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Contested Identities: Migrant Stories and Liminal Selves in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

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The maps in our geography books, concentrating on British islands in the Caribbean, seemed to stress our smallness and isolation (209).

A Way in the World, V.S. Naipaul

The alternative [to the capitalist colonial system] is to throw the Empire overboard and reduce England to a cold and unimportant little island [...] (140).

The Road to Wigan Pier, George Orwell

Within fifteen years, Andrea Levy, a black British writer born to Jamaican parents in 1956, has become a literary figure that cannot be ignored; yet few critics have paid close attention to her works of fiction. Her novels *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994), *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), and *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) all present the frustrations and challenges of second-generation black female immigrants in London. To Susan Alice Fischer, the novels read as a "trilogy" since "the stories build one upon the other as these English-born daughters of Jamaican immigrants come of age in three successive decades," from the sixties to the late eighties (199). Andrea Levy's realist female *Bildungsromane*, set "in context [...] at the heart of a history that Jamaica and Britain share," says the author ("This Is My England"), do bespeak her postcolonial literary project. The novelist consistently aims to explore the theme of identity formation complicated by gender and racial biases, the problematic construction of individual and collective selves among the African Diaspora, so as to confront narrow Eurocentric configurations of the world at large and of Great Britain in particular.

With her fourth novel *Small Island* (2004) Andrea Levy looks back on the “Windrush generation,” Caribbean migrants who sailed to the “Mother Country” in 1948 in search of a better life. The author braids together the overlapping first-person narratives of her four London-based protagonists: Gilbert Joseph, a young Jamaican who joined the Royal Air Force in England, his priggish and naïve wife Hortense, their white landlady Queenie Bligh, and her jingoistic husband Bernard returning from India where he served his country during the war. The complex multilayered structure of Levy’s novel, with four discontinuous, criss-crossing personal narratives, offers distinct views along gender, class, and color lines. Starting with a “Prologue,” the novel is then made of nine parts titled “1948” and “Before” alternately. “1948” is a specific date that evokes the start of a new era with the arrival of immigrants. “Before” is a vague reference to an undetermined time span that precedes 1948 and focuses on the past lives of the four protagonists. Each part includes several chapters, each titled with the narrator-character’s name (“Queenie,” “Hortense,” “Gilbert,” or “Bernard”). Through a series of long flashbacks, the novel expands beyond post-war London to rural England, to Jamaica and India. Levy thus contextualizes the migrants’ arrival and the disruptive encounter with the racial Other within a global frame, showing how the trauma of World War Two, the decline of Empire, transnational migration and the beginnings of “colonization in reverse” led concomitantly to profound sociocultural changes that reshaped both Jamaica and Great Britain into “small islands” (each in her own way).

Through her characters’ contrasted narrative voices, the author exposes the conflicting interests and identities at stake in social interaction. She constructs London as a new “contact zone” (Pratt 7), a liminal space in which all the characters without distinction have to negotiate their place and reconsider their self-image whether in terms of race, gender, class or nationhood.

While Andrea Levy's literary forefathers George Lamming and Sam Selvon made the transatlantic journey in 1950 and fictionalized their lived experiences, their hardships and dreams as West Indian (male) immigrants, Levy belongs to a younger generation of (female) writers who, as Onyekachi Wambu observed, "began, uniquely, to map out the contours of their own identity as black British people, not as rejected outsiders, but critical insiders" (28). Writing from a different perspective and with the benefit of temporal distance, Levy reconsiders the impact of this first wave of migration on Britain's national sense of self.¹ Given her understanding of this crucial event and its ramifications in present-day multicultural London, being herself a member of the urban African Diaspora, Levy intends to rewrite the history of the capital city, thereby responding imaginatively to Paul Gilroy's call for a critical re-reading of London's colonial past: "We will have to adjust the threshold of our contemporaneity and rethink the ways in which the history of this metropolis has been periodised" ("A London sumting dis..." 60).

Andrea Levy's literary exploration of postcolonial themes, such as the emergence of a new geography of relations on a worldwide scale and the development of "new ethnicities" to the contact of others within Britain, sets in perspective geographical and historical (dis)continuities and revises the traditional binary oppositions between center and margin, the local and the global. The author reconceptualizes the island as an ambiguous place of confinement and openness, unity and diversity, which embraces and reflects interrelated fluid identities. Our aim is to demonstrate that Levy's poetics of urban and insular space in the context of migrancy as well as her formal approach to fictional writing (with a non-linear, rhizomorphic narrative structure and alternating multiple voices) rest on the tension between two main concepts: insularity and liminality, bounded space and thresholds to be crossed, whether they be national, cultural or textual.

Colonial Embrace

Small Island opens with a “Prologue,” Queenie’s reminiscences about her visit to London and the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 when she was a young farm girl: “I went to Africa when it came to Wembley” (1). The colonial exhibition was a showcase that staged Britain’s advanced technology and reconstructed “[t]he Empire in little. The palace of engineering, the palace of industry, and building after building, that housed every country we British owned. [...] Practically the whole world there to be looked at. ‘Makes you proud,’ [our farm helper] Graham said to Father” (3). While, as Jane Jacobs puts it, “The spatial imaginary of British imperialism was based on the forceful flow of power from what came to be understood as the ‘core’ to what was relationally designated as the ‘periphery’” (10), the exhibition draws a new cartography of Britain’s hegemonic expansionism, since the edges of Empire, its scattered colonies, are de-territorialized to be re-located within the center. London, the point of departure of imperial deployment, the main root of a rhizomatic spreading, becomes a unique point of convergence and concentration in a reverse, centripetal movement that reinforces colonial ties between “mother Country” and her “Daughters.”² The coming of the colonized to metropolitan space is a symbolic return to the womb, an invagination that does not simply allow the colonial encounter with the Other; visiting the interstitial space of each pavilion enables Queenie’s family to perform (or re-enact) the colonization process, to explore and appropriate inaccessible distant overseas territories: “I wanted to see more countries. [...] me, Emily and [...] Graham carried on travelling the world” (5), potentially crossing borders, moving beyond and yet within the confines of London and the British Isles:

India was full of women brightly dressed in strange long colourful fabrics. All of these women had red dots in the middle of their forehead. No one could tell me what the dots were for. “Go and ask one of them,” Emily said to me. But mother said I shouldn’t in case the dots meant they were ill—in case they were contagious. (4)

The exhibition is a totalizing but nonetheless fragmentary *mise en scène* of alterity. Willing to catch a glimpse of a foreign reality she cannot grasp, Queenie is confronted with cultural difference. While she wants to “see more countries” and satisfy her voyeuristic desire for exoticism, the mother’s colonial gaze on the Indian women renders them invisible: they are misapprehended, thus seen as threatening and kept at a safe distance. The two characters’ contradictory reactions exemplify the attraction/rejection process symptomatic of othering.

The unfamiliar displays give young Queenie the illusion of being immersed into another world where she comes to be the outsider losing her cultural markers and sense of direction: “That’s when we got lost in Africa. [...] Then we found ourselves in an African village [...]. We were in the jungle” (5). There, for the first time in her life, Queenie comes upon a black man who greets her. The young white girl is then overwhelmed by an irrational fear, as Graham suggests that she kiss the African man:

This man was still looking down at me. I could feel the blood rising in my face, turning me crimson, as he smiled a perfect set of pure blinding white teeth. The inside of his mouth was pink and his face was coming closer and closer to mine. He could have swallowed me up, this big nigger man. But instead he said, in clear English, ‘Perhaps we could shake hands instead?’ (6)

Queenie's childish reaction, her embarrassment and repulsion are obviously stamped with a strong racial bias; the disturbing African man, pictured as the borderline cannibal, the savage opposed to the civilized, is the stereotypical representation of black otherness.

Writing from a postcolonial perspective, Andrea Levy constructs the African pavilion as a "Third Space" (Bhabha, 37-38), a place of in-betweenness and close contact with the racial Other. The African jungle (a colonized space symbolizing nature versus culture) is indeed a fabricated tropical landscape in northern latitudes, a decontextualized setting that is meant to represent an alien continent from a Western standpoint. The exhibition supposedly brings Africa to England, yet this artificial jungle is not Africa but a partial imitation. It is not England either, though set in London. Or, it is the meeting, the merging of the two. This ambivalent liminal space of representation signifies the imbrication of two radically different sites and cultures, their interpenetration and interdependency, or what Paul Gilroy calls "the internality of blacks to the West" (*The Black Atlantic*, 5). On the one hand, the Westernized, English-educated African is the epitome of the hybridized colonial subject. On the other, his presence in London, the heart of Empire, is suggestive of Britain's dependency on her colonies in the dynamic construction of a national identity (as a powerful and prosperous insular State). Levy thus goes beyond the binary logic of polarities, the dialectic of center and margin organized into a hierarchy, and stresses in oblique ways the commonalities shared by British people and their fantasized "others."

Interestingly enough, Queenie's younger brothers did not come to the exhibition because "they would get swallowed up by the crowd. 'I'm not scared of being eaten,' Billy whimpered" (2). This anecdotal remark echoes Queenie's comment about the African man ("He could have swallowed me up"). Both suggest the threat of being possessed by the dominant other (the tall black man, the white crowd), the fear of being absorbed and transformed, of losing one's

integrity (which recalls the mother's fear of contamination). In ingurgitating his victim, the cannibal appropriates his identity, his difference that is transmuted into sameness. The fantasmatic image of the savage is also a projection of the colonist's hidden repressed self. Then, by inversion, the cannibal trope can be associated with the colonizer, since imperialism is based on propagation, appropriation and acculturation, as well as exploitation abroad that enriches a vampiric nation-state and secures consumption at home. In a similar way, the exhibition in London can be understood as a form of ingestion, an incorporation of the peripheral Other into the center. The exhibition's main goal was indeed the celebration of Empire trade, rather than the apparent humanist promotion of cultural diversity. Andrea Levy does stress the fact that the colonies primarily provided the capital city with natural resources and food: "the different woods of Burma," "the coffee of Jamaica," "the sugar of Barbados," "the chocolate of Grenada. [...] Australia smelt of apples. Ripe, green, crisp apples. A smell so sharp it made *my teeth* tingle" (4, my emphasis).

The gated site of Wembley Park was an enclave within the metropolis. During the exhibition, London contained the Empire "in miniature" (2) and helped maintain cohesion, the Empire being presented as one world in its diversity. Through her figurative use of space, Levy posits that this sense of wholeness, which obliterated any signs of internal fractures, was essential to the illusory narcissistic construction of an integral British identity. In her novel, the family trip to London turns out to be a didactic enterprise and an initiatory passage that shapes Queenie's sense of self as a white British girl made aware of the colonial "grandeur" and centrality of her country within the vastness of a rich Empire. Taking his daughter for a ride on a scenic train to get a panoramic view of the park, Queenie's father says "something [she] will never forget. He said, 'See here Queenie. Look around. You've got the whole world at your feet,

lass” (7). The young girl, “christened Victoria yet called for ever Queenie” (235), looking down upon the miniaturized Empire that appears even smaller from above, is the very incarnation of British sovereignty and immoderate self-aggrandizement.

The irony of the scene lies in the dialogic interplay between the characters’ imperialist discourse and the author’s “contrapuntal” voice. Framing the novel within a colonial context, the prologue is a powerful opening that contains all the themes to be later developed. From the outset the author highlights the lasting inextricable connections between the metropolis and overseas territories, thereby contesting the myth of Britain’s geographical and national insularity. Levy’s characters that migrate across borders and embark on journeys of (self-)discovery feel the need to reassess their identity as islanders.

New Cartographies of Identity or the Remapping of “I-Lands”

In *Small Island*, the characters’ recollections reveal how international conflicts impacted their private lives and their own separate, yet tangled destinies. World War Two brought many local, national and global changes that affected their perceptions of their respective native island. Gilbert’s and Bernard’s parallel painful wartime experiences away from home give each of them the necessary distance to re-evaluate his homeland.

First based in the United States, then dispatched to England, Gilbert realizes that Jamaica is unknown to most Westerners (their unawareness of, and disregard for, the periphery implying his own invisibility as a colonial subject), while he can place Great Britain, the imperial center, on any map and prove his unfailing allegiance: “But give me that map, blindfold me, spin me round three times and I, dizzy and dazed, would still place my finger squarely on the Mother Country” (142). On his return from England at the end of the war, Gilbert sees his island with

new eyes: “With alarm I became aware that the island of Jamaica was no universe: it ran only a few miles before it fell into the sea. In that moment, standing tall on Kingston harbour, I was shocked by the awful realisation that, man, we Jamaicans are all small islanders too!” (196). Gilbert’s remark underscores the problematic identitary relation between the island and the self, the island and the rest of the world. He now views the largest British isle in the Caribbean as “a small island” (207), a contracted space in which he can no longer fit: “I was a giant living on land no bigger than the soles of my shoes. Everywhere I turn I gazed on sea. The palm trees that tourists thought rested so beautifully on every shore were my prison bars. Horizons my tormenting borders” (209). In his hyperbolic reconfiguration of Jamaica (once a sanctuary, an idyllic haven), he describes the island as a stifling, inadequate place surrounded by the disheartening immensity of the open sea that isolates and restricts him to the confines of an unpromising environment: the development prospects of the cramped and remote island seem as doomed to failure as his risky beekeeping venture (a total fiasco). Through the character of Gilbert, now turned outward and unable to readjust to home, the author constructs a shifting black subjectivity reshaped by the experience of migrancy.

By contrast, Levy portrays Gilbert’s cousin Elwood as an islander strongly attached to his roots, who refused to get involved in “a white man’s war” (129) and remained in Kingston: “You born a Jamaican. You die a Jamaican. [...] Why you wan’ leave?” (208). While Gilbert thinks of his island as a place of stagnation, if not backwardness, “back in the dark ages” (201), Elwood has a strong sense of belonging (to a place, to a nation) and believes that “An independent Jamaica gon’ take care of [them]” (208). Their diverging attitudes are indicative of the changing geography of the Caribbean at a hinge of history. Within the turbulent social context of the forties, the colonized island becomes the germinative site of black consciousness and political

activism: “Manley get us the vote [...] we mus’ govern ourselves. Gilbert hear me nah—no more white man, no more bakkra. Me say get rid a Busta too. Him too licky-licky to the British” (199).³ Through Elwood’s words and his Creolized speech pattern transpires the will to appropriate the British-ruled colony and transform it, to claim it as a self-contained black world. The forceful subversive reformulation of a racial and national identity is to be read as the harbinger of the coming decolonization.

Levy represents Jamaica as a finite enclosed space in mutation, an island whose very insularity, whose geographical, social and racial boundaries are being contested and redrawn. Through Gilbert and Elwood, the author places in dialogue two differing discourses that conjure up the antinomic relation between “routes” and “roots.” To Gilbert, the returning migrant in transit, the island which has shrunk and turned into a trap can only be a place of passage and final departure: “The world out there is bigger than any dream you can conjure. [...] I need opportunity [...]. I need advancement” (207). To Elwood, Jamaica is a site of anchorage and resistance that allows racial emancipation and the positive reconstruction of an insular collective self. Whether leaving or staying, both characters embark upon ambitious projects that reject the island’s coloniality. New multiple identities are being forged that challenge an imposed world order. Both characters are going through a period of transition, questioning the past and contemplating the future. Then, the island as a site of in-betweenness and impermanence on the margins of Empire becomes an ambiguous liminal space of contestation, agency, and reformation. Gilbert’s sense of success and progress (which he believes can be achieved in London only) and Elwood’s burgeoning anti-colonial sentiment are built upon their sense of difference, in connection with and/or in opposition to Britain.

Furthermore, Levy's *Small Island* aims to show that, across the Atlantic, Great Britain's insularity was also questioned and revised. World War Two and the Blitz shattered a national identity firmly built on the persistent myth that the British Isles formed an impregnable archipelago safely separated from continental Europe, that they made up a United (and unique) Kingdom, a geographically bounded space that fostered a self-centered, Anglocentric world view. Besides, the spreading of Empire, its geographical amplitude that ensured political pre-eminence reinforced national pride and prestige. Decolonization therefore entailed a major redefinition of Britishness. White men who had conquered the world and disseminated their culture had to withdraw and accept the fact that colonized peoples pressing for change had the right and the will to be self-governed: "Bloody coolies. Wanting us out of India dead or alive," says Bernard, mobilized and sent overseas (393).

Through the character of Bernard Bligh, who defines himself with much arrogance as "an Englishman, [...] a civilised man" (401), "proud to belong to a civilisation" (365), Andrea Levy creates an emblematic figure whose convictions and certainties, his sense of racial, national, and cultural distinction will be shaken by the war and its aftermath. Symbolically enough, aboard the ship that takes him away from home to serve his country in the colonies, Bernard stares at the coastline: "England disappeared so quickly. Soon there was nothing but sea. My legs wobbled. Couldn't get my balance, find my grip. I sat down to watch the spot where my country dissolved" (406). The image of the island, the homeland, receding into the distance is suggestive of England's "[imperial] contraction and decentering" (Esty 22). Bernard's sense of loss, the island vanishing into nothingness are the figurative signs of a fading national past never to be recovered, the waning of Britain's greatness. Moving from a solid element (British soil, his fixed center of gravity) to a liquid element (the choppy sea), Bernard is destabilized and feels insecure.

His journey to an unfamiliar India beyond control, where he has to confront the horrors of war, mutinies, ethnic riots, bloodsheds and death, is a descent into Hell reminiscent of Marlow's travel to Congo: "A moonless forest. Dark. Alien. Crowded with the unfamiliar. Phantom shapes. Peculiar sounds" (357). Bernard's voyage is not only a violent encounter with the Oriental Other perceived as the untrustworthy, uncivilized "scoundrel" (395), it also forces him to confront his own "darkness." Before sailing back home, Bernard has a sexual relationship with a young Indian prostitute: "the wretched whore in Calcutta" (418) was about "[f]ourteen or even twelve. A small girl. [...] Her hand no bigger than a monkey's paw" (413-414). The image of the depraved pedophile abusing a helpless girl, denying her humanity and dignity, symbolizes the barbarity of the colonizer: "I felt like a beast" (414), Bernard confesses. This violent transgressive sexual act imposed to the child is symbolic of colonial relations and the perversity of hegemonic power seen as a form of rape.

Aware of India's ineluctable independence and partition that will contribute to the decline of Empire, ashamed of his abject and degrading act, "that little madness in India" (427), Bernard Bligh is a fallen man engaged in denial and left with a bitter feeling: "This war hadn't made me a hero. It had brought me to my knees" (414). Yet, in a burst of indignation and with much patriotic fervor and self-delusion, Bernard stubbornly wants to believe in a resilient, renewed British nation. To him, (white) men were "[n]eeded for post-war rebuilding in Blighty. Britain required a new backbone. Men to reconstruct the ravaged land back into something worthy of the British Empire" (365). Ironically, one of his ancestors "changed their family name from Blight to Bligh in the hope of reversing a run of bad fortune" (254). "Blight," synonymous with destruction and decay, disease and affliction, phonetically close to "Blighty," meaning England, the home country during service abroad, is rich with symbolism. Bernard's truncated patronymic

signifies an obscured tainted lineage, a national masculine identity doomed to failure and dissolution.

On his return from military service, shamed and sapped by illness (he mistakenly believes that he caught syphilis, the price of his misconduct), Bernard wanders over the world and goes through an agonizing reappraisal of his defeated self. His dis-ease is the first symptom of a coming “postimperial melancholia,” as defined by Gilroy (*After Empire* 98), “Britain’s inability to mourn the loss of Empire” (*After Empire* 111). Both despicable and pathetic, recalling Conrad’s Kurtz dying—“The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 100)—Bernard is reluctant and unprepared to face the reality of a decaying home: “Nothing was familiar. Had it always looked so exhausted? So friable? Buildings decaying and run down. Rotting sashes. Cracked plaster. Obscene gaps where houses once stood. [...] I hoped to be discovered (I admit). [...] But still approached as a stranger” (427-428). Shocked by post-war urban blight and apocalyptic visions of a capital city in ruin, Bernard anxiously feels alienated in a strange world. Just like Gilbert, he is forced to reconsider his island: “England had shrunk. It was smaller than the place I left. [...] I had to stare out at the sea just to catch a breath. And behind every face I saw were trapped the rememberings of war” (424). The island has become a stifling chaotic place where people have to survive amid the rubble and endure the physical scars and psychological traumas of a war won against the Nazi enemy.

The rebuilding of the country in the early post-war years necessitated outside help, hence the arrival of Caribbean immigrants whose urban presence transformed the social geography of the island. As Roger Bromley observed, “post-war immigration has helped to pull ‘Englishness’ out of shape, and to push it in new directions, clearly differentiated formations” (129). The emergence of multiculturalism called in question the particularism of white British identity and

led to racial tensions. In order to record these social changes, Andrea Levy uses Bernard and Queenie's house on Nevern Street as a central trope that "stands for the nation the migrant is only superficially, and seemingly temporarily, allowed to occupy thanks to the 'charity' of the mother country," as Maria Helena Lima noted (60). Through her four characters living under the same roof, Levy focuses on shifting spatialities and show how migration and movement affect the national understanding of the self.

"21 Nevern Street, London SW5": The (Dis)location of home

In his essay "The Pioneers," devoted to the post-Windrush generations, Caryl Phillips states that: "Race and ethnicity are the bricks and mortar with which the British have traditionally built a wall around the perimeter of their island nation and created fixity" (272-273). The relocation of colonial subjects within the metropolitan center and the dissolution of porous national boundaries have turned London into a diasporic space that contests fixed racialized identities: "Everyone had a place. England for the English and the West Indies for these coloured people. [...] I've nothing against them in their place. But their place isn't here," Bernard claims (439), as he feels threatened by the intrusive presence of black immigrants in his street and home: "I fought a war to protect home and hearth. Not about to be invaded by stealth" (470). Levy's poetics of domestic space, her imaginative use of Bernard and Queenie's house on Nevern Street as an in-between space, a place of interaction that reveals the nation's racial divide, recalls the use of architectural imagery in post-war black British fiction. James Procter has shown that in these writings, "the thresholds of the dwelling place—doors and doorways, walls and windows—are repetitious referents within racial discourse" (36).

In *Small Island*, the encounter with the black migrant always takes place on Queenie's doorstep: "But there I was!" Hortense recalls, "Standing at the door of a house in London and ringing the bell. [...] But when I pressed this doorbell I did not hear a ring. No ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling. [...] The door was answered by an Englishwoman" (12). A few months before, Queenie had opened her door to Hortense's husband Gilbert: "Trepidation trembled my hand as I rang a bell that did not work. It was Queenie Bligh who answered" (216). Queenie also recalls the day she met Michael Roberts, a Jamaican RAF serviceman (her lover to be and Hortense's cousin): "there were three sharp knocks at the door" (291). The doorstep is a liminal place of arrival and possible passage between two worlds. The black characters standing on the threshold, looking for housing, are obviously representative of newcomers willing to integrate into British society. Levy uses front doors, keys and doorbells as motifs that keep cropping up, echoing from page to page. The harmonious rhythmic sound of the doorbell announces visitors; it is a pleasant signal of communication. Queenie's mute bell, Hortense's persistent knocks, Gilbert's desperate quest for a roof, the constant rebuffs from white landlords who retrench behind closed doors all signify Britain's insular hostility towards foreigners, racism and xenophobia: "So how many gates I swing open? How many houses I knock on? Let me count the doors that opened and shut quick without even me breath managing to get inside. Man, these English landlords and landladies could come up with excuses" (215).

Yet Queenie has no alternative but to take in roomers, just like Bernard's mother did in her own time: "She had a big house and a small pension" (403). History repeats itself: only the presence of outsiders, the occupancy of stigmatized German Jewish, Polish, Irish or Caribbean tenants have allowed these women to survive in hard times, thus suggesting Britain's recurrent economic dependency and capitalization on yet unwelcome immigrants, "paying guests" (117) as

Queenie says, proving her sheer pragmatism passing for altruism and openness of mind. Levy thus exposes enduring social realities in contradiction with a nationalist discourse that aims to exclude and dislodge.

Queenie's English neighbor Mr Todd, who objects to the presence of black residents in his street, regularly interferes, standing on Queenie's doorstep and behaving as the custodian of her integrity: "I was to watch out, keep my door locked" (116). Todd's racist prejudices and phobias (his fear of intrusion, theft, rape and miscegenation), his masculinist attitude and own invasive presence (feeling the need to check on Queenie while her husband is in the war, stepping into the breach) concur to represent the doorway—the entry to domestic space, the passage from the public to the private—as both a racialized and gendered place of tension and confrontation.

In a similar way, the author uses the door key as a tangible symbol of power relations. When Bernard finally returns home, his wife wishes to sleep in a separate room (to hide her pregnancy following her brief love affair with Hortense's cousin Michael): "I locked the door after he'd gone. Turned the old key, rusty and stiff, in the lock" (434). The key confers authority and protection. It enables to open or lock doors; it gives or restricts access and can lead to revelation or keep in secrecy. The key holder is the master who takes command. When Gilbert is upset to find Queenie's husband inspecting his tiny rented room, Bernard reminds him that he is the owner of the place: "But I showed him the keys anyway. Left him in no doubt as to who had the upper hand. My house, and I've a key to every room" (470). The key is then a symbol of empowerment, freedom, and (re)possession. It brings many possibilities, which Gilbert enjoys when he eventually buys a house in North London: "It was a fine house, I could tell as soon as I turned the key and pushed open the door" (500-501).

Through her use of architectural imagery, Andrea Levy addresses the issue of national identity. She shows how the dynamic boundaries of place affect one's way of inhabiting and sharing space. Bernard recalls with much nostalgia that the room now occupied by Gilbert used to be his mother's favorite room:

Ma used to use this room. Sewing, mending, reading and suchlike. [...] Always when I lost her, me a little boy, I would climb up the stairs. If the door was closed I knew she was there. I'd tap three times, softly. [...] she'd tell me to come in. Beckon me to sit beside her chair. [...] Pa was born in this room. His father and a couple of the great-aunts before him. A woman's room, Ma called it. Not only because of the births. It was the view from the window. She could spy on the whole street [...]. It was the top of her world. [...] Cheeky blighter tells me that this room—at the top of my house—does in fact belong to him. (468-469)

The rented room used to be a retreat, a private sanctuary full of the reassuring complicity between a child and his mother. He was then allowed to enter the room so as to share a privileged intimate moment with his mother, while now he is denied access and accused of trespassing. The sentimental memory of the secluded mother involved in womanly activities and looking out through the window to spy on the neighbors, thus having control of her surroundings, symbolizes Bernard's regretful vision of Britain, the Mother Country as a exclusive nurturing place that makes one feel special. "Couldn't see anything out of the windows now. The curtains grubby and ripped" (468), Bernard observes. The dilapidated room without a view and Bernard's shrinking territory are salient signs of an inward-looking nation on the decline. Besides, with Britain in the midst of post-war reconstruction, Levy's white characters are preoccupied with domestic changes that affect their daily lives in a city transformed by

encroaching newcomers with whom they have to learn to co-exist, living under the same roof. The redistribution and sharing of domestic/national space abolishes an established discriminatory social and racial hierarchy and abrogates Bernard's prerogatives. The contested space of Gilbert's room upstairs (while Bernard lives downstairs) illustrates an interracial conflict for legitimate control and appropriation.

The inherited house that has been owned by the Bligh(t) family for several generations is also a birthplace, a fixed point (in space and through time) that gives Bernard a sense of permanence, rootedness and belonging. Yet, with each wave of migrants and the arrival of new tenants who walk through his doorway to move in and out, Bernard is caught in a steady process of change materialized by the fluctuating inner boundaries of his house. Symbolically enough, Hortense's "huge trunk blocking most of the doorway" (467) occupies the liminal space of penetrable border areas, first in Queenie's lobby downstairs: "You'll have to move that trunk. I need to shut the door," she says (23); then in Gilbert's room, "just inside the door" (24). The misplaced heavy trunk, which contains Hortense's belongings brought from Jamaica, indicates at the same time the newcomer's will to take root in England and his/her unfulfilled quest for a stable location. In opposition to the house, the trunk is a symbol of movement and travel; yet it obstructs the passage and prevents the circulation of black and white, male and female dwellers competing for space and thereby for full recognition and a place in the "Motherland." Repeatedly left on the threshold, it signifies the awkward transient position of the migrant, the liminality of his identity as he stands both within and without. Indeed, as Homi Bhabha argues: "It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (2).

Andrea Levy's metaphoric use of "the stairwell as liminal space" (Bhabha 4) exemplifies in a fictional way identity transformation in relation to the Other and the process of becoming, undergone by new arrivants like Hortense at Queenie's: "I had to grab the banister to pull myself up stair after stair. There was hardly any light. Just one bulb so dull it was hard to tell whether it was giving out light or sucking it in. At every turn on the stairs there was another set of steep steps, looking like an empty bookshelf in front of me" (20). The dark stairwell leading to the top floor is a transitional space of ambiguity and uncertainty. Each steep flight of stairs spiraling up evokes the reality of having to undergo the great trials of a new life in an alien place. Ironically, Hortense's ascent is a descent into Hell, a passage to a peripheral place; it anticipates her vain efforts to climb up the social ladder. Then, the top-floor room reads as a trope for marginalization rather than achievement. Before sailing to England, Hortense had great dreams and aspirations: "England became my destiny. A dining-table in a dining room set with four chairs. [...] Armchairs in the sitting room placed around a small wood fire. [...] A red bus, a cold morning and daffodils blooming with all the colours of the rainbow" (100-101). Once she has settled in Gilbert's shabby room, she discovers a different grey world: "For England was my destiny. I started with that sink. Cracked as a map and yellowing I scrubbed it with soap [...]" (226). Through textual repetition with a difference and revision ("England became/was my destiny") and the stark contrast between her lofty dreams of a cozy little nest in London, filled with clichés about England, and the drab reality of London housing, Hortense is portrayed as a determined, ambitious woman who has become a vulnerable black newcomer led to reconcile her romantic idealization with England's realities.

Levy addresses the challenges and issues that migration poses to Caribbean colonials who feel cheated by the Mother Country, which Gilbert criticizes vehemently: "The filthy tramp [...].

Ragged, old and rusty [...]. This stinking cantankerous hag. 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?’” (139). Yet, Andrea Levy believes that, as arbitrary social constructs, racial and cultural boundaries can and must be dissolved. The black and white communities cannot simply wish one another away. They have a long common history, are in close daily contact and have to compromise, re-negotiate their interrelated identities, and cooperate. Gilbert actually reminds Bernard of this inescapable reality, calling for dialogue: “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. And I to be the servant and you are the master for all time? No. Stop this, man. [...] We can work together, Mr Bligh. You no see? We must. Or else you just gonna fight me till the end?” (525).

The novel’s final twist—the discovery of Queenie’s pregnancy and the birth of her bi-racial child fathered by Michael Roberts and adopted by Gilbert and Hortense as they are leaving Nevern Street to move into their new house to start up a family—is more than an unexpected happy ending which binds two ethnic communities together. The newborn is not to be seen as “an impostor child” (508), but as the native son of “a hybrid nation [...] plural and inclusive” (Levy, “This Is My England”), a child “[who]’s got a home” (519). This denouement sheds light on the potential of multicultural London as a place “[p]aved with gold, no—but, yes, diamonds appear on the ground in the rain” (209).

In *Small Island*, Andrea Levy explores the impact of immigration on Britain’s sense of space. Through her novel’s dual time frame (1948 and before) and its multiple locations (England, Jamaica, India), the author aims to show that the island’s history and national identity have been shaped beyond its borders, which have been repeatedly crossed back and forth, first by

British colonizers, then by West Indian servicemen and migrant workers who came to defend or help rebuild the country. Given this long-standing intimate contact, Andrea Levy insists on the legitimate urban presence of these émigrés, claiming that: “Englishness must never be allowed to attach itself to ethnicity” (“This Is My England”). She thus intends to redress the balance and, so as to give a complete picture of post-war London as a problematic “contact zone” from different vantage points, she gives voice to both “mainstream” white Londoners and black newcomers.

Levy’s fragmented polyphonic novel, with four different I-narrators, weaves together interactive narratives expressing contradictory views. It also opposes and yet bridges different spatialities and temporalities. The novel’s composite textual space and its dialogic structure support the author’s counter-hegemonic discourse.

Crossing Textual Thresholds: Narrative Space and Discursive Liminality

Small Island oscillates between “1948” and “Before.” The titling of each segment is obviously intended to help the reader follow the story as the text drifts back and forth in time and shifts in place and perspective. Titles also signal recurrent breaks in the narrative and function as liminal paratext, as Gérard Genette demonstrated in his seminal work, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*: “More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold. [...] this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction” (2).

“1948” and “Before” are two paratextual elements which set a visible contrast between two separate phases. They are the textual markers of a break, a historical passage from one period of time to another with a pivotal moment of arrival in London opposed to duration—life

prior to 1948 in different parts of the globe. Yet, more than the signs of a temporal (and spatial) rupture, “1948” and “Before” are in close correlation: what happened “here” in London in 1948 is the direct consequence of what preceded “out there” in the colonial world. Andrea Levy structures her discourse within, around and across the textual borders of her novel, within the interstices of her narrative. The paratext operates as the novel’s infrastructure that underpins the meaning of the text, Levy’s message about the formation of black Britishness that affects white Britons’ sense of self by concatenation.

In a similar way, each of the fifty-nine chapter titles, titled “Queenie,” “Hortense,” “Gilbert,” or “Bernard”, not only help the reader to readily identify the narrator of a given chapter, but they also connect together all the dispersed fragments of each single first-person narrative as well as differentiating these segments from the other three fragmented narratives. In other words, Levy uses the paratext as a framing device that serves two other functions: bridging and discriminating. The reader identifies one textual unit in relation to the others in terms of similarity and contrast. Each of the four discontinuous narratives could be read as a separate story, an autonomous textual entity with its specific linguistic idiosyncrasies (Queenie’s low-class colloquial expressions, Hortense’s schoolish British English, Gilbert’s vernacular Jamaican English, Bernard’s racist slurs and understatements). Yet the four protagonists’ accounts are not simply juxtaposed; they are texts in contact, interactive narratives in dialogue. Taken together, the narrators are storytellers who weave a web of intrigues that intersect and converge toward a binding family drama.

Small Island reads as a choral text traversed by the connecting threads of overlapping stories. There is no central narrative, no dominant voice; yet the ordering of the textual segments fashions the reader’s response to the characters. Indeed, Bernard, as a narrator, is given a voice

rather late in the novel. Out of the fifty-nine chapters which *Small Island* contains, Bernard's first narrative segment falls as late as chapter 35. While the reader is by then acquainted with the other three narrators, the late appearance of the fourth and last one is an obstacle to any familiarity with the reader. The authorial organization of textual space silences Bernard for a large part of the book and relegates his narrative to the margin. This structural arrangement conveys a critical comment. Though Bernard is mentioned by the other three narrators earlier on and is therefore portrayed through the filter of their subjectivities, his long absence as a narrator and his deferred account tally with the author's intentional decentering of a once predominant white male discourse. The novel's disjointed structure isolates him and infers his shrinking role in a changing multifaceted British society.

In addition, although the four intertwined narratives express divergent sensibilities, their structural relation emphasizes correspondences over differences. Their many parallels and echoes draw together contrasted characters who eventually share a common destiny. Both Queenie and Hortense left their home as young girls to be properly educated by an aunt, hoping to improve their lot, and both got married out of the need to escape a not so promising social milieu. Both Gilbert and Bernard were mobilized, sent overseas and returned to their respective "small island" with a sense of unbelonging. All four revise their certainties and lose their hopes.

Besides, the author includes echoing scenes that link separate itineraries. When Gilbert takes his wife on a bus tour of London, Hortense is thrilled at the sight of Picadilly Circus, the Houses of Parliament, Trafalgar Square, and Buckingham Palace: "So pleased was she with her view from the top of the bus, she held her hands as if on a steering-wheel saying, 'You can pretend you are the driver of the bus from here'" (462). This scene is reminiscent of Queenie's train ride at the Exhibition, not to mention Bernard's mother enjoying the view from her attic

room. The monuments Hortense sees are the remnants of the glorious past of the mythic British capital city. Viewing them from the upper deck of the bus gives her the illusion of power and control.

Words and phrases also resonate in various contexts throughout the novel and bridge a gap between disconnected events. By way of example, the young Queenie was excited at the idea of seeing Stephenson's Rocket (an old steam locomotive) at the exhibition: "It must be as big as the whole world," she said (2). As for the young Hortense, who dreamed of going to England, she believed "[she] would sail on a ship as big as a world" (11). Similarly, Bernard believes that the "pustule" (427) on his penis is the shameful mark of his "sexual relation with the wrong type" (418), while Hortense, who delivers Queenie's black baby, sees it squeezing out "like an erupting pustule" (481). In both instances, the image of the disgraceful pimple evokes the rejection of difference and the fear of close contact with the other as a threat to "purity" (whether it be racial, cultural, or moral).

In conjunction with these multilayered variations of a same theme (social ambition, great expectations and the distortion of reality or extramarital, interracial sex and miscegenation), the author inserts trivial details, which are given significance through repetition. Queenie recalls the day when her father received a letter: "So Father casually opened the envelope and a white feather fluttered out and circled gently down to the ground" (239). By the same token, Bernard remembers that one time, "A young girl, barely a woman, handed [his father] a white feather" (402). These peculiar anecdotes have no other function than connecting: textual iterations deny distinctiveness and relate disparate singularities, thus pointing up multiplicity and pluralism.

The novel closes with Winston Churchill's words: "Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few" (531) in a tribute to a small number of RAF

combatants who won a decisive air battle against the Nazis. As noted by Lima, “Winston Churchill’s words at the novel’s end serve as a coda of sorts” (79). Through this concluding dedication, Levy captures the sense of owing. It is also a call to remember. As paratext and intertext, this quotation placed at the very end, on the fringe of the novel, has an intrinsic liminal character. Levy appropriates and revises Churchill’s speech to endow it with a new meaning. She not only honors brave RAF servicemen (among whom were Caribbean men), but within the context of her novel, she more broadly refers to the black “pioneers” who came to London from 1948 onwards and contributed to the making of contemporary Britain.

In interweaving the lives and visions of a multiracial cast of characters, Andrea Levy gives a fresh nuanced perspective on post-war London and contests rigid polarities. Her use of the concept of bounded insularity, challenged by transformative liminalities in narrated and narrative space, communicates her concerns about the articulation of diasporic urban identities. With *Small Island*, Levy keeps contributing to a rich and vibrant black British literary production. Her novel demonstrates that the process of forming identities occurs within fluid liminal zones that relate local and global developments, geographically and historically, and lead to rethink British particularism in terms of hybridity and pluralism: “Saying that I’m English doesn’t mean I want to be assimilated; to take on the majority white culture to the exclusion of all other” (“This Is My England”).

Corinne Duboin,
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Notes

¹Historians have pointed out that there were actually only 492 passengers on the S.S. *Empire Windrush*. Yet their arrival at Tilbury on June 22, 1948 marked a milestone in British history as it was the signal for the start of massive post-war immigration. Andrea Levy's father was one of these passengers.

²On the official program and map for the 1924 British Empire Exhibition, one can read that the exhibition was intended to celebrate the empire and “to stimulate trade, strengthen bonds that bind mother Country to her Sister States and Daughters, to bring into close contact the one with each other, to enable all who owe allegiance to the British flag to meet on common ground and learn to know each other” (“British Empire Exhibition 1924”). This note is characterized by an ambivalent colonial discourse that exalts national pride and defines colonies as equals (Sister States) yet subalterns (Daughters), therefore establishing a filiation and dominance.

³Norman Washington Manley (1893-1969) founded the People's National Party, which supported the National Workers' Union. Alexander Bustamante (1884-1977) was the founder of the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union in 1938. In 1943, he set up the Jamaican Labor Party. In 1944, the New Constitution granted universal suffrage. In *Small Island*, Gilbert comes across Hortense for the first time during one of “Busta's” meetings—a way for Levy to set up her characters against a historical background of social and political unrest.

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