, incapable of seeing or

understanding one another and themselves. At the same time, four of these five people are capable of varying degrees of empathy and humor, and of recognising—if only briefly—the humanity in one another, of bridging the racial estrangement Baldwin describes.

Two elements in this historical moment of counter-migration and contact that Levy depicts are strikingly similar to those Baldwin discusses in his essay: the vastly different power dynamics implicit in the white and the black encounters of Otherness; and the way language often constitutes an obstacle to, rather than a means of, human connection, inscribing and reinforcing racial and class differences. In many ways, the blindness of these characters to and about each other, reflected in their misunderstandings of one another's words, illustrates the degree to which both people of 'colour' and white, working-class people have been erased from the discourses of power and have no language to understand one another. In the words of Anne McClintock:

> The colonial journey into the virgin interior reveals a contradiction, for the journey is figured as proceeding forward in geographical space but backward in historical time, to what is figured as a prehistoric zone of racial and gender difference.... According to this trope, colonized people—like women and the working class in the metropolis—do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency.[9]

Levy's novel reclaims the voices and emotions and experiences of men and women, including colonial subjects and England's working class, all of whom struggle in the course of the novel to express their "human agency" and to find their place in time and history.

Historically, significant differences exist between the racial encounters depicted in Levy's novel and in Baldwin's essay. Most strikingly, the West Indians expected, upon arriving in Britain, that they would be recognised as citizens of the 'Mother Country': they saw themselves as vital to the survival of England and as part of its Empire.[10] Furthermore, they had resources available to them as a distinct community from a separate and beloved, known homeland; they had a strong sense of themselves and their cultural history. Despite the Harlem Renaissance and the critique of race and racism proffered by authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois, I would argue that such resources—stemming from the sense of a collective, imagined community—were not always available to African Americans at the time Baldwin wrote his essay: or, at least, these resources are not acknowledged in his essay. Indeed, Baldwin's solitude as a Black man in that frozen white Swiss village is the most powerful element of his essay and his argument.

The novel's Jamaican characters include two Royal Air Force (RAF) airmen, Gilbert and Michael, and Gilbert's wife, Hortense, an educated school teacher. The British characters are two working-class or lower-middle-class Londoners: Queenie, a butcher's daughter and a housewife who rents rooms to the West Indians, and her husband, Bernard, a clerk who returns from the war in India still trapped by his racism and fear. All three Jamaicans arrive in England either during or after the war, eager to fight and/or

work on behalf of the British and to start a new life there, convinced by years of colonial propaganda that they are equal citizens of the 'Mother Country' and Empire, not second-class subjects of colonial rule. Instead, of course, they encounter virulent racism and violence from many of the people whom they had been taught to regard as fellow citizens in an England they had been taught to regard as home.

Most persistently, Gilbert and Hortense, whose experiences we hear in their own voices, find that the 'Mother Country' neither recognises nor acknowledges their humanity; indeed, it literally cannot understand their theoretically-shared English language. Instead, Gilbert, Michael, and Hortense look "black" and less than human to most white English residents, whether in London's East End or in a Yorkshire village, and their speech, as we shall see below, is often incomprehensible to the English, in part because the Jamaicans are far better educated than the working-class English people they encounter. But while the white characters see all of the Jamaicans as undifferentiated Others, blind to their humanity and deaf to their words, we, as readers, hear the voices of the individual Jamaican characters as unique and distinct, shaped by class and gender and character.

Levy highlights the ways in which all of the personal voices in the narrative are inflected by empire, albeit in different, highly individual ways. Hortense, for example, opens her background narrative by establishing her status in the colony of Jamaica: "The sound of my father's name could still hush a room long after he had left Savannah-La-Mar. Every generation in our district knew of my father and his work overseas as a government man."[11] Gilbert opens his by boasting of his looks and criticising British food: "My mirror spoke to me. It said: 'Man, women gonna fall at your feet.' … How the English built empires when their armies marched on nothing but mush should be one of the wonders of the world."[12] Each of these two voices is distinct in its colonial snobbery and insecurity, its confidence and sensuality, and much of the novel's power derives from the contrapuntal effect of these vivid, interlacing narratives, rendering as intensely vivid these characters whom the English cannot see or hear.

At the same time, 'hearing' the voices of the two white characters, Queenie and Bernard, allows us to understand more fully their personal histories, their vulnerabilities and desires, and the way their fears and bigotries have been shaped by their culture and class and gender. The novel opens with Queenie's story of a childhood experience going to "Africa" at the British Empire Exhibition, an encounter that contains elements of sexuality and fear. This episode presents dramatically Queenie's first discovery of the 'surprising' humanity of the "black man who looked to be carved from melting chocolate," as well as her racist presumption that he is "civilized—[because he was] taught English by the white man."[13] By contrast, Bernard's voice comes to us only mid-way through the novel, and his searing and humiliating war experiences in India mark him as palpably as Queenie's childhood encounter with exoticism marks her: "We were packed like cattle on to the train in Bombay when we first arrived I India. Hundreds of troops. We walked three abreast into the station but were quickly outnumbered. Brown people all around."[14] For Bernard, the only compensation for his suffering and sexual inadequacy is his reflexive

contempt for people of other races. Various colonial hierarchies and practices of othering emerge, highlighting the variously alienating effects of empire on individuals.

These interlacing first person narratives heighten the reader's awareness of how cruelly racism blinds nearly all of the characters in the novel, but especially the white characters, both to shared human experiences of love, hate, fear, and need as well as to an understanding of the unique qualities that make each individual so profoundly different. While most readers will see and hear significant distinctions among the West Indians, the British characters in the novel see the West Indians as undifferentiated others defined entirely by their race. The Jamaicans, by contrast, see the white characters with such widely varying perspectives that some readers may have trouble reconciling the Queenie of Gilbert's narrative to the character of the same name in Hortense's account. Indeed one of the most striking qualities of the interlacing first person narratives in the novel is that the self-perception of each character, conveyed by his or her voice, differs so radically from the way the other characters in the novel see that person.

Despite the persistent, claustrophobic effects of race / class / gender blindness that dominate the novel, we as readers are aware of the deep, hidden human connections between them, connections none of the characters ever fully realizes. Both Queenie and Hortense, for example, are in love with the charismatic and elusive Michael, and both women respond to Gilbert initially because of his physical resemblance to Michael. This secret erotic connection between Queenie and Michael, Hortense and Michael, and Gilbert and Michael, becomes crucial toward the end of the novel when Queenie, who has just given birth to Michael's child, asks Hortense and Gilbert to adopt the mixed-race baby, knowing that her husband and neighbours will never accept him.[15] While neither woman ever knows that the other knows (and loves) Michael, the mixed-race child of Queenie and Michael helps bring Hortense and Gilbert together, and points the characters and the novel to an ambiguously hopeful and racially mixed post-colonial future.

Power and Race in Encountering Otherness

The experiences of this *Empire Windrush* generation of West Indian immigrants both illuminate and challenge Baldwin's description of the differences between white men arriving in Africa and Africans arriving in Europe:

> I thought of white men arriving for the first time in an African village, strangers there, as I am a stranger here, and tried to imagine the astounded populace touching their hair and marveling at the color of their skin. But there is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites. The white man takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned; whereas I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even, in a

> sense, created me, people who have cost me more anguish and rage than they will ever know, who yet do not even know of my existence.[16]

It is precisely this combination of astonishment, racial superiority, and ignorance that greets the West Indians in England, although Levy reminds us that it is the experience of both black men and black women. Furthermore, the response of the Jamaicans, or a part of their response, is, just as Baldwin describes, a mixture of anguish and rage, most particularly inspired by the recognition that they are, as human beings, at best invisible to the English—not, as they were led to expect, fellow citizens—and at worst sub-human barbarians or animals.

Michael, and later Gilbert and his mates, arrive in England from the West Indies in the midst of the Second World War, having enlisted in the RAF not to conquer or to convert but to save what they think of as the 'Mother Country.' As soldiers they are partially insulated from the extremes of racism they and other West Indians will encounter after the war, when they are no longer protected by their uniforms. Yet their experiences are still remarkably like those of Baldwin in that small Swiss village. During their first visit to a small Yorkshire village, Gilbert observes that he and his fellow West Indians attract the same kind of attention a gecko receives from a dog:

> A gecko sensing a dog remains as still as death. [a dog] seeing a gecko is suddenly caught by passionate curiosity... Fearing the unexpected he moves stealthily round the creature, never—even for a second—taking his gaze from it.... The entire village had come out to play dog with gecko. Staring out from dusty windows, gawping from shop doors, gaping at the edge of the pavement, craning at gates and peering round corners. The villagers kept their distance but held that gaze of curious trepidation firmly on we West Indian RAF volunteers. Under this scrutiny we darkies moved with the awkwardness of thieves caught in a sunbeam.[17]

The West Indian men are seen as objects of the colonialist gaze in this isolated Yorkshire village; these men become, as Gilbert notes, mere "darkies" (a word Hortense has never heard before arriving in England). They become awkward, and most tellingly they begin to internalise this perspective: to see themselves as illicit, like thieves. Where Baldwin's essay focuses on the cruel echoes of American racism in the ignorant response of the Swiss villagers—those children shouting "*Neger! Neger!"*—Gilbert, whose vision is the most consistently generous and thoughtful of the four voices in the novel, recognises here and throughout his narrative the fear and trepidation that lie behind the scrutiny and ignorance.

In the language of postcolonial theory, Gilbert recognises "recurrent doubling in male imperial discourse... the simultaneous dread of catastrophic boundary *loss*... associated with fears of impotence and infantilization and attended by an *excess* of boundary order and fantasies of unlimited power."[18] In effect, his description of this encounter challenges and complicates the experience Baldwin describes. He returns the gaze of the imperialist villagers and depicts his vision of them through language, offering a narrative account that manifests considerably more compassion and humor than the villagers do. In the process of describing the encounter he reclaims and asserts his own humanity.

Furthermore, the English response to the West Indians soldiers is more varied and complex than the reaction of the Swiss villagers Baldwin describes in his essay. When the Yorkshire villagers do finally come out to inspect the West Indians, one old man says,

> 'We're all in this together, lad. We're glad to have you here – glad to have ya' ... [while a woman, arguing with her husband about the West Indians' language, says] 'There, I told you. They speak it just like us, only funnier. Ta, ducks, sorry to bother ya,' ... [and a middle-aged man asks them why they would] 'leave a nice sunny place to come here if you didn't have to' [but is clearly offended when Gilbert responds,] 'To fight for my country, sir.'[19]

Despite this variation in response, however, and the humor of the Yorkshire villagers' perspective on the 'funnier' language of the Jamaicans, it remains true that the most prevalent and systematic reaction of the English is the kind of ignorant racism Gilbert so vividly captures in describing the experience of one of his friends: "let me not forget James [a fellow West Indian RAF volunteer], perplexed as a newborn, standing with military bearing surrounded by English children—white urchin faces blackened with dirt, dryed snot flaking on their mouths—who yelled up at him, 'Oi, darkie, show us yer tail.'"[20] In his account of encounters with poor, white English villagers, who regard the West Indians as animals, Gilbert conveys them, in turn, as dirty, ignorant, and inhumane. As Gilbert's description suggests, Levy's rendering of this cultural encounter includes dimensions that did not exist for Baldwin, as an American in Switzerland. Not only is the response of the white English citizens more varied than those of the Swiss villagers, but the reaction of Gilbert and his friends to the English contains, in addition to anguish and rage, subversive elements of humor, class superiority, and disappointment in the poverty and ugliness of the 'Mother Country,' in the discrepancy between the legends of glorious empire they had been taught and the realities of a war-torn small island they encounter.

The paradox here is that the ideology of empire had, ironically, shaped their belief in their own place as participants in England's culture and history, and raised their expectations of what that "home" island would be like as well as their place in it. Like Baldwin, then, they arrive in England "among a people whose culture controls" them, but unlike Baldwin, who feels that even the most illiterate Swiss villager is "related, in a way that [he is] not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus... [and] the cathedral at Chartres,"[21] the West Indian immigrants in Levy's novel, while certainly shaped and damaged by white British culture, feel not so much intimidated or coerced by that culture as appalled by its shabbiness, its smallness. They witness "the emerging vision of Britain as a beleaguered island race, rather than a great imperial power."[22] Indeed the 'Mother Country' proves, in Gilbert's words, to be a

> filthy tramp... Ragged, old and dusty as the long dead.... She offers you no comfort after your journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says 'Who the bloody hell are you?' ... There was a pained gasp at every broken-down scene [the West Indians] encountered."[23]

As colonial subjects, accustomed to seeing whites in positions of power and unaccustomed to seeing white people work in any menial capacity, they are shocked to see white women labouring in restaurants and factories, surprised to hear the uneducated language of the working class English people they meet, and appalled to encounter bland, boiled food and a cold, colourless winter landscape. The "small island" of the title might refer as easily to the narrow, bland and provincial England as to the sunny Caribbean island of Jamaica, but these islands prove to be significantly different.

Even more powerful than their disappointment in the tawdriness of England at war, however, is their shock at being alternately threatening and invisible to those they have enlisted to protect from Nazi aggression, to those who in Baldwin's words "do not even know of [their] existence. "But for me I had just one question," Gilbert says, "—let me ask the Mother Country just this one simple question: how come England did not know me?"[24] He goes on to explain:

> Ask any of us West Indian RAF volunteers—ask any of us colony troops where in Britain are ships built, where is cotton woven, steel forged, cars made, jam boiled, cups shaped, lace knotted, glass blown, tin mined, whisky distilled? Ask. Then sit back and learn your lesson. Now see this. An English soldier, a Tommy called Tommy Atkins.... Ask him, "Tommy, tell me nah, where is Jamaica?" And hear him reply. "Well, dunno. Africa, ain't it?" ... It was inconceivable that we Jamaicans, we West Indians, we members of the British Empire, would not fly to the Mother Country's defence when there was a threat. But, tell me, if Jamaica was in trouble, is there any major, any general, any sergeant who would have been able to find that dear island?[25]

What Gilbert discovers is precisely what Baldwin describes in his essay, that "white men have for black men a reality which is far from being reciprocal; and hence all black men have toward all white men an attitude which is designed, really, either to rob the white man of the jewel of his naiveté, or else to make it cost him dear."[26] Thus, for both, a fundamental goal is, again in Baldwin's words, "that the white man cease to regard [the black man] as an exotic rarity and recognize him as a human being."[27] Yet, in *Small Island*, those being seen as an "exotic rarity" are, radically and presumptuously, visiting the small island of England to save it from annihilation in war. This underscores the ignorance and racism of the English; it also positions the RAF soldiers in a different power dynamic than the one Baldwin imagines. Where Baldwin's African-Americans are most often bitterly aware of white racism and resistant to it, Levy's black colonial subjects are caught up in a more ambivalent sense of accommodation and resistance to empire.

Language as Obstacle/Hearing Race, Class and Gender

Levy's novel complicates Baldwin's analysis in several ways: by adding the voices and perspectives of *both* black and white people, both women and men; by exploring the role of class in shaping the ideology of empire and inhibiting the full development of black and white people; and by depicting the way humor and resilience help the Jamaicans in surviving injustice. In all of those cases, Levy focuses in particular on the way language

often complicates human connections rather than facilitating it. Language is, of course, fundamental to human identity, and the dilemma of the capacity of the Other to speak (and be heard by the dominant group) has been a recurring theme in postcolonial literary studies. We may think, for example, of Joseph Conrad's classic rendering of white men encountering the 'inarticulate' Other in *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1902) as well as of Chinua Achebe's cogent analysis of Conrad's refusal or inability to "confer language on the 'rudimentary souls' of Africa."[28] Perhaps for this reason it is the capacity of the West Indian immigrants not simply to speak English but to speak it clearly and, in the case of Hortense, to speak a Caribbean-inflected, educated English that causes the greatest initial surprise and resentment among many of the white people they meet. Through the constant failures of white English and black West Indians to understand the words of one another, we most vividly see the painful dimensions of differences in race, class, and cultural difference.

Hortense's first conversation with Queenie illustrates the way social class, marked by accent and diction and culture, reflected by idioms and by deeply engrained assumptions about race, make human communication and connection across these divides virtually impossible. Queenie comes to visit Hortense on her first day in the shabby and deteriorating house where Queenie quite bravely rents out rooms to several West Indians. Hortense, a strict and rigid woman proud of her light skin and her upper class connections as well as of her training as a teacher, is utterly appalled by the squalor of the tiny attic room, so far removed from her expectations of imperial England. She is cold and silent to Queenie, and their first encounter flounders almost immediately:

> 'Cat got your tongue?' [Queenie asks. And Hortense thinks] What cat was she talking of? Don't tell me there was a cat that must also live with us in this room. 'My name's Mrs. Bligh,' [Queenie] carrie[s] on. 'But you can call me Queenie, if you like. Everyone here does. Would you like that?' The impression I received was that she was talking to me as if I was an imbecile. An educated woman such as I. So I replied, 'Have you lost your cat?'[29]

Despite the humor of the encounter, the obliviousness of each woman is heartbreaking: neither of these strong and forceful women truly sees or hears the other; Hortense is as blinded and deafened by her class snobbery and inflated expectations of imperial England as Queenie is by the insularity of her social class and its reflexive racism.

Hortense's first shopping experience in London contains a similar painful mix of humour and heartbreak. This educated woman, who prides herself on her refined language and elegant speech, finds that few white English people can understand her Jamaican-inflected English with its Victorian sense of correctness. When she asks for a tin of condensed milk at the grocery store, she finds that the storekeeper cannot understand her:

> […] this red man [the storekeeper] stared back at me as if I had not uttered the words. No light of comprehension sparkled in his eye. 'I beg your pardon?' he said. Condensed milk, I said, five times, and still he looked on me bewildered. Why no one in this country understand my

> English? At college my diction was admired by all. I had to point at the wretched tin of condensed milk, which resided just behind his head.[30]

Like Gilbert in his encounter with impoverished Yorkshire villagers, Hortense is shielded by her initial self-confidence (her diction was admired by all at college). Also like Gilbert she is ultimately wounded not simply by the racism she doesn't yet understand but more profoundly by the failure of the 'Mother Country' to understand the language it has taught her, and thus to be able to respond to her as a human being. Unlike Gilbert, Hortense is unable to come to terms with the pain of repeated experiences of racism.

These language complications make vividly and painfully concrete the deeper miscommunications across racial, class, and gender divides. These misunderstandings culminate in one of the most powerful moments in the novel, a scene fraught with all these issues of racism and sexuality, language and ignorance of shared human community. In this scene, Gilbert makes an impassioned speech about racial justice to Bernard, Queenie's husband, a man who has returned belatedly from his humiliating and harrowing wartime experience in India and is shocked to find that his wife is renting rooms to West Indians. He is even more stunned to learn that she has just given birth to a mixed-race child. The scene opens when Queenie asks Gilbert and Hortense to adopt her child, acknowledging with pain that she will not be able to raise it herself safely in the racist world of post-war England. One of the many ironies of this scene is that the child's father is Michael, the man Hortense also loves, although Hortense does not know the child's parentage. Another irony is that Hortense, through whose voice we hear Gilbert's response to Bernard, begins in this fraught and painful moment to value and admire Gilbert, the man whom she had married without love, by hearing him speak:

> Gilbert sucked on his teeth to return this man's scorn. 'You know what your trouble is, man?' he said. 'Your white skin. You think it makes you better than me. You think it give you the right to lord it over a black man. But you know what it make you? You wan' know what your white skin make you, man? It make you white. That is all, man. White. No better, no worse than me—just white.' Mr Bligh moved his eye to gaze on the ceiling. 'Listen to me, man, we both just finish fighting a war—a bloody war—for the better world we wan' see. And on the same side—you and me. We both look on other men to see enemy. You and me, fighting for empire, fighting for peace. But still, after all that we suffer together, you wan' tell me I am worthless and you are not. Am I to be the servant and you are the master for all time? No. Stop this, man. Stop it now. We can work together, Mr Bligh. You no see? We must. Or else you just gonna fight me till the end?'[31]

It is an intensely powerful moment, and Hortense's response is naturally one of enormous pride and admiration. In this moment she fully recognises and acknowledges the many wonderful qualities the reader has already seen in Gilbert, qualities to which her snobbery (and life-long obsession with Michael) had previously blinded her: "I realised that Gilbert Joseph, my husband, was a man of class, a man of character, a man of intelligence. Noble in a way that would some day make him a legend."[32] Gilbert's language, which is both less educated than Hortense's and potentially incomprehensible to many working-

class English people, here defines a vision of the future for the country and creates hope for his connection with his wife. He asserts exactly the subjectivity and reciprocity that Baldwin so bitterly desires. But the cruelest irony of the moment is contained in Bernard's reply: "'I'm sorry... but I just can't understand a single word you're saying.'"[33] Whether Bernard's lack of understanding is personal or linguistic or political, his response defines the extent to which race, class, and empire render him deaf to Gilbert's humanity. In Baldwin's words, Gilbert's "inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned."[34] Anguish and rage remain integral to this encounter.

New Visions

Baldwin's essay, which imagines an encounter between Europe and Africa, white and black, ends on a note of consciously willed, not completely plausible hope:

> The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger.... This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.[35]

His words are strikingly close to those of Gilbert, in his impassioned statement to Bernard: "No. Stop this, man. Stop it now. We can work together, Mr Bligh. You no see? We must."[36] Levy's novel, exploring precisely the encounter Baldwin imagined, ends with the same note of deliberate optimism, as Hortense, holding in her arms the child of Queenie and Michael, joins Gilbert in the street as they prepare to move into their new house and to build their lives together in the Mother Country: "I adjusted my hat in case it sagged in the damp air and left me looking comical" says the ever-dignified Hortense. She adds: "A curtain at the window moved – just a little but enough for me to know it was not the breeze [as Queenie watches her child depart]. But I paid it no mind as I pulled my back up and straightened my coat against the cold."[37] Levy presents an ambivalent moment of pain and humour, hope and continued misunderstanding, as Gilbert and Hortense, brought together by Michael's child as well as by the shared experience of racism, move not, it is clear, to an ideal life, but certainly to one filled with greater possibilities than Baldwin was able, in 1953, to imagine, certainly greater than those Queenie and Bernard have before them.

Endnotes

1 James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, 2: https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/stranger.htm [accessed 26 June 2011]. Baldwin's essay was written while he was living in exile abroad. First published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1953, it was republished two years later as part of his collection, *Notes of a Native Son*. It thus marks a liminal moment in the Civil Rights Movement, brilliantly articulating some of the anger and frustration and desire that forged that Movement, but not yet informed by the sense of collective purpose and hope the Movement would generate.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 7.

4 Anne McClintock*, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995, 22.

5 Ibid., 24.

6 Stuart Hall, "Reconstruction Work: Images of Postwar Black Settlement," *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. James Procter, ed., New York: Manchester University Press, 2000, 92.

7 In other texts, notably *Giovanni's Room* (1956), Baldwin examines the intersections of race and sexuality, often in ways that challenge hegemonic norms.

8 Helen Scott, "Reading the Text in its Worldly Situation: Marxism, Imperialism, and Contemporary Caribbean Women's Literature," *Postcolonial Text* 2.1 (2006): 1.

9 McClintock, 30.

10 Andrea Levy. *Small Island*. New York: Picador, 2004, 117.

11 Ibid., 31.

12 Ibid., 105.

13 Ibid., 5-6.

14 Ibid., 281.

15 For more on adoption in Levy's work, see John McLeod, "Postcolonial Fictions of Adoption," *Critical Survey* 18:2 (2006): 45-55.

16 Baldwin, 3.

17 Levy, 113-4.

18 McClintock, 26.

19 Levy, 115.

20 Ibid., 117.

21 Baldwin, 3.

22 David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 436.

23 Levy, 116.

24 Ibid., 117.

25 Ibid., 118.

26 Baldwin, 4.

27 Ibid.

28 Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness,*” Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1988, 255.

29 Levy, 187-88.

30 Ibid., 274.

31 Ibid., 435.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Baldwin, 4.

35 Ibid., 8.

36 Levy, 435.

37 Ibid., 438.