

Decolonizing cultural memory in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

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This article examines Andrea Levy's 2004 novel *Small Island* as a postcolonial trauma novel that revises cultural memory of World War II and its aftermath. Utilising the insights of Stef Craps's *Postcolonial Witnessing*, it explores the ways in which Levy's text redresses the marginalization of non-western and minority trauma and addresses the underexplored relationship between First and Third World traumas. Eschewing classic western definitions of trauma as a point of rupture and fragmentation, the novel provides an alternative trauma aesthetic based on the power of storytelling and the use of humour to mitigate the traumatic losses of the past. Drawing on Michael Rothberg's notion of "multidirectional memory", it argues that *Small Island* employs a notion of cultural memory as heterogeneous to suggest strong continuities in the experience of Black and white men and women before and after the war in terms of the long history of colonialism.

Keywords: Andrea Levy; World War II; Black British history; trauma narrative; multidirectional memory; decolonizing theory

Introduction

Recently, British fiction writers such as Sebastian Faulks, Kate Atkinson, Sarah Waters and Andrea Levy have begun to address and revise under-represented aspects of wartime and post-war experience to focus on the lives of the unacknowledged "many" who contributed to the war effort, such as women, the working classes, and migrants from the Empire.¹ Andrea Levy's (2004) prize-winning novel, *Small Island* tells the occluded story of the recruitment of Black servicemen from the Caribbean and their contribution to World War II and the subsequent post-war "Windrush" migration as a doubly traumatic rupture with the past.² Unlike her first three books which were semi-autobiographical coming-of-age novels, *Small Island*, according to Maria Helena Lima (2005), "constitutes a much more ambitious project

of remembering, a historical novel that for the first time offers an account from the point of view of both the white and the Black British of a crucial period in England's history, the moment when the children of Empire came 'home' to the mother country" (75). The novel is divided into two time frames – "Before" (referring to the decades up to and including the World War II) and "1948" (depicting the Windrush migration experience) – and between four narrators: Hortense, a well-educated Black Jamaican woman who marries in order to emigrate to the UK in 1948; Gilbert, her husband, a Black Jamaican man who serves in the RAF during the war and later emigrates on the *Empire Windrush* in 1948; Queenie, a white British working-class woman running a boarding house in Earl's Court; and Bernard, her husband, a white British middle-class man posted to India during the war and caught up in Partition strife.

As a post-colonial trauma novel, *Small Island* challenges and revises the dominant aesthetic of fragmentation, rupture and alienation which characterizes the model of trauma theory developed in the west by Cathy Caruth among others; rather it foregrounds the power of storytelling, coherent cultural memory, and the use of humour to mitigate loss. Moving beyond or away from the melancholic discordance and aporia associated with many theories of trauma, Levy's text works towards creative restitution, privileging the power of storytelling and humour as a form of narrative healing of traumatic rupture and historical erasure. In addition, *Small Island* employs a "decolonized" notion of cultural memory, which suggests continuities in the experience of Black and white men and women before and after the war in terms of the long history of Empire and colonialism. Further, it draws parallels between attitudes to colonial subjects and migrants from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent and points up commonalities across race and national lines in terms of the experience of wartime trauma and privation. As a result, *Small Island* evinces a desire both to record untold or overlooked aspects of collective British history, and to intervene in history

by giving symbolic and narrative shape to previously marginalised Black, working-class, migrant and diaspora experiences.

Decolonizing trauma theory and multidirectional memory

In *Postcolonial Witnessing*, Stef Craps (2013) mounts a critique of the Eurocentric bias of trauma theory and sets out the challenges posed to it by postcolonialism. He argues that despite its laudable ethical origins, which sought to foster cross-cultural solidarity, trauma theory has largely failed to recognise the sufferings of non-western others. As a result, trauma studies have been based on a relatively narrow canon of works deriving from a European cultural tradition. For him the founding texts of trauma theory fail on at least four counts:

they marginalise or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas. (Craps 2013, 2)

If the ethical aspirations of the field are to be realized, he argues, there is an urgent need to “decolonize” trauma studies by recognising the globalized contexts of traumatic events such as war and colonialism, and the myriad ways in which they are represented in literary works.

One of the major stumbling blocks to a truly globalized discipline, according to Craps, is the fact that trauma theory “continues to adhere to the traditional event-based model of trauma, according to which trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event” (Craps 2013, 31). For example, in numerous (western) accounts, trauma is paradigmatically

defined as “a frightening event outside of ordinary experience” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995, 172) But, as Craps argues, this hegemonic model doesn’t necessarily work for non-western or minority group trauma. In particular, the very persistence and “ordinariness” of racism poses a clear challenge to the event-based trauma model:

Unlike structural trauma, racism is historically specific; yet, unlike historical trauma, it is not related to a particular event, with a before and an after. Understanding racism as a historical trauma, which can be worked through, would be to obscure the fact that it continues to cause damage in the present. (Craps 2013, 32)

Therefore, racially based forms of trauma historically rooted in the global systems of slavery and colonialism pose a significant challenge to the eurocentric model of trauma as a single overwhelming event. Craps argues that a decolonized trauma theory can firstly, redress the marginalization of non-western and minority traumas; secondly, challenge the supposed universal validity of western definitions of trauma; thirdly, provide alternatives to dominant trauma aesthetics; and lastly, address the underexplored relationship between so-called First and Third World traumas. As I will presently show, Levy’s text meets all four of these criteria in challenging dominant cultural narratives of 1940s Britain.

The other theoretical framework of relevance to Levy’s radical revision of trauma is Michael Rothberg’s notion of multidirectional memory. In his essay, “From Gaza to Warsaw”, Rothberg (2011) asks the salient question, “What happens when different histories of extreme violence confront each other in the public sphere?” (523) His work is concerned with challenging the hierarchical and/or exclusivist approach to chronicling collective traumas – “either mine or yours” – and he is at pains to point out how “collective memories of seemingly distinct histories—such as those of slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism—are not so easily separable” (524). In his earlier book, *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg developed the concept at length:

Against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory -- as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources -- I suggest that we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private. [...] This interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic that I call multidirectional memory. (Rothberg 2009, 3)

He advocates this concept for thinking about how minority subjects in the present come to terms with and think about their and our collective histories. His emphasis on the transcultural and productive character of memory may be seen to resonate with Levy's approach to constructing 1940s wartime narratives.

Challenging the marginalization of non-western and minority traumas

For Levy, the story of *Small Island* is a personal one: her father was one of the 492 West Indian migrants who sailed from Jamaica to England on the *Empire Windrush* in May 1948 and her mother joined him soon afterwards. Levy has spoken at length about her desire to tell her parents' story, and to narrate a part of history that is not taught in British schools or even handed down in Black families (see Younge 2010). It was not until Levy was in her 40s that she got her mother to tell her about her experiences of emigrating to Britain. Growing up, it seemed to her that her parents were reluctant to talk about the past and, like many second-generation migrants, she was much more interested in being British than in learning about her West Indian roots:

I grew up thinking I was worthless and the story of the Caribbean was worthless. But I discovered that people were interested and wanted to know about it and understand it. [...] Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out. (Andrea Levy website)

Telling this particular story, however, involves Levy in the reclamation of a bigger narrative about non-metropolitan, non-white participation in the Allied war effort: the novel looks back to the colonial past and the willingness of West Indian men and women as British subjects to join the war effort in defence of the Empire, travelling thousands of miles to do so; it thereby reclaims this largely occluded aspect of British history. In the West Indies, thousands of men joined the local home guard and the British Armed Forces.³ While they were eventually sent to Europe for training, few were allowed to fight on the front line (WW2 People's War Archive). In 1943 the Ministry of Information made a film called *West Indies Calling* (1944) with the aim of educating the British public about the role of Commonwealth personnel from the West Indies stationed in Britain. It uses a combination of documentary style footage and a series of broadcast addresses by representatives from the main Services in a studio, cabaret-style setting. While highly scripted and artificial, it nevertheless tells the story of West Indian service personnel's wartime contribution in their own voices and may be seen as an important precursor to Levy's attempt to educate and inform contemporary readers about the hidden voices of Britain's wartime experience. Black servicemen's testimonies can also be found on numerous archives and websites, from which Levy (2011) drew in researching the novel. One of these describes the experience of a Jamaican man called Billy Strachan who, like his country men and women viewed himself as British, emigrated on a Jamaican Fruits Company ship and made his way to the Air Ministry to enlist:

I hadn't heard about the recruiting stations and the guards thought I was taking the Mickey when I said I wanted to join up. Luckily, a Hooray Henry, Officer type, overheard us and said: "oh you're from Jamaica, one of our colonial friends.

Welcome. I did geography at university and I've always been impressed by you West Africans." Thanks to his supreme ignorance I was dragged in and was eventually sent to the RAF unit in Euston for a medical. (The Black Presence in Britain website)

As the website notes, Billy Strachan went on to serve both as an Air Gunner and pilot for Bomber Command and was a member of the only crew of 99 Bomber Squadron to finish a tour of thirty trips alive.

Small Island foregrounds the experiences of such Black servicemen through the characters of Michael and Gilbert. The character Michael, Hortense's cousin and Queenie's eventual lover, becomes a Sergeant in the RAF, flying a Lancaster in raids over Germany before being shot down over France and invalided home. His story is recounted by Queenie in the 1948 section of the novel when he reappears and briefly reignites their affair before boarding a ship to emigrate to Canada. Michael is a mysterious figure who does not feature as a narrator; in contrast to the sketchy account of Michael's war, the reader gets a more detailed insight from Gilbert's narrative. On hearing of the outbreak of war Gilbert, echoing the real-life Billy Strachan, reflects: "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" (Levy 2004, 142). Gilbert is initially sent for training in the US state of Virginia, where he encounters Jim Crow laws and segregation before being posted to Yorkshire to continue training as an airman in the RAF. For all these men and women, Britain represented "the Mother Country", a powerful construct, which had been inculcated into the Empire's children through the education system, the Civil Service, and imperial ideology. In *Small Island*, Levy registers the deep sense of loyalty to and identification with Empire at the same time as she debunks and satirizes Britain's imperial arrogance and hypocrisy.

On his arrival in Britain, Gilbert is shocked at the state of the country he has so long revered, and his account mischievously defamiliarizes the traditional representation of Britain as the noble Britannia:

The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. Ragged, old and dusty as the long dead. Mother has a blackened eye, bad breath and one lone tooth that waves in her head when she speaks. [...] 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?’ (Levy 2004, 139)

The grotesque filthy tramp is England, the Mother Country, who fails to even recognise let alone nurture her own offspring. Repeatedly, Gilbert finds that no one in England has heard of Jamaica and cannot understand how he can be simultaneously British and Jamaican.

Through Bernard’s story, Levy foregrounds the Indian subcontinent as a major theatre of war and tells the relatively forgotten story of the British troops whose demobilization was delayed to maintain the Empire and police civil conflict in the immediate aftermath of World War II. From Bernard’s embittered point of view, he and his comrades “were all left out here sat brooding on their worth to a country they loved. Wondering what sort of Britain was being built without us. Forgotten war, forgotten army, forgotten again” (Levy 2004, 365). Bernard’s complaint represents an example of dramatic irony given the huge numbers of non-white, non-European citizens who fought in both world wars: between 1939 and 1945, over 2.5 million South Asian men volunteered for service, producing the largest volunteer army in history.⁴ However, Bernard’s narrative barely registers this hidden history; in fact, he looks down on the Indian recruits as untrustworthy “coolies” (375) who sometimes “took orders well” (383) but are incapable of governing themselves. While there is no South Asian voice in the text to counter-balance Bernard’s racism, the message of sacrifice and suffering on the part of all those touched by war in the Indian sub-continent is clearly conveyed to the reader.

At the end of the novel, Levy includes a coda, which reads: “Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few” (Levy 2004, 531). The quotation is taken from Winston Churchill’s wartime speech in the aftermath of the Battle of

Britain and pays tribute to the RAF fighter pilots who defended the British mainland from Nazi attack. However, following as it does Levy's story of Black and white experiences before, during and after the war, in Britain and the Caribbean, the coda performs the function of re-signifying Churchill's famous 1940 homage to (white) RAF fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain so that it references and includes not only the unacknowledged contribution of Black service men and women in World War II but indeed the whole pioneering generation of Windrush migrants who filled much needed jobs in the period of post-war reconstruction. As Levy states: "Britain is finally beginning to gather up its more distant voices and listen to the rich stories they have to tell, stories that are central to the history of Britain and of British literature as anything we are more familiar with" (quoted in Lima 2005, 82).

***Small Island* as challenge to western definitions of trauma**

The second challenge identified by Craps (2013) concerns the problematization of western definitions of trauma. Drawing on the work of critics of the American Psychological Association's model of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) that informs much trauma theory, he calls into question the conventional definition of trauma as an event that "would evoke significant symptoms of distress in most people" and which is "generally outside the range of usual human experience" (Craps 2013, 24) such as military combat, rape and torture.⁵ However, as Laura Brown (2008) points out, this definition ignores "the normative, quotidian aspects of trauma in the lives of many oppressed and disempowered persons" such as Black people in racist societies (18). New terms have been devised to capture these non-exceptional concepts of trauma and as long ago as 1992 Maria Root coined the term "insidious trauma" to refer to the covert, everyday character of much racism in contemporary western countries. However, it should be remembered that racism against Black people in the

western world, particularly in the US, can still take the form of overwhelming violence, for example the murders in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. Rather, trauma is a constant presence in Black people's lives; it constitutes what Brown (1995) calls a "continuing background noise rather than an unusual event" (103).

Small Island may be seen to explore trauma in this doubled sense: *both* as an act of overwhelming event-based violence *and* as a form of quotidian racial discrimination against Black service personnel and migrants. Significant examples of the former include Bernard's father Arthur's shell shock from World War I and the "race riot" that breaks out between American GIs and Caribbean-British servicemen during World War II, which tragically leads to Arthur's death. All these events conform to the hegemonic American Psychological Society definition of catastrophic stressors: military combat and overwhelming violence outside the usual range of human experience. However, neat distinctions between types of trauma, and between Black and white experience, are called into question by Levy through the interweaving of these events; it is not only the War but the "race war" that comes home to the English countryside. Moreover, Bernard's own war experiences in India and Burma also challenge false distinctions between event-based and ongoing forms of trauma; while particular events, such as the fire that kills his friend Maxi, constitute classic trauma triggers, it is the protracted nature of Bernard's suffering, as a result of his fear that he has contracted syphilis, which he prolongs by staying away from Queenie for a further two years after the end of the war, that causes his ongoing sense of traumatic loss and fuels his resentment against the "foreigners" who have taken up residence in his house.

Small Island offers a powerful depiction of the ways in which racism, operating on a variety of levels – individual, social and institutional -- is potentially traumatizing. It portrays the racism experienced in the military by Black servicemen during wartime, and that experienced by migrants at all levels in post-war British society in housing, employment and

everyday encounters. It also bears out the claim that, after the war, white attitudes to Black people changed from relative acceptance and tolerance to implicit or explicit hostility and resentment, fuelled partly by perceived competition for scarce resources in bankrupt post-war Britain and partly by ignorance about the migrants' status as British subjects.⁶ Gilbert's sections of the novel depict his experience of institutional racism in training and employment in both the armed forces and Civvy Street. Although Gilbert as a Caribbean-British airman is not subject to the same segregation that operates in the US armed forces, nevertheless he discovers that his opportunities as a Black recruit are much more limited than those of his white comrades. Rather than realizing their dream of becoming pilots, the majority of Black service personnel find they are assigned roles as ground staff; in Gilbert's case, and much to his disgust, he is sent to the transport division to become a driver.

After the war, Gilbert returns to the UK as a migrant on the *Empire Windrush* in the hope of studying law. Once again, his ambition is thwarted when he finds himself offered only trades-related training in bread-baking, which his pride leads him to reject. However, once he is on the job market, institutional racism kicks in again and he is turned away from even menial jobs on the grounds of race. In one encounter, he is unceremoniously told: "We don't want you. There's no job for you here. [...] We can't use your sort. Go on, get out" (Levy 2004, 313). Eventually, Gilbert gets a job with the Post Office where he is subject to continuous racist bullying and aggression. When it comes to housing the situation is no less racist, and Gilbert is turned away repeatedly from rental properties:

Man, there was a list of people who would not like it if I came to live – husband, wife, women in the house, neighbours, and hear this, they tell me even little children would be outraged if a coloured man came among them. Maybe I should start an expedition – let me trace it back and find the source of this colour bar. (215)

In this extract, Gilbert's comment "let me trace it back" shows his (and Levy's) understanding that white-Black relations are not just a consequence of war but are shaped by the long history of slavery and colonialism. It is at this point in the novel that Gilbert remembers the London address Queenie gave him during the war and makes his way to her house in Nevern Street.

On her arrival from Jamaica six months later, Hortense joins Gilbert in his digs in Earl's Court, and is dismayed by the shabbiness and ugliness of post-war London: "Just this?" she wails, "You bring me all this way for just this?" (Levy 2004, 21). Hortense believes that her academic qualifications will afford her a better life in the Mother Country but she is disillusioned in turn when, references in hand, she goes to the Department of Education to register as a teacher only to be told "the letters don't matter": "You can't teach in this country. You're not qualified to teach here in England." (Levy 2004, 453-454). Following this episode, Hortense turns on her heel to make a dignified exit but inadvertently walks through the door into a broom cupboard thus compounding her humiliation. Indeed, even the most trivial of Hortense's social interactions, such as shopping, are characterized by embarrassment and alienation, suggesting that for Black migrants trauma is not only experienced as a single overwhelming event but as an ongoing series of micro-aggressions. However, the novel also offers a strong counter-narrative towards the traumatizing potential of everyday experience through the deployment of humour. However humiliating and demoralizing Hortense's experience in the broom cupboard at the time, Levy gets her character to laugh at herself when looking back at the episode through Gilbert's gently mocking eyes. Gilbert manages to transform Hortense's sense of utter rejection into a sense of solidarity and it is at this point that love between the couple begins to grow. Through the character of Gilbert, Levy advocates a strategy of "laughing through the tears", which helps to build resilience in the face of traumatic experience and make it more bearable so that it can

be put into narrative and become part of cultural memory. As Gilbert declares at one point, “Laughter is part of my war effort” (171).

Providing alternatives to normative trauma aesthetics

The third challenge issued by Craps concerns the aesthetics of postcolonial texts and how they may differ from those of the European cultural tradition invoked by western trauma theory. Drawing on the work of Rita Felski (1989) who argues in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* that the ideological meaning of the text cannot be read off from the form alone but is dependent on the context of its production and reception, Craps argues that postcolonial texts may well eschew the modernist aesthetics of canonical trauma texts for political and ideological reasons. Discussing the Stolen Generation testimonies, concerning Australian Aboriginal children who were taken from their families, he attributes their “no-frills, realist aesthetic” (Craps 2013, 42) to their sense of political urgency. Levy, too, has spoken about the wider social function of literature, saying she writes to change the world (quoted in Lima 2005, 80). Lima argues that Levy chooses realist conventions because of her belief in the power of representation. In fact, while *Small Island* is broadly realist, in that it is strongly plotted, foregrounds storytelling, and communicates a social message, it also incorporates many of the features of canonical trauma fiction, notably the devices of temporal dislocation and narrative rupture. Foremost amongst these is the structural division of the narrative into “Before” and “1948”, by which the novel registers trauma at a formal level. As Birk Laursen (2012) states: “In doing this, [Levy] addresses the historical rupture of the Windrush– [...] and complicates the notion that the history of migration belongs only to those who migrated” (64).

“Before” signifies both “before the war” and “before mass migration” and thus has implications for both Black and white characters. Their overlapping and non-synchronous

accounts can seem disorientating to the reader who is taken back and forth in time and place and frequently has to wait for the significance of an event to be revealed in the manner of modernist delayed decoding. One such example is the scene in Lincolnshire where Gilbert first encounters Arthur and imagines he is a poor kind of spy (Levy 2004, 164). The reader only realizes who Arthur is when Gilbert reads his name and address on a piece of paper in his pocket. However, the text also problematizes the notion of (temporal and structural) rupture; as Alicia E. Ellis (2012) argues, the novel presents a counter-history, which resists the articulation of a singular experience of migration and empire:

The structure of the narrative, with its shifting voices and time periods (before and after), indicates that her narrative seeks to complicate the prevailing approach to Windrush history as a moment of rupture. Instead, Levy reclaims a pre-history of discourses and events that inform and even shape Windrush and post-Windrush encounters. (72)

Thus, the novel works against the grain of western theories of trauma as constituting a single moment of rupture. This rich pre-history includes Hortense's middle-class upbringing and education in Jamaica and her witnessing of a scandalous intergenerational mixed-race love affair, as well as Queenie's rural working-class upbringing in Yorkshire and her ambivalent memories of the "chocolate coloured" African man at the Empire Exhibition in 1925. These events, while separated spatially (located as they are in colony and Metropole respectively), are nevertheless shot through with similar racial ideologies and tensions. If Levy's motivation is to reclaim the marginalized history of Caribbean people before Windrush, she also calls into question the simplistic idea that Windrush inaugurates multicultural Britain. Through their wartime collaboration as well as the longer history of colonial interactions, she shows how Black and white histories are intertwined. The disruption of war and migration are arguably registered in the multiple, discontinuous, fragmented, and conflicting narrative

voices of the four protagonists who don't come together until the very end of the novel but, even then, do not produce a single articulation of their experiences. As Ellis (2012) comments, their "discourses share a similar mark of anxiety in the form of a distressed language that faces two ways at once, reaching back into the past to write the way forward" (72–73).

Addressing the underexplored relationship between First and Third World traumas

The final aspect of decolonizing trauma theory highlighted by Craps is the need to explore the interconnectedness of Metropolitan and non-western traumas. When she set out to write the novel, Levy (2011) realized that she needed to tell the story from all sides: "Not only the immigrants' tale, but also from the point of view of the people that those immigrants came to live among. Their lives were changed by that migration to Britain just as my parents' lives were" (*The Guardian* Book Club). The result was a novel in which multiple characters narrate their own stories:

Four distinct characters began to form in my head, and all of them seemed to demand that they tell their own stories. So four first-person narratives became the structure of the novel. And as I explored their stories I came to better understand the relationship between the country of my birth and the country of my heritage. (*The Guardian* Book Club)

As well as depicting the insidious trauma of Black migrants within an imperial system of institutionalised racism, Levy also portrays the event-based trauma of shell-shock suffered by the (white) character Arthur who served in World War I. When World War II breaks out, Arthur is retraumatized by the Blitz. Despite being evacuated to Lincolnshire with Queenie,

he is then caught up in a race riot that breaks out in a cinema between white GIs and Caribbean-British servicemen posted in the UK. The culmination of the race riot scene is told from Gilbert's perspective: spilling outside the cinema, the riot, he points out, is stoked up by US military police who start shooting and Arthur, tragically, is shot dead:

“Only now did I experience the searing pain of this fight – and not from the grazing on my face or the wrench in my shoulder. Arthur Bligh had become another casualty of war – but come, tell me, someone ... which war?” (Levy 2004, 193).

This poignant example of dramatic irony is Levy's way of showing the imbrication and interconnectedness of Black and white, British and Caribbean histories of loss and suffering.

While the first-person monologic narrative method separates and divides the characters from each other in that they cannot hear each other's stories and readers only hear one account at a time; nevertheless, as John Mullan (2011) points out, “they do oddly cooperate in building the narrative” (*The Guardian Book Club*). In the 1948 sections, one speaker picks up where another has just left off in a kind of storytelling relay; for example, at the start of chapter two Gilbert picks up Hortense's final words in chapter one: “Is this the way the English live?” (Levy 2004, 22), putting her disillusionment into relief and revealing his own exasperation. While the characters may at times appear isolated in their individual traumas, this technique of picking up the narrative thread provides continuity between the stories for the reader who acts as the witness to their traumatic memories and histories. Thus, the novel enables the transformation of traumatic memories into narrative memories through the characters' collective act of cultural memory.

***Small Island* as an example of multidirectional memory**

Another way of understanding Levy’s revisioning of wartime and 1940s cultural history is through Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory. The novel may be seen to employ a model of cultural memory akin to Rothberg’s two axes of multidirectionality: the axis of political affect and the axis of comparison, which refer respectively to the range of responses to other’s traumas from competitiveness to solidarity, and to the equation or differentiation of types of trauma. In Figure 1, the axis of political affect runs from top to bottom and the axis of comparison from left to right:

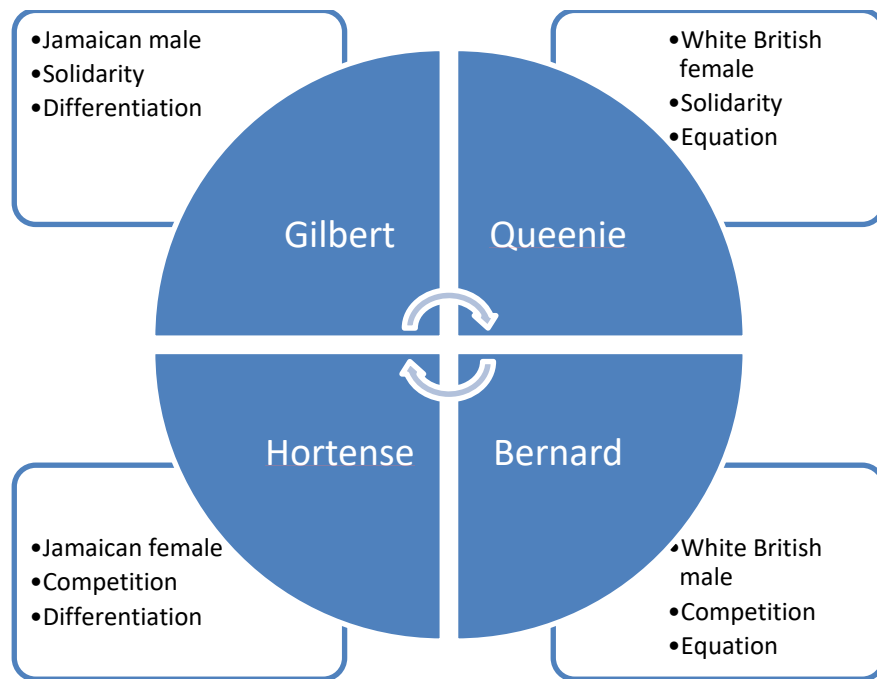


Figure 1

On the axis of political affect, Gilbert and Queenie arguably demonstrate some solidarity with each other over their shared traumatic experiences (particularly in the race riot scene); while Bernard certainly and Hortense to a large extent – “Just this?” -- privilege their own suffering over that of others’. In terms of the axis of comparison, the Black characters Gilbert and Hortense, from their diasporic and migrant perspective, are arguably able to differentiate

between varieties of traumatic experience (from the ruptures of war and migration to quotidian racism), whereas Bernard wilfully and Queenie partly unconsciously ignore different (non-white) kinds of collective and cultural trauma.

Bernard represents the kind of white supremacist ideological attitudes that were typical among white Britons of the time. His character is only introduced late on in the novel and his uncompromising racism towards the suffering of non-white people is in stark contrast to the attitudes of the other main characters. The following extract from Bernard's narrative may serve to demonstrate his competitive, unempathetic world view, only reinforced by his bitter experiences in India:

The war was fought so people might live amongst their own kind. Quite simple. Everyone had a place. England for the English and the West Indies for these coloured people. [...] Everyone was trying to get home after the war to be with kith and kin. Except these blasted colonials. I've nothing against them in their place. But their place isn't here. (Levy 2004, 469)

Bernard utterly fails to acknowledge the enormous contribution made to the war effort by colonial service personnel or the great suffering experienced by Indian nationals, many of whom starved as resources were diverted to Britain. His sense of estrangement on homecoming parallels Hortense's on her arrival in the UK, his bitter words mirroring the refrain Gilbert repeatedly mocks: "Just this? Only this?" (Levy 2004, 21)

Queenie's cultural attitudes contrast strikingly with those of her husband. Ever since she saw the "chocolate coloured" man at the Empire Exhibition she has been fascinated by the Black (male) Other. In adulthood, this informs her sexual desire for Michael, the RAF pilot who becomes the father of her child. While she rejects overtly racist attitudes, standing up for Gilbert when he is abused in the cinema, she does exhibit a racial bias, which is never really challenged over the course of the novel. For example, she expects Hortense to step into

the road when passing a British person and, even after her love affair with Michael, she still refers to Gilbert as a “coloured chappie” (Levy 2004, 170). For Queenie, traumatic experiences like war and dislocation are simply things visited on people regardless of their race. While Hortense’s middle-class background and prudish, conventional character set her apart from Queenie, both women marry men they don’t love to get away from their family situation -- and both are in love with Michael Roberts. In the “Before” and “1948” sections of the novel alike, Hortense’s own grievances take precedence over a sense of solidarity with others and she is ruthless in dispatching her Jamaican rival in love Celia Langley when she, Hortense, virtually bribes Gilbert to marry her with the passage fare to England.

Of the four main characters it is Gilbert who possesses the most sophisticated ability to show solidarity across race lines on the axis of political affect as his account of his standoff with Bernard reveals:

There was something I recognised on the face of Bernard Bligh. I glimpsed it on that first encounter for only one second, two. But I know it like a foe. Come, I saw it reflected from every mirror on my dear Jamaican island. Staring back on me from my own face. [...] A bewildered soul. Too much seen to go back. Too much changed to know which way is forward. I knew with this beleaguered man’s return the days of living quiet in this house had come to an end. (Levy 2004, 445)

Bernard’s dyed-in-the-wool colonial attitudes contrast strikingly with Gilbert’s complex and empathetic response to the other man’s disillusionment. He can identify with Bernard despite the latter’s racist hostility towards him precisely because he understands the complex and multidirectional ways in which their stories are intertwined.

While the overlapping and contrasting accounts presented by the characters are ultimately unreconcilable, an effect highlighted by the novel’s use of four first-person narratives, Levy’s text serves to build up multiple histories and versions of cultural memory

which are “structurally multidirectional” (Rothberg 2009, 524). As Rothberg argues, “Memory works productively: the result of memory conflict is not less memory, but more -- even of subordinated memory traditions” (523). The discrete but intertwined stories of Levy’s characters work in just this way, creating dissonances and consonances in historical and cultural memory, sometimes operating competitively and, at rarer moments, in solidarity with each other. As Birk Laursen (2012) comments, “memory is conceived as a discursive space where cultural identities are formed in dialogical interactions with others – not silencing histories, but displacing them” (56) to reveal the complex transnational legacies of colonial and racial violence.

Conclusion: storytelling as healing traumatic rupture

Finally, as part of its aesthetic and ideological challenge, the novel uses storytelling and humour as a means of healing the traumatic rupture with the past. Stories are shown to provide a link with the lost past and creatively heal its wounds, while humour leavens the sense of traumatic loss, and facilitates cultural memory characterised by resilience. Moreover, Queenie’s baby, Michael, named after her Jamaican RAF pilot lover, is doubly symbolic, representing both a new beginning *and* the ambivalent bearer of the legacy of the past. The birth itself represents the traumatic climax to the novel, holding different meanings for the characters. For Bernard, the baby represents a hateful symbol of miscegenation and what he sees as the usurpation of his house and country by Black colonial subjects. For Gilbert, the baby represents a potentially life-threatening accusation that he is to blame for getting a white woman pregnant. For Hortense, who becomes Queenie’s reluctant midwife, the birth of the baby represents a miraculous, if somewhat grotesque event:

What a thing was this! A wondrous sight perhaps – for there was the round head complete with curly dark hair matted with blood pushing out from within her. A new

life for this world. But it was quite the ugliest sight I had ever beheld. Only a few days before this pretty white woman was going about her business [...] now, prostrated by nature, she was simply the vessel for the Lord to do His work! (Levy 2004, 479)

Levy, in characteristic style, treats this episode as comedy, highlighting the dramatic irony of the characters' post-war situations – Hortense as respectably married woman and Queenie as unmarried mother of a mixed-race baby. This would seem to afford a reversal in the power relations between the women; however, Hortense is still ordered about by Queenie and made to participate in the event. In this way, colonial power relations are still arguably operating. The fact that the afterbirth explodes over Hortense's pristine white dress would seem to reinforce a sense of outrage committed against the young Black woman. While Levy undoubtedly uses humour to lessen the tension of the situation, the carnivalesque comedy cuts both ways and is an ambivalent leveller of race and gender privileges.

Moreover, the comic mood is soon dissipated by Queenie's extreme anxiety about her baby growing up as a "coloured" child in a white household and community. Prompted by her fears for his safety and her own ambivalent attitudes towards race, Queenie begs Hortense and Gilbert to take him:

'I'd have to give him away, you see. [...] To an orphanage. [...] And they don't want them, you know – the coloured ones. [...] In the newspaper they said they were going to send all the half-caste babies that had been born since the war – sons, daughters of coloured GIs mostly – they were going to send them to live in America. [...] Gilbert, can you imagine? You remember, don't you? The Americans. They'd want Michael to go up to the back of the picture house.' (Levy 2004, 522)

Here, in a multidirectional manner, Queenie recalls the racist treatment of Black soldiers by the Americans during the war and makes the link between her own post-war but not yet post-colonial society and the racist Jim Crow laws that have governed US society since the

abolition of slavery. This, she implies, is how her baby would be treated were he to be adopted. For Queenie, the child of empire, a non-racist upbringing in 1948 isn't conceivable; in a white-dominated society only Black parents can bring up a Black child. Queenie's conclusion represents a pessimistic assessment of post-war possibilities; moreover, it problematically places the challenge of countering racism onto Black families in a gesture that arguably mirrors imperialist power relations, a point which Levy has been at pains to draw to the reader's attention from the opening Preface.

As Ellis (2012) comments, "Levy's work serves as an act of reconstruction, a belated intervention, which is both sequel (*epigones*) and prologue to the story of the Windrush generation" (69). Through this act of reconstruction, therefore, *Small Island* foregrounds the process of storytelling and testifies to the importance of historical and cultural memory. It functions as a self-reflexive act of remembering and forgetting, exploring the gaps, contradictions and memory frictions, in accounts of British wartime experience. It evinces a desire both to record untold or overlooked aspects of collective British history, and to revision that past by giving symbolic and narrative shape to previously marginalised Black, migrant, and working-class experiences.

Notes

1. Andrea Levy's death from cancer at the age of 62 in February 2019 deprived English literature in general, and Black British writing in particular, of an important and original voice. Richard Lea's *Guardian* obituary identified her as "the chronicler of the Windrush generation" (*The Guardian*, February 15 2019) and Gary Younge paid tribute to his long-time friend by commenting that she strove "for a fuller, more rounded, more inclusive version of our national story" (*The Guardian*, February 15 2019).
2. *Small Island* was Levy's breakthrough work that earned her widespread acclaim. After initially slow sales on publication in 2004, and a respectful if muted critical response, the novel suddenly became well-known after winning the Orange Prize and then, in quick

succession, the Whitbread, the Commonwealth, and the Orange Best of the Best. It was also shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award in the United States, Romantic Novelist of the Year and two National book awards in the UK. Huge international sales followed and the novel has now been translated into over 20 languages (Levy 2010). It was subsequently turned into a successful two-part television drama by the BBC and broadcast in 2009.

3. According to the WW2 People's War Archive (BBC 2014, n.p.), approximately 5,500 West Indian RAF personnel arrived in Britain in 1944–45 and from 1944, West Indian women served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) in Britain.
4. The majority of Indian recruits fought against the Japanese in Burma, but Indian soldiers also served in North and East Africa, Italy and Greece. The Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) fought against the Japanese, while Royal Indian Navy ships fought in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean. In addition, there were around 40,000 Indian servicemen in the British Merchant Navy (BBC 2014, n.p.).
5. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) added PTSD to the third edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) classification scheme, defining a traumatic event as a catastrophic stressor that was outside the range of usual human experience.
6. An identical dynamic has been at play in recent years in British society in the context of austerity and Brexit through the "hostile environment" towards immigrants fostered by Theresa May, first as Home Secretary (2010–16) and then as Prime Minister (2016 to present) until her government's forced climbdown on the policy in 2018.

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