11 Under the Skin of British History

Bodies in Transit in Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004)

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"A Ship as Big as a World"[1]

On the morning of June 22, 1948, the *Empire Windrush* arrived at the Tilbury Docks, Essex, to disembark some five hundred settlers from Kingston, Jamaica, in what can be considered as the first wave in Britain's post-war attempt to recruit Commonwealth labour to cover for employment shortages at home. Although most of these West Indians had British citizenship and believed they were answering the call of their "mother country" for which many of them had served in World War II, they soon met hostility and discrimination from the white population in the UK.[2]

In *Small Island* (2004), Andrea Levy, whose own parents were *Windrush* pioneers, addresses the intricacies of this pivotal episode in modern British history from all sides, because she maintains that "[i]mmigration is a dynamic process. The people who come are as changed by it as the people they come to" (in Hickman 2004, n.p.). The novel was highly acclaimed by readers and critics and won the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction, the 2004 Whitbread Novel Award and the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, in what has been considered as part of Britain's serious attempts at coming to terms with its difficult colonial past. If we draw on Paul Gilroy (1993) who, in turn, refers to Mikhail Bakhtin (1982), the *Windrush* is a "chronotope"—that is, a time/space configuration—that, through the image of the "ship in motion", helps to define the Caribbean diaspora as the interaction of past experience, ongoing involvement and future goals characterised by conflict and hybridity. For Gilroy (1993, 4), ships symbolise diasporic processes born and reborn beyond strict notions of race, ethnicity and nationhood, as they "focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs". His notion of Black Atlantic (1992) is illuminating as an anti-essentialist approach and an alternative to nationalistic theories about the complex relationships among black cultures

in Europe, Africa and America. In fact, he sees these relationships as an unfinished process of travel and exchange across the Atlantic.

Levy's novel is a criss-cross of narratives conceived as the intertwined stories of two couples: one black, Hortense and Gilbert, just arrived from Jamaica; and the other white and England born, Queenie and Bernard, whose voices interact polyphonically and whose experiences move from past to present, between London, India and Jamaica in order to contest the linear and dominant narratives of patriarchal and imperial discourse. In her novel, Levy dramatises the literal diaspora of the West Indians, but with such a narrative design her novel is equally decentred and diasporic, as the gendered and racialised perspectives of the four protagonists (articulated through an intricate body rhetoric) overlap and switch back and forth between temporal and spatial dimensions as if navigating the oceans of history and memory. Thus, the main aim of this chapter is to examine how these social, political and cultural dislocations that the novel situates in the origin of modern racialised Britain are primarily manifested in the body as the locus of unstable identities always "on the move".

"We Were in the Jungle"

The novel opens with the 1924 Wembley Exhibition, which provides the imperial frame out of which all the text unfolds as both an endorsement and a contestation of that dominant ideology. Portrayed through the eyes of a very young Queenie Buxton, dressed precisely in a virginal "white organza frock", the Exhibition conceptualises panoptically as "the whole Empire in little" (Levy 2004, 2), or "the whole world at your feet" (7), serving the purpose of ethnocentric propaganda presiding British colonialism. According to the organisers (Clendinning 2012, n.p.), the exhibition, enthusiastically inaugurated by King George V and alluding to a "family of nations", was intended to stress the importance of maintaining strong imperial ties while instructing the visitors about the wealth and potential of the empire's resources. Interestingly enough, a tour of the empire was offered, making the fantasy of international travel "within the reach of all" at a cost of only eighteen pence.

This setting is also the best starting point for a story of reciprocal adjustment of different communities and identities as the text very clearly shows (Levy 2004, 6): "[b]ut then suddenly there was a man. An African man. A black man who looked to be carved from melting chocolate"; and Queenie's apprehensions at her first encounter with him reveal all the racial and cultural stereotypes regulating the construction of the Other:[3]

> A monkey man sweating a smell of mothballs. Blacker than when you smudge your face with a sooty cork. The droplets of sweat on his forehead glistened and shone like jewels. His lips were brown,

> not pink like they should be, and they bulged with air like bicycle tyres. His hair was woolly as a black shorn sheep. His nose, squashed flat, had two nostrils big as train tunnels. And he was looking down at me.
>
> (Levy 2004, 6)

Here Levy seems to invoke postcolonial critics like Franz Fanon (2004), Edward Said (1993), Homi Bhabha (1994) and Robert J.C. Young (2003) in their common belief that the main aim of colonisation is to impose one's own culture/language/meaning onto the Other. Her text resonates with racial stereotypes, but it is perhaps the notion of the native as food, available to be consumed and devoured—as if "carved from melting chocolate"—the one that deserves further attention, as it operates deconstructively in its ironic racial reversal of the myth of cannibalism, overwhelmingly present in so many imperial narratives.[4] Queenie herself echoes this Eurocentric paranoia as she fears that "he could have swallowed [her] up, this big nigger man" (6). Additional irony is provided by the fact that Queenie's family, the Buxtons, are butchers and run their own slaughterhouse, thus suggesting an element of brutality inherent to their gory engagement with bodies.[5] When the adolescent Queenie becomes a vegetarian and quits her family's meat business, she endorses a more urban and far-reaching lifestyle in the metropolis. This new London environment will offer her a world of possibilities which, rendered through abundant imagery of food and eating, according to Brophy (2010, 13), "position Queenie alternately as a benefactress, as a highly desirable consumable object, and as a desiring consumer of black men's bodies". Further on, in their game of reciprocal consumption, Queenie, who, ironically enough, had given up meat for years, describes Michael's lips as "plump as sausages" (298) and wonders whether they would bounce hers off or "would soften when kissed" (Ibid.), whereas Michael—who, during his flirtatious approach to Queenie, has identified himself with the Jamaican national bird, the humming bird—admits his being "so happy to have the chance to sample the nectar of English flowers" (300).

But soon those stereotypes that seemed so firmly settled in the Wembley visitors' imagination are contradicted by the African man's own actions: he speaks English; he is polite; and his hand is warm and sweaty just like anyone else's. That the girl is forced to kiss the man and is all too early made aware of his sexual significance anticipates miscegenation as one of the central topics in the novel: Queenie's affair with the West Indian RAF officer Michael Roberts and Bernard's assault on the young Indian prostitute suggest that the exoticisation and eroticisation of the Other are inherent to the libidinal economy of colonial and postcolonial Britain.[6] Homi Bhabha (1994, 67) adds a psychoanalytical dimension that might work illuminatingly at this point, because he notices that what is despised as savage and uncivilised is at the same time strangely

desired, and consequently states that the colonial Other is an object of both derision and desire. If, as Levy's passage implies, the body stands as a signifier of difference establishing hierarchies of race, gender, class or age, the Othered body is also an ambivalent site where boundaries can be trespassed and where colonial dreams, fears, fantasies and myths are projected (Bhabha 1994, 71).

After all, racialisation is primarily inscribed on the body, and together with miscegenation, most of the issues that Levy addresses in her novel—racial impurity, segregation, ghettoisation, housing discrimination, cultural prejudice—involve a centrality of the body that has been overlooked in much of the critical work about her fiction. I draw on feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's (1994) engaging notion of the pliability of the body to argue that, despite the strong regulations imposed upon post-war British bodies, these were explicitly transformed in contexts of cross-cultural and interracial communication as the ones depicted in *Small Island*. Following Michael Foucault's constructivist approach (*Discipline and Punish* 1979), Grosz (1994, 187–88) defends that, although the body is constrained by its biological limits, it holds the "capacity to open itself up to prosthetic synthesis, to transform or rewrite its environment, to continually augment its power and capacities through the incorporation into the body's own spaces and modalities of objects that, while external, are internalized, added to, supplementing and supplemented by the 'organic body'".

Recognising this pliable dimension of bodies, which in their ongoing metamorphosis, "open themselves up" to challenge race and gender normativity, Levy maintains that being black in Britain is about "becoming" racialised, a process in which skin colour stands as a signifier of both exclusion and belonging—or, as Stuart Hall (1997, 9) would put it, a "floating signifier" entirely dependent on social, cultural and historical context. According to him (Ibid.), "race works like a language" where concepts signify in a context of relational differences: "Their meaning… can never be finally fixed, but it is subject to a constant process of redefinition and appropriation". Through a number of examples, Levy evidences that just as race is a fluid and protean category, racism is equally produced and reproduced in very different geopolitical environments.

Hortense, for instance, constructs her identity in Jamaica on the premise that, unlike the "bitter chocolate hue" (38) of her mother Alberta, her own complexion is like "warm honey" (Ibid.), therefore resembling that of white people and granting her a better position in Caribbean society. But in England her fair-skinned body is not going to provide her any "access" to whiteness; here she is black enough to be discriminated against and have those privileges—like her British education, her polished manners and her professional qualifications—ignored. She even has to face the humiliation of being mistaken for a prostitute in the street because, within the colonial logic still presiding post-war London, the black

female body stands for lasciviousness and sexual availability. Contemporary black female critics (Collins 1990; Giddins 1984; Hobson 2003) and artists (O'Grady 1992; Williams and Willis 2002) are struggling to rearticulate an aesthetics of the black female body that challenges the patriarchal and colonial constructs of "obscenity", "hypersexuality" and "grotesquerie" traditionally defining it. Particularly worth mentioning is Lorraine O'Grady's (1992, 14) notion of "unmirroring", a process through which black women have been depicted by dominant white culture with distorted images and racial stereotypes that need to be contested: "To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. For some of us, this will not be easy. So long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look".

In the case of Gilbert, his blackness is perceived more tolerantly than that of the African American soldiers with whom he served in the war and who are fiercely ruled by the Jim Crow laws (Levy 2004, 131): "this American officer with the angular head was telling us that we West Indians, being subjects of His Majesty King George VI, had, for the time being, superior black skin. We were allowed to live with white soldiers, while the inferior American negro was not. I was perplexed". Their black male bodies are racialised in different ways because they inhabit distinct sociopolitical contexts. Through examples like this, Levy addresses the complexities of "difference within difference" so as to avoid the risks of the binary thinking that has dominated most narratives of the empire as well as its subjects—narratives where polarised divisions between centre and margins, home and abroad, and metropolis and periphery resulted in Manichean oppositions obviating the diversity of cross-racial realities. Gilbert and his fellow Afro-American soldiers share a series of commonalities in their experiences, but the particularities of their respective racialised positionings need to be acknowledged too. Whereas, during their military destination at the Virginia camp, the black British soldiers were allowed to sit in the all-white picture shows and dance clubs and were "handed bars of chocolate and cigarettes to share", their Afro-American comrades were severely segregated on the premise that the mix of black and white races lowered the efficiency of fighting units (132). Hazel Carby (2009, 629) stresses the need to address the idiosyncrasy of the geopolitical and biopolitical transactions among places, peoples and ideas if we want to draw an accurate picture of interracial encounters:

> Does it matter where encounters between Africans and Europeans, between those constructed as 'black' and 'white' take place: in an African or English village, town, or city; if they occur in the impenetrable and claustrophobic darkness of the dungeon of a coastal fort or hold of a slave ship, or take place, face-to-face, in the glaring light reflected from the Atlantic Ocean; if they are

> confrontations on the shores of a Caribbean island or on the streets of a metropolitan imperial city?

Against homogeneous accounts of racial conflict, she claims (Ibid.) that it is worth unravelling the intricacies of difference, embedded in the context-dependent tensions between the colonial centre and the colonised periphery: "Perhaps it is not, in fact, only the place that is significant but also the manner of the journey and arrival, the eager walking or manacled stumble, the panicked flight, or forced or voluntary sailing toward and away from each other".

The relativism of racial discourse also marks the differences between the two female narrators in relation to their possibilities of motherhood, as Queenie, the white woman, feels socially compelled to renounce her black baby and hand him over to a black foster mother, Hortense, in what represents an ironic reversal of the notion of the Mother Country. The brutal episode of the childbirth, with Queenie's asking Hortense, whose wedding dress is all soaked in placenta blood, to cut the umbilical cord is a shocking *mise-en-scène* of this new world order. Further on, the vision of Queenie on bended knees begging Hortense and Gilbert to look after her coloured child destabilises the power of imperial Britain, now symbolically represented by Queenie, as a nation on its knees, collapsing both from the attack it has suffered in the war and from the post-emancipation demands coming from its former colonies. This shift of power is a carnivalesque disruption Hortense can hardly make sense of (523): "I never dreamed England would be like this. Come, in what crazed reverie would a white English woman be kneeling before me yearning for me to take her black child? There was no dream I could conceive so fanciful".

Significantly enough, in this and other episodes, the female body stands as agent of distortion and disorder, the space where all fixed categories are subverted. Hortense is shocked at the grotesque vision of the white woman's body contorting and oozing fluids—"her private parts… could not stretch wide enough to let the creature pass" (479), she observes—because in all its filthy materiality, it transgresses the dominant gaze over normative white femininity. Born of a mother who "was an English rose. Flaxen hair, a complexion like milk" (236), and having perceived the racial others as "meat" all along, Queenie is now rendered in an abject pose—Hortense describes (480) how "the noise she then created brought to mind the relieving of constipation" and how "her baby squeezes further and further out like an erupting pustule". This emphasis on an abominable corporeality is necessarily reminiscent of Julia Kristeva's (1984) theories on abjection, conceived as a process of expulsion and rejection of the Other that begins at the maternal body but that she identifies with the historical exclusion of women. This is a process that, nevertheless, can be used positively to undermine

gender-based conceptions of beauty and desire, as has been explained by Edwards and Graulund (2013, 32) in their thought-provoking association between the feminine and the grotesque: "If the 'perfect' woman's body is a product of the male gaze and its related power dynamics", they argue, "then the affirmation and display of material bodies in all their diversity (shapes, contours, sizes, dimensions) and bodily functions (ingestions, excretions, menstruation, pregnancy, aging, sickness) have the potential to subvert patriarchal gender codes related to corporeality. Grotesque bodies", they conclude, "resist absorption into the objectifying gaze that seeks to contain them".

The same destabilising quality that is attributed to the female body can be granted to the "black body", which in the colonial discourse is constructed as ugly, dirty, defiled, impure, contaminated or sick. According to this rationale, it is not surprising that the most common opinion about the arrival of black immigrants in Britain was that they came to improve their "imperfect" bodies; this is illustrated in Queenie's account of her neighbours' paranoid perception (111): "For the teeth and glasses. That was the reason so many coloured people were coming to this country, according to my next-door neighbour Mr. Todd". Nonsensical as it may sound, the "lazy black man" stereotype and the argument that immigrants were draining the National Health Service are still too fresh in the British collective memory, and these opinions that Levy recalls in her novel are not dissimilar from those found nowadays in much of Europe's conservative media about refugees stealing "our jobs, housing and benefits" and posing a sexual threat for white women.[7]

Actually, Gilbert and Queenie's relationship is always under their environment's suspicions about their trespassing of the legitimate obligations between a tenant and his landlady. The black phallus elicits a notion of hypersexuality similar to that suggested by the presence of Hortense's black body in the street. But the black male body also represents a threat to white masculinity, an anxiety illustrated in the novel by Bernard's appalling discovery that, during his absence, not only his house, but also his wife's body, has been invaded by the "darkies". He recalls that the room that the Josephs occupy now used to be his mother's room for "[s]ewing, mending, reading…. or embroidering something splendid" (468), thus attributing to the presence of their West Indian lodgers an added meaning of usurpation. Moreover, that this "woman's room" was the privileged spot from which "she could spy on the whole street without anyone realising… the top of her world" (468), implies that the mother's panoptical vision (a nostalgic metaphor for the all-embracing power of the Empire) has been invalidated in the new postcolonial scenario.

The connections between Queenie's middle-class home (now transformed into a multiracial lodging) and her white female body (radically altered by interracial desire and offspring) conjure up the idea of a nation equally permeable and fragile, and dismantle the fantasy of

ethnic absolutism operating at the heart of the British empire. At this point, I am not unaware of the tensions inherent to the utilisation of the "body-as-metaphor" and firmly believe that these analogies must be seen in the context of patriarchal paradigms where real women's bodies have been, and still are, subject to different forms of violence precisely because this very mystification of female corporeality as symbolic construct has been an effective strategy of political control. As stated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (1997, 8), most feminist readings of the body "thus emerge from an everpresent threat to [women's] own vulnerable flesh and blood, and the resulting symbolism is too close to the material body to allow for the comfort of seeing this danger merely as metaphor".

The impact of her one-night adulterous experience is so intense that Queenie hardly recognises herself in the sexual encounter with Michael, who almost constructs for her a new corporeal identity through his desire and activates a process of "unmirroring" in the way O'Grady (referred to before) alludes to this exercise of disidentification that is necessary to undertake a divorce from the dominant iconography of manhood and womanhood, whiteness and blackness:

> It wasn't me. Mrs Queenie Bligh, she wasn't even there. This woman was a beauty—he couldn't get enough of her. He liked the downy softness of the blonde hairs on her legs. Her nipples were the pinkest he'd ever seen. Her throat—he had just to kiss her throat. This woman was as sexy as any starlet on a silver screen. The zebra of their legs twined and untwined together on the bed. Her hands, pale as a ghost's, caressed every part of his nut-brown skin. She was so desirable he polished her with hot breath….
>
> (Levy 2004, 301)

At this climactic moment, difference penetrates the text and is marked not only as Otherness in culture, manners, customs and language, but as primarily inscribed on the body. It is worth noticing that Queenie's feeling of detachment and disavowal (expressed through the shift from first to third person) takes place in the context of a strong bodily awareness framing the pleasurable consumption of each other's exoticism. This unstable narrative perspective also allows her to morally distance herself from this adulterous act that simultaneously awakens gratification and self-disgust (301): "This woman panted and thrust and bit. And when he rolled her over she yelped wickedly into the pillow. Mrs Queenie Bligh would never do such a thing". In the context of their brief miscegenetic affair, racial difference is strongly fetishised and helps Queenie trespass the domains of her own parochial ignorance about the Other. Just as she did not know that Jamaica is not in Africa (298), she wonders whether she would know Michael "was naked when he was undressed or would he look like he was clad all over in leather" (297). If the vision of the

African man in the Wembley exhibition simultaneously aroused fear and fascination in a young Queenie Buxton, Michael's black body ignites in the adult woman a similar thirst for knowledge that needs to be satisfied (298): "Would [his hair] chafe against your skin or would it brush gentle as an angora jumper?"

Through this episode Andrea Levy goes beyond the mere romantic recreation of the past so as to dramatise the realities of so many interracial couples which brought about hybrid, unconventional genealogies of settlement and diaspora. At this point, it is worth mentioning Hazel Carby (2009, 641), who offers an alternative narrative for the birth of modern racialised Britain by tracking its origins to the presence of West Indian civilian and Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel on British soil during World War II, rather than to the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948: "The mobilization of women in the homeland and of colonial troops and civilians in the Caribbean", she argues, "resulted in racialized encounters between young women from the colonial heartland and young men from its colonized periphery". Through this alternative genealogy of black Britain, Carby (Ibid.) tries to explain how the racialisation of subjects during World War II occurred as "the expression of particular fears and anxieties which had developed about 'race' in the colonies and in British cities" and how "these fears and anxieties circulated around these two sets of bodies: the racialization of black men was articulated in relation to white women and the subjecthood of white females was, in turn, articulated in relation to the former". Although the contribution of these coloured citizens to the war effort remains unacknowledged and conveniently blurred from British cultural memory, recent studies like Carby's demonstrate that many of the governmental and military policies in post-war Britain were instituted to control and discipline the cohabitation with these black bodies and to police specific encounters between black men and white women: "Many of these encounters flourished into sexual relationships and, despite overwhelming opposition from friends, family, strangers and society at large, some culminated in marriage and increased the number of what officials regarded as the 'problem' of 'half-caste children'" (Ibid.). In this context of moral panic and segregationist policies, Queenie's heartbreaking decision of renouncing her new born baby is perceived as her only option to disentangle herself and her son from this racial conflict (Levy 2004, 522): "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 America".

Ironically enough, in this paranoid scenario of post-war Britain, it was mainly black male bodies and white female bodies that were strictly supervised and were, in Carby's words (2009, 650), "designated vectors of disease, carrier[s] of a threat which could literally and metaphorically infect the nation". In Levy's novel, however, it is Bernard's white

male body the one that, through his intercourse with the young Indian prostitute, becomes the potential agent of contagion (of syphilis in this case). Although the medical officer identifies these incriminating bodily symptoms—"ulcers, inflammations, colourful discharge, swellings.... [a]poplexy, mental failure, nervous disease, blindness, and of course, eventual death" (Levy 2004, 418)—as "the result of sexual relations with the wrong type" (Ibid.), at home the fact is conveniently silenced by the family doctor in what represents British society's double standard of morality about male and female misbehaviour.

If, according to Adrienne Rich (2003, 30), the body is "the geography closest in", the next closest one would be the home. West Indians faced great discrimination in housing, and one of the main conflicts in the novel revolves precisely around this circumstance. Gilbert secures accommodation at Queenie's, who he had met during the war. Despite the decrepit room he gets, he is grateful since "places hard to come by, especially for coloured boys" (54). The neighbours put pressure on Queenie because they fear West Indian lodgers—who, they believe, "wash in oil and have animal desires"—will turn the area into a "jungle" (113). The term "jungle" resonates with strong racist prejudices about the savage and beastly nature of the black immigrants, many of whom had to experience the humiliation of having the back of their bodies inspected in search of animal tails. To a great extent, the neighbours' fears echo the national anxieties about the limits of English identity and their attempts at establishing a *cordon sanitaire* around their notions of racial purity.[8] But, according to Corinne Duboin (2011), the space of the "jungle" also evokes the artificially fabricated tropical landscape at the African pavilion of the Wembley exhibition, a deterritorialised fragment of Africa brought to England representing neither one space nor the other, but the ambivalent interpenetration of the two sites and cultures.

Within Levy's rhetoric of hybridity, the liminal spaces of the stairwells, passageways and thresholds, so frequently alluded to in her novel, symbolise the conflicting spatiality generated in postcolonial Britain. The image of Hortense's huge trunk evokes notions of nomadism and travel, but its being always in the threshold, "blocking most of the doorway" (467), conjures up the precarious housing of thousands of post-war immigrants, their transient position and ultimately their sense of placelessness. In the introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (1994, 3) alludes to the metaphoric value of this racialised architecture:

> The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial

> passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

In a less romanticised view, James Procter (2003, 35) sees this particular location "not as a site of cultural hybridity but as a racially fraught contact-zone at which blacks and whites came into confrontation. The stairwell was regularly an index of the squalor and cramped conditions to be found in black housing of this period… a congested, contestatory site of dwelling and a marker of black degradation". In *Small Island* Gilbert's account of his personal experience is rendered in similarly pragmatic terms, through an urban and domestic geography signifying exclusion and unbelonging: "So how many gates I swing open? How many houses I knock on? Let me count the doors that opened slow and shut quick without even me breath managing to get inside" (215).

Since Andrea Levy's focus is on the experience of the first generation of Caribbean immigrants following the *Windrush* arrival, the emphasis is not so much on identity as it is on prejudice and discrimination and on the reciprocal perception of Otherness. One aspect that her characters share with these new Londoners is the collapse of the expectations nurtured from afar and confronted with the everyday realities of the post-imperial metropolis. In Levy's novel, this disappointment is also expressed through a corporeal grammar, when a disillusioned Gilbert describes England (139) as an old disfigured woman, an iconography that explicitly deviates from the ideal Britannia celebrated by imperial discourse:

> 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. Can this be that fabled relation you heard so much of? This twisted-crooked weary woman. This stinking cantankerous hag. She offers you no comfort after the journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, 'Who the bloody hell are you?'

As suggested in Kristeva's (1984) model of psychosexual development where the access to the realm of the abject represents the moment when the subject separates from the mother, Gilbert recognises a painful split between him and his Mother country. He primarily understands this experience in bodily terms, as a moment of physical revulsion and disgust. Kristeva's theory of abjection (1984, 4) offers illuminating insights for this analysis because it is concerned precisely with figures that are "on the move", that is, in a state of transition or transformation, and, in her best known formulation, it addresses "[w]hat does not respect borders,

positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite". In a similar vein, Judith Butler (1993) appropriates the rhetoric of abjection to articulate the experiences of exclusion and unbelonging that Gilbert is so bitterly made aware of. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993, 3), she draws special attention to the "outside", the non-signifying realm against which the intelligible subject is established: "This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects', but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject". Though Butler is referring to gender, her spatial metaphor and her account of the abjected Other situated beyond the borders of the acceptable work as convenient formulations of Levy's racialised subjects (Butler 1993, 3): "The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject". Reading Levy through Butler's prism, one can conclude that the racialised subject is produced by a process of inclusion and exclusion in which the "domain of the abject" (constituted by women, black citizens, immigrants and other precarious identities in the novel) necessarily dictates a hierarchy of bodies that bespeaks the limits, prejudices and paradoxes of contemporary Englishness.

"I Never Dreamed England Would Be Like This"

This context of cross-cultural hostility and prejudice aligns Levy's text with what Chris Weedon (2008, 18) has described as a typology of "novels set in a Britain disfigured by racism and ethnocentrism that had claimed to be the 'Mother of Empire' and had invited her former colonial subjects in the 1950s and 1960s to come and work". A considerable number of postcolonial writers—Sam Selvon, V.S. Naipaul, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Monica Ali, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith, Buchi Emecheta, Grace Nichols, David Dabydeen, Fred D'Aguiar and Bernardine Evaristo—who have been notably compiled by John McLeod in *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004), have portrayed the capital as a site of encounters and misencounters between different communities negotiating a sense of place in a common location and calling upon a necessary reassessment of Britishness. Thus, London is seen as a city that is constantly reimagining its urban and human geography out of the legacy of post-war migration, settlement and diaspora. Together with Simon Gikandi (1996, 27), these authors seem to claim that "the task of decolonization must be taken to the metropolis itself; [that] the imperial mythology has to be confronted on its home ground". As illustrated before, the multilayered, fragmented and discontinuous narrative of *Small Island* allows for a complex account of the conflicting

spaces and identities that emerged on the post-war map of London. This is a map that Mary Louise Pratt (1992, 34) would identify as a *contact zone*, that is, one of these "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today".

Andrea Levy's revisitation of British colonial and postcolonial past and her focus on the heart of the Empire as the site of ambivalence between hope and frustration is charged with utopian possibilities by imagining better alternatives to contemporary racist realities and by envisioning unexpected encounters and stories of survival which explore the fantasies and fears about Otherness. This chapter started with the image of the "ship in motion" as a powerful metaphor for the diasporic processes that challenge and transform the political and cultural landscape of Britain. As this chapter heads to its conclusion, it seems worth invoking a similar notion of "bodies in transit" as malleable spaces constantly permeated by new meanings. According to Pile and Thrift (1995, 26), "The body is in constant motion. Even at rest, the body is never still. As bodies move they trace out a path from one location to another. These paths constantly intersect with those of others in a complex web of biographies". Multicultural environments, as the ones depicted by Levy, have endorsed a hierarchy of bodies "in motion" acting as an organising principle, but simultaneously offering non-essentialist modes of relationships with which to weave complex biographies across gender, class, race and nation lines. Through their experiences of migration and diaspora, the gendered and racialised bodies of the protagonists turn into spaces of negotiation between inner and outer geographies—spaces where links between familiarity and foreignness, alienation and belonging emerge in new and unforeseen ways.

Notes

1 (Levy 2004, 11). All further references to this text are from this edition and appear parenthetically in the chapter.
2 The prevalence of colonial prejudice and the absence of official information about the increasing number of arrivals made alarmist media and politicians (like, most notably, Cyril Osborne MP and Norman Pannell MP) warn apocalyptically about "Britain being 'swamped' by dark-faced migrants, whose alien cultures and lifestyles posed a threat to traditional standards and values" (Whitfield 2006, n.p.)
3 In its popular and controversial section "Races in Residence", the Wembley British Empire Exhibition followed the tradition of displaying colonial people before the viewing public and providing visitors with demonstrations of indigenous handcraft, music and dance. The West African pavilion illustrated the educational merits of colonial rule by reproducing a "native village" and "native workshops" where the qualities most valued by British administrators and missionaries—industriousness, discipline, the cultivation

of community and conversion to Christianity—shone at their best (Clendinning, n.p.). Within this patronising view, the colonial Other was not valued *per se*, but as an effect of the successful policies of the Empire, now trying to modernise its own discourse by replacing the older Victorian model of conquest and exploitation by one of development and productivity.

4 From Defoe and Kipling to Stevenson and Haggard, colonial fiction has evidenced Western fascination with the figure of the cannibal in its embodiment of the fears and fantasies about the unknown. For further reading on cannibalism and its impact on the colonial construction of the Other, see Barker, Hulme and Iversen, eds. (1998); and Brown (2013).

5 A further ironic twist to all this interplay of consuming and consumable subjects is offered by the protagonist's name resembling that of *Queen* Victoria, who, to a great extent, derived her empire's wealth from the corporeal exploitation of black men.

6 Black bodies have been consistently subjected to ethnographic scrutiny and were commonly exhibited as colonial oddities, the most prominent example of these freak shows being that of the Khoisan woman Saartjie Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus", displayed along European stages between 1810 and 1815 because her prominent buttocks (a symptom scientifically labelled as *steatopygia*) made a very profitable spectacle. She became an example of racial and sexual exploitation which continued even after her death when her genitals, brain and skeleton were kept on public display at the Musée de L'Homme (Paris) until 1976. After years of oblivion, interest in her fate revived in post-apartheid South Africa, and in 2002 her mortal remains returned to her homeland for official burial in what meant the reassertion of her degraded identity and the acknowledgment of past atrocities (McGreal 2002).

7 For further knowledge on the European media response to the refugee crisis, see "Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries". Report prepared for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (December 2015) by Mike Berry, Inaki Garcia-Blanco, Kerry Moore.

8 Though literally denoting a barrier designed to stop the spread of infectious diseases, the French term can be also used metaphorically to refer to different containment practices intended to prevent any form of ideological and moral contagion. Various modes of racial hostility and prejudice inspired by the "keeping Britain white" sentiment exemplify the post-war enactment of a *cordon sanitaire* to protect the "mother country" from the undesirable consequences of black immigration.

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