The Peripheral Other and the Construction of New Social Relations in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

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Abstract

Andrea Levy begins her story in *Small Island* (2004) with a prologue that speaks of the gathering of colonial subjects at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition. Although the colonial subjects are portrayed as uncivilized and as the peripheral Other, the Exhibition sets the stage for alterity in social relations and in the rewriting of history that renders the former members of British colonies invisible through an encounter between an African man and young Queenie, portrayed as the archetypal figure of England, the Mother Country. By offering to shake hands with Queenie rather than be spoken about, the African man not only changes Queenie's perception about Africa but also speaks himself into subjectivity. The quest to reposition oneself becomes a leitmotif in the narrative as events and human contacts offer new perspectives for both Black and White people to reconstruct their identities. Significant is the fact that Black women are in the forefront of this reverse colonization as they take up the responsibility of nurturing a new British multicultural society and fostering new social relations as Hortense does in the novel. Hortense's ability to reposition herself socially and historically paves the way for her to construct what I have termed a "rhizomatic womb-space"—a social, creative, ideological, and biological space through which women conceive, nurture, and offer new social relations built not on the either/or dichotomy that gender, class, race, and nationality evoke, but on fluid identity formations and social relations. She not only becomes the voice that opens and ends this important narrative but also is the lone voice that speaks of the birth and nurturing of a new British multicultural society. The history rewritten through the birth of Queenie's biracial child is one of conquest, resilience, resistance, love, inclusion, and emplacement. It is one made possible through the restructuring of sociohistorical narratives and repositioning of various characters. In this paper, I will pay particular attention to the encounters between the immigrants and the host community and their outcomes, especially in ways in which they challenge their portrayal as the peripheral Other through dialogue, questioning, and the representation of themselves and their rich cultural heritage. I argue that while these migrants/colonial subjects are framed in history and in the minds of Britons as the peripheral Other, these encounters and their position as insider/outsider provide them the opportunity to reposition themselves and speak themselves to subjectivity.

Andrea Levy commence le récit de *Small Island* (2004) par un prologue qui évoque le rassemblement de sujets coloniaux à l'occasion de l'Exposition impériale britannique de 1924. Bien que les sujets coloniaux soient dépeints comme non civilisés, comme cet Autre périphérique, l'exposition ouvre la voie de l'altérité dans les relations sociales. À travers la rencontre entre un Africain et la jeune Queenie – présentée comme la figure archétypale de l'Angleterre, de la mère patrie – l'exposition ouvre la voie à la réécriture de l'histoire, une histoire qui avait jusque-là omis de mentionner les anciens membres des colonies britanniques. En proposant de serrer la main de Queenie plutôt que de laisser les autres le définir, l'Africain modifie non seulement la perception que cette dernière a de l'Afrique, mais il affirme aussi sa subjectivité. La quête d'un nouveau positionnement devient un leitmotiv dans le récit, car les événements et les contacts humains offrent de nouvelles perspectives aux Noirs et aux Blancs afin de reconstruire leur identité. Il est important de remarquer que les femmes noires sont en première ligne de cette colonisation inversée puisqu'elles ont pour responsabilité l'émergence d'une nouvelle société britannique multiculturelle. Elles doivent aussi favoriser la création de nouvelles relations sociales, comme le fait notamment Hortense dans le roman. La capacité d'Hortense à se positionner socialement et historiquement lui permet de construire ce que j'ai appelé un « espace utérin rhizomatique » – un espace social, créatif, idéologique et biologique à travers lequel les femmes conçoivent, nourrissent et proposent de nouvelles relations sociales fondées non pas sur la dimension binaire des concepts de genre, classe, race et nationalité, mais sur des formations identitaires et des relations sociales fluides. Elle devient non seulement la voix qui ouvre et termine ce récit, mais aussi la seule voix qui parle de la naissance

et de l'épanouissement d'une nouvelle société britannique multiculturelle. L'histoire réécrite à travers la naissance de l'enfant métis de Queenie est celle de la conquête, de la résilience et de la résistance, de l'amour, de l'inclusion et du repositionnement. Elle est rendue possible par la restructuration des récits sociohistoriques et le repositionnement de divers personnages. Dans cet article, j'accorderai une attention toute particulière aux rencontres entre les immigrés et la communauté d'accueil ainsi qu'aux conséquences de ces rencontres et à la manière dont le statut des migrants se trouve démystifié à travers le dialogue, le questionnement et les représentations que ces derniers se font d'eux-mêmes et de leur riche héritage culturel. Je soutiens qu'en dépit du fait que ces migrants, ces sujets coloniaux, sont représentés dans l'histoire et dans l'esprit des Britanniques comme l'Autre périphérique, ces rencontres ainsi que l'ambivalence du statut de ces migrants, à cheval entre appartenance et marginalisation, leur donnent l'occasion de se repositionner et d'exprimer leur subjectivité.

Keywords

Rhizomatic womb-space, social relations, migration, postwar, Black people, peripheral Other, multiculturalism, emplacement, and herstory

Espace utérin rhizomatique, relations sociales, migration, après-guerre, personnes noires, Autre périphérique, multiculturalisme, repositionnement et féministoire

Central to Andrea Levy's *Small Island* is the mass migration of members of British former colonies to Britain in 1948 and their contributions to the redefinition of British society and national identities. The novel, which begins with the female protagonist, Hortense's quest to migrate to England to join her husband, Gilbert, explores the challenges immigrants face in finding a home in England in the postwar period. Although lack of housing, jobs, discrimination, and displacement are some of the initial challenges they face, Levy makes room for (re)negotiation through dialogues and cultural exchanges both in the pre-war and post-war moments. The birth of Queenie's biracial child conceived during the war creates not only an opportunity for a British multicultural society to emerge, but also provides a unique opportunity for Black and White people to unite as they try to find a better home for the child. The nurturing of this child left in the hands of Black people helps to reposition them as they move from the margin to the center to become the face of a new multicultural society that the child symbolizes.

The Empire and the Peripheral Other in the Pre-War Moment

Andrea Levy, a Black British writer of a mixed-race identity, opens her story with a prologue that speaks of the gathering of colonial subjects at the British Empire Exhibition that took place in Wembley in 1924. As Queenie—a White British woman that is portrayed in the novel as the archetypal figure of England, the Mother Country—notes, the Exhibition is meant to show "the whole Empire in little" (2). Thus, while the Exhibition has in attendance people from different colonies, what is remarkable is not the people but the goods they produce. As Queenie explains, on display are "the coffee of Jamaica. (…) the sugar of Barbados. (…) the chocolate of Grenada. (…) a lifesize model of the Prince of Wales made in yellow butter. (…) The smell of tea in Ceylon" (3-4). In referencing these products from the different colonies, Queenie underscores how the British nation depended on the goods and services of the colonized nations for its development and sustenance. As Shane Graham notes, "[T]he fact that the stereotyped 'essence' of each colony is so often represented by a trade (…) points to the Empire Exhibition's commodification of ethnicity and its repression of colonial history beneath a narrative of the economic and cultural benefits of imperialism" (442). In other words, undergirding the exhibition is the display of wealth garnered through many years of imperialism rather than the representation of the colonial subjects and their history. As Graham further explains, the Empire Exhibition, which was inaugurated on St. George's day in April 1924, had as its main purpose the celebration of Empire trade and wealth. According to the official guidebook:

> The purpose of the Wembley exhibition was [t]o find, in the development and utilization of the raw materials of the Empire, new sources of Imperial wealth. To foster inter-Imperial trade and open fresh world markets for Dominion and home products. To make the different races of the British Empire better known to each other, and to demonstrate to the people of Britain the almost illimitable possibilities of the Dominions, Colonies, and Dependencies overseas. (Graham 444)

Thus, in opening up the colonies to trade, as Graham notes, "the Empire likewise commodified their cultures and rendered them as stereotypes that obscured true memories of colonial relations and a precolonial past" (444). Conversely, in speaking of goods rather than human subjects, Queenie depicts an old history that is shaped by human conquest and colonialism. It is a history that has been handed down from generation to generation and one that elevates the British Empire so that the whole world is under it. Thomas Bonnici attributes the commodification of the colonial subjects to ingrained racism and argues that this form of racism

> makes the colonial subject invisible, which may be another way of detecting, perhaps anachronically, an incipient financialization of the globe, even though labour migrancy is not implied at the moment. The event by which the muted native is brought to Britain in another different type of diaspora suppresses the possibility of any decolonization project and reaffirms the colonizing convictions of the Other. (90)

Although the colonial subjects are rendered invisible during this historical moment, I argue that Levy not only gives them a voice to speak, but also places their history side by side with the dominant history to confront the narrow Eurocentric representation of British history and its relationship with other nations, especially colonized ones. I posit that it is at that moment that the colonial subjects begin to re-articulate their identities, question their displacement in British history and polity in order to establish their personhood, as seen in the interaction between Queenie and the African man. Thus, in speaking themselves into subjectivity, the colonial subjects offer new social relations that are built on mutual respect rather than racial hierarchy. As Wendy Knepper remarks, *Small Island* "remaps our understanding of the histories, places, and peoples, before and after *Windrush*[1] migration, in Jamaica and England as well as the wider world" (1). As she further notes, the "very structure of the narrative, composed of various first-person accounts expressing black and white and male and female perspectives, implies the need for equal representation and thus challenges colonial hierarchies" (1). In other words, there are multiple voices, rather than one voice, speaking of different histories ranging from the British Empire Exhibition to War World II to the *Windrush* historical moment. In an interview with Tracey Walters, Levy explains that:

> All my books are about me trying to explore my British Caribbean ancestry, and to place that heritage where I think it belongs—squarely in the mainstream of British history. Britain created those societies for better or for worse and she profited enormously from them. They have been relegated to the margins, or in the case of slavery, almost forgotten. I want to give them a voice, and make that voice an accepted part of our history. (n.pg)

By placing side by side the histories of the minority groups with the dominant British history, Levy accomplishes this task as she gives voice to the voiceless and in so doing brings to light the complex and interconnected histories that have come to define British multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural identities.

Undergirding Levy's narrative is, therefore, a journey of self-discovery and recovery for both

[1] *Empire Windrush* refers to the mass migration of about 492 Jamaicans to England on June 22, 1948. It derives its name from the ship, "HMT *Empire Windrush*" that conveyed this first-generation of Jamaican immigrants.

White and Black protagonists. The novel captures Black people's experiences in Britain before and after World War II. The story, which is told by four different first-person narrators—Gilbert and Hortense (a black couple), Bernard and Queenie (a white couple)—depicts the different journeys each of these characters must undertake to reconstruct their own identities and the different histories that shape those identities. The story is broadly divided into two temporal moments represented as "Before" and "1948"—and each of these moments reveals the tensions and changes that shape both their personal histories and the national ones. While the "Before" moments speak of events that took place before the post-war mass migration to England (in Jamaica, London, and in the lives of these different characters), "1948" speaks of the arrival of immigrants in London or what is generally referred to as the *Empire Windrush* and the changes that come as a result of their arrival.

While most of the events take place in London, Levy interweaves these events with other ones taking place in different locales, in her bid to defy a singular story and to deconstruct the myth of British homogeneous identity. She does this by giving each of the characters the opportunity to speak, each interpreting history and events as they impact his/her life. Thus, through multiple narratives and histories, Levy explores the impact of colonialism, slavery, and migration in the restructuring of British society. Conversely, the journeys upon which the characters embark, both physical and mental, cut across geographic, gender, and historical boundaries. There are movements to Jamaica, India, America and even within London. There are voices of men and women intersecting as they share their individual and collective stories. Thus, in all her novels, questions of identity, (un)belonging, nationality, and dislocation are raised. In telling these stories, Levy draws the attention of her readers to the struggles and challenges immigrants face in their bid to understand who they are and where they belong. For her, identity is an enigma because many immigrants still do not understand their identities as they straddle two or more cultures. Even after declaring Englishness as her birthright and England her home, in an interview with *The Guardian* in 2000, Levy shows how challenging these issues can be when she asks in that interview with *The Guardian*, "Identity! Sometimes it makes my head hurt—sometimes my heart. So what am I? Where do I fit into Britain, 2000 and beyond?"[2]

Levy understands how central the question of identity and (un)belonging is to the rewriting of history and gives the colonial subjects the opportunity to reassert and reposition themselves during the Empire Exhibition. The Exhibition, therefore, becomes a space of alterity and negotiation as perceptions about people and places change through interactions and social contacts. It is an enunciative space where new social relations are articulated. In other words, although the colonial subjects are portrayed as uncivilized and backward, the Exhibition provides them with a physical, ideological, and social space to begin to renegotiate their identities. For instance, the framing of British history that represents colonial subjects not only outside of history but also under British colonial rule is altered when Queenie encounters the African man. At first, when she finds herself in the exhibition section for Africans and their artifacts, what catches her interest is the location and positioning of the African people in a jungle. Her description of the place arises from the stereotypical image of Africa in the dominant history and the framing of members of the British colony as the peripheral Other:

> We were in the jungle. Huts made out of mud with pointy stick roofs all around us. And in a hut sitting on a dirt floor was a woman with skin as black as the ink that filled the inkwell in my school desk. A shadow come to life. Sitting cross-legged, her hands weaving bright patterned cloth on a loom. (…) I want to go, I said, because there was nothing interesting to look at. But then suddenly there was a man. An African man. (4)

[2] See: Interview with Betsy Reed. "This is my England." *The Guardian*, 18th February 2000, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/feb/19/society1.

The appearance of this man not only changes Queenie's perception of Africa, and by extension other colonies, but her worldview in general. This is because, in speaking, the African man changes the erroneous impression Queenie and others have about Africa as Graham—Queenie's father's employee—tells Queenie, "they're not civilized. They only understand drums" (5). However, the racial stereotype that depicts Africans as backward, uncivilized and as savages, as Graham evokes, changes as soon as Queenie encounters the African man.
The African man's ability to speak himself into subjectivity marks a turning point not only in his relationship with Queenie, but also in the relationship between the Empire and the colonies. Like other European characters who see the Other through the lens of internalized racial stereotypes, Queenie's initial description of the man is based on the social values ascribed to people outside of her European community. In her description, she commodifies the man, showing what is of value to Britain in terms of its business in the colonies:

> [H]e looked to be carved from melting chocolate. (…) 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. (5)

Jewels, black wool, bicycle tires, train tunnels, and melting chocolates that the man is associated with only commodify him, thereby depriving him of his humanity. Similarly, the representation of these colonies by their trade goods shows not only the commodification of individuals but also of ethnicities on the one hand, and on the other hand, it represents the cultural and economic benefits of colonialism and imperialism to Britain. These goods, which are finished products from different parts of the world, also showcase the expansiveness of the Empire in terms of power and control, which reaffirms Queenie's father's claim that Britain has the world at its feet (6). As Sarah Brophy notes, "Queenie's equation of the African man with the chocolate insinuates, moreover, that the crowds were being invited to consume not only the goods but also the Exhibition staff, as commodities that offer pleasure to the visitors but which are granted no significant material histories of their own" (9). However, on shaking his hand, Queenie is forced to look beyond such commodification to acknowledge his humanity, as she observes that he is indeed human, just like any other European: "It was warm and slightly sweaty like anyone else's. I shook his hand up and down for several seconds" (5). Thus, while acknowledging the African man's humanity, Queenie admits her physical attraction to him and by extension to Africa in general. As Alicia Ellis explains, this encounter shapes Queenie's understanding of "cultural, racial, and erotic identities" (77). However, as Brophy argues, while this brief encounter may be read in terms of its commodification of both goods and human beings, it can also be read as constituting a diasporic space—a space which Queenie seeks to control. This contested and new diasporic space offers them an opportunity to move beyond any previous knowledge (or stereotype on the part of Queenie) in order to forge a new social relation.
Significantly, in speaking and in negating his social position as a second-class citizen, the man disrupts the racial hierarchy that silences and renders him invisible. Prompted by her companions—Graham and Emily—to kiss the African man, Queenie moves forward to do so. However, contrary to their assumption that the man does not understand English, the African man understands the taunting and responds, to the amazement of everyone. When he finally speaks in English, he shows his resistance to racial stereotypes by offering a new model of social integration, one based on equal social relations. When he tells Queenie, "perhaps we could shake hands instead" (5), he is not only negating the racial prejudice that has undermined cordial relationship between the Empire and its colonies but also suggests it is worthwhile to

recognize and acknowledge the presence of colonial subjects at this historical moment. By offering to shake hands, he makes a case for an equal relationship rather than the power imbalance that informed colonial enterprise in the first place. Also, by negating his social position and his stereotypical portrayal by British people, the African man not only shows his humanity but also his desire to reconstruct his identity. Put differently, his statement gives him a voice to speak and in so doing disrupts the social hierarchy. Thus, instead of looking up to Queenie—the archetypal figure of the Mother country—the man looks down at her. As Queenie notes, "the man was still looking down at me. I could feel the blood rising in my face, turning me crimson" (5). His return gaze does not only make Queenie uncomfortable but also unseats her and the rest of her group. As Queenie explains, Graham's smile falls off his face as soon as the man returns his gaze and shakes hands with Queenie not as one under her but as her equal or even a better person.

The shaking of hands breaks Queenie's initial barrier as it brings them together in a warm embrace. It is also suggestive of Queenie's awareness of the possible demise of the Empire and the construction of a new space for both the natives and their visitors. More so, this scene also helps to explain Queenie's disposition to inter-racial relationships, as one sees later in the narrative. The demise of the Empire signals the loss of British homogeneous identity and its hegemonic rule on the members of its former colonies. With this loss, Britain ceases to be the world superpower. Significantly, the loss of the Empire provides room for the construction of an alternative national identity, which is realized through the creation of a diaspora space. As Brophy notes, the changes that occur because of this contact can be interpreted as constitutive of creating a diaspora space as "both migrants and natives are implicated in, and changed by, migration to a region" (2). However, just as the Empire thrives with power imbalance, the new diaspora space that emerges from this contact is replete with power, with both Queenie and the African man seeking to dominate the space. As noted earlier, the African man's refusal to allow Queenie to kiss him, but rather asking that they shake hands, is suggestive of his objection to Queenie dominating this space.

This "prologue" sets the pace for the changes that one sees taking place in the rest of the narrative not only in terms of the encounter between the Empire and its colonies, but also the position of colonial subjects in the post-war period. It also marks the beginning of a transition and change in history and human relations as these subjects, though marginalized and silenced in history, seek to renegotiate their identities as they move from the margin to the center. As one sees later in the narrative, Queenie's relationship with Michael, a member of the RAF from Jamaica, soon after the war is influenced by the brief encounter that she has with the African man. As she notes, on seeing Michael, what comes to her mind immediately is her experience at the Empire Exhibition: "The RAF man's hand was raised almost in salute, ready to knock at the door once more. But that wasn't the first thing I noticed. I was lost in Africa again at the Empire Exhibition" (240). Thus, her encounter with the African man not only helps her in building a good interpersonal relationship with people of color but also helps in rewriting history through the biracial child that she has with Michael. As evidenced in the interaction and encounter between Queenie and the African man, the relationship between the Empire and its colonies has been informed by conquest, unequal power relations, uneven wealth distribution, and dominance. However, these one-sided relationships take a new form during the war and its aftermath when the colonized subjects begin to reassess and reassert their social positions. Their contact with the English people outside their own native homes—during the war and in the post-war migration—gives them the opportunity to begin to question their subjugation. As Gilbert asks during the war: "How come England did not know me?" (117). His questioning and the sense of disillusionment about his mistreatment by the Mother Country come from the belief that they are a part of the British national culture and identity when they were called upon to defend Britain in World War II. Their sense of belonging also comes as a result of the colonial

experience and education through which they are taught to regard England as a mother country. While in Jamaica, they are exposed to English culture and tradition and as such internalize these cultural values, often at the expense of their own culture. As Levy notes in "This is my England," "Britain was the country that all Jamaican children learned about at school. They sang God Save The (*sic*) King and Rule Britannia. They believed Britain was a green and pleasant land—if not the centre of the world, then certainly the centre of a great and important Empire that spanned the globe, linking all sorts of countries into a family of nations."[3] For these Jamaicans, England is not only a center of excellence or an epitome of civilization, but a nation of power and wealth. However, on arriving in London, they realize that they are neither recognized nor accepted in England by the mother country. Their denial of a sense of belonging stems from the old social relations that informed colonialism and imperialism where they are seen and treated as the peripheral Other when compared to their white counterparts.

Construction of a New World Order

Despite the treatment of Black people as the peripheral Other, Levy provides them the opportunity to reimagine and create "a new world order" that is geared towards tolerance and accommodation of different cultural values, traditions, and individual perspectives. It is "a new world order" that is constructed from multifaceted or multiple histories, journeys, and cultures. As Maria Dolce notes, the novel prefigures "a new world order in which a peaceful and harmonious communion could take place provided that we are all prepared to call into question our comfortable assumptions and beliefs and to accept mobility and change" (133). In view of the racial inequalities that hamper good social relations prevalent in the post-war period, Levy argues that there is a need to reassess the different positions in order to build new personal and national identities. This new identity formation, as Stuart Hall states, comes at "a point at which, on the one hand, a whole set of new theoretical discourses intersect and where, on the other hand, a whole set of new cultural practices emerge" (42). To develop this "new world order," Levy asserts that older, dominant historical narratives as well as the social relations that relegate the colonial subjects to the background and render invisible a particular group of people must be revisited and re-evaluated for, as Hall contends, "there is no English history without that other history" (49). This entails questioning the constitution of national boundaries and social identity or, what Homi Bhabha, refers to as "metaphor of landscape as the inscape" (205). In other words, it entails a reconstitution of national boundaries constructed basically on the physical landscape in order to include other aspects of life that transcend fixed national boundaries and identities. As Bhabha notes:

> The recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression. There is, however, always the distracting presence of another temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of national presence. (205)

The other "distracting presence" denotes the unavoidable presence of minority groups that disrupt the British national imaginary as a homogenous and an insular nation. In other words, their presence cracks the walls of Britain as a bounded territory or nation. As Bhabha notes, there is always a double time or a splitting moment (which Bhabha explains manifested in the dividing and the interchanging of the self) in the construction of any nation space that undermines any attempt to read the national space as a coherent whole. Thus, in space and in

[3] Interview with Betsy Reed. "This is my England." *The Guardian*, 18th February 2000, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/feb/19/society1.

time, the construction of a national identity is never complete as it is always disrupted by various mechanisms or events that occur at various temporal moments—past, present, and future. By implication, the construction of a British national identity cannot be fully articulated without the history of these former colonial subjects, for these minority groups have become an integral part of British national life. In this regard, any attempt to construct or write British history without acknowledging Britain's contacts with its colonies creates a void that, as Bhabha states above, becomes the "temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of national presence." In fact, Hall expresses more clearly the unavoidable presence of the colonial subjects in the life of the British nation when he describes them as "the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea (…) the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth" (48). In other words, the roles that the colonial subjects played in building the British Empire cannot be overlooked in the writing of British history for they constitute an unavoidable presence in Britain, as Hall suggests. In this vein, the colonies have become an integral part of Britain so that one cannot talk of one country without the other. Thus, for Levy, the narrative of the nation cannot be constructed without the incorporation of the minority discourses and the voices of minority groups.

The birth of Queenie's illegitimate biracial child can also be read as that "distracting presence," though neglected for a long time, that needs to be incorporated into British national imaginary. Not only does it evoke the long history of colonialism, but this child's birth opens up a new discourse on social relations between Britain and its former colonies. Queenie's child, conceived during the war, disrupts the homogenous culture that has come to define British national identity and also introduces a new culture and presence. The presence of the child at a time when Black people are not welcomed in England therefore pushes for recognition, acceptance, and a space of its own. His presence suggests that there is a need to re-evaluate Britain's relationship with its former colonies at this historical moment.

As earlier indicated, Britain has erroneously considered itself as an insular nation or bounded territory. Although it has maintained social relations with its former colonies, it has deliberately erased the presence of these people from its national history. Prior to the post-war moment, biracial children were often seen as contaminated species, hence the clamor to maintain pure racial identity. As Robert Young contends in *Colonial Desire,* the fear of miscegenation has been at the heart of British social relations with members of its former colonies. For instance, he notes that Edward Long, a Jamaican slave-owner, argues in his influential book, *History of Jamaica in 1774*, that, "for my own part, I think there are extremely potent reasons for believing that the White and the Negro are two distinct species" (Young 6). Henry Hotze shares a similar view with Edward Long as he contends that racial difference is a permanent phenomenon:

> It is enough that, so far as the records of human existence can be traced, the distinctions of race were what we find them now; and that, therefore, we are justified in regarding them as being permanent in the only sense in which any earthly phenomenon can be called permanent. With the origin of species, we are not called upon to concern ourselves, the fact of specific difference suffices us. So long as the world of which we know has existed, the Negro has been a Negro, the Asiatic an Asiatic, the Caucasian a Caucasian; and we must conclude, therefore, that these distinctions will continue as long as the races continue to exist. (Young 13)

The clamor for separating different races was largely because in their bid to preserve racial purity, many people associated hybridity with infertility and thus argued that the two "races" should be kept distinct.

Although discourse on "race" is an age-long literary and political engagement that extends even beyond the sixteenth century, Levy contends that until this issue is addressed, the notion of a multicultural British society remains only an illusion. Her argument is similar to Paul Gilroy's

contention that, "racial hierarchy structures the life of this city in multiple ways" (59). In view of this, Gilroy contends that "before we can plausibly post anything (…) we have to produce histories of the city in this century which allow the presence of diverse colonial peoples and their stubbornly non-colonial descendants a far greater significance than they have been allowed in the past" (60). Thus, the birth of Queenie's child provides various characters the opportunity to begin to address the place and position of biracial children and the interracial relationships that produce them. In other words, it provides an opportunity to articulate questions of race and identity in Britain in a way that could lead to building a sustainable multicultural and inclusive British society.

The birth of Queenie's child also becomes an avenue through which Levy seeks to explore and possibly resolve the tensions surrounding the presence of Black people in Britain during this historical moment as she repositions them to nurture the birth of a new nation that the child symbolizes. Levy uses the story of Gilbert and Hortense to show the struggles of Black people and their quest for inclusion during and after the War. As Gilbert notes, his return to England is instigated by his desire to find a better job opportunity as he considers himself a part of English culture and national identity, but this is not so. Hortense explains, "returning to England was more than an ambition for Gilbert Joseph. It was a mission, a calling, even a duty. This man was so restless he could not stay still. Always in motion he was agitated, impatient—like a petulant boy waiting his turn at cricket. He told me opportunity ripened in England as abundant as fruit on Jamaican trees. And he was going to be the man to pluck it" (81). England, for Gilbert, becomes a place where he seeks to fulfill his dream, not only in finding a job, but also in building a home for himself. However, on returning to England, he finds all doors closed to him as he is constantly reminded that he is outside of British history and society:

> 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. Man, these English landlords and ladies could come up with excuses. If I had been in uniform—still a Brylcreem boy in blue—would they have seen me different? Would they have thanked me for the sweet victory, shaken my hand and invited me in for tea? Or would I still see that look of quiet horror pass across their smiling face like a cloud before the sun, while polite as nobility they inform me the room has gone? Or listen as they let me know, so gently spoken. "Well, I would give it to you only I have lots of lodgers and they wouldn't like it if I let it to a coloured." Making sure I understand, "It's not me—if it was just me I'd let you" before besmirching the character of some other person who, I assured, could not bear the sight of me. 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 come among them. (177)

Underlying such denial of even a place to live are racial tensions arising from Britain's portrayal of members of its former colonies as savages and contaminated species. As Kim Evelyn contends, "this illogical fear is always based on change, regardless of whether it is legitimate or not. Because the concepts of the nation of Britain and Britishness rely on the perceived value and defense of tradition, politicians like Powell emphasize the past, such as when he evokes 'a thousand years of English history'" (140). Like Enoch Powell who alleges that Britons are displaced from their rightful positions by immigrants, Queenie expresses this fear as she recalls the criticism that she receives from her neighbors for lodging Black immigrants. As Queenie explains, her neighbor, Blanche, blames her for her displacement from a house that her family has owned for many generations. Blanche claims she no longer feels safe in her house with the arrival of immigrants. She considers the presence of immigrants threatening not only to her but also to her husband and her two little children: "And she told me she had her two little girls' welfare to think of. Gilbert raised his hat to her one morning. She rushed into her house like

he'd just exposed himself. (…) All those coons eyeing her and her daughters up every time they walked down to a semi-detached house in Broomley" (98). Blanche is not the only one afraid of Black people or whose "honour" is threatened by their presence; Bernard also sees the presence of Black people as a threat to his country and seeks to evict them from his house when he returns from India after the war. Bernard's fear is not only that they compete for a space with him (both in terms of a physical location and a cultural space) but also that their very presence disrupts the culture and tradition that he holds so dear. He sees them as savages who are not used to British civilization: "These coloured people don't have the same standards. I'd seen it out east. Not used to our ways. (…) These brown gadabouts were nothing but trouble. (…) It would be a kindness to return them to the backward place they came from" (389).
However, that Queenie's child is not only born in a house that Bernard holds so dear because of its legendary status, but also welcomed into it by Bernard, marks a turn in the renegotiation of social relations as it helps to resolve some of the tensions that have hampered mutual understanding and respect in the past.

Hortense's Rhizomatic Womb-Space, Her-story, and the Birth of a New Nation

Bernard and Queenie's house can be read as a metaphor for the British nation. This is because much of what one knows about the characters takes place at Queenie's house—the tension surrounding their occupation of the house, their inclusion and exclusion from the house, which in this narrative is depicted as the microcosm of British society, induction into British ethical and cultural values, (re)negotiation of identity, discussion of historical past, and plans for the future. As Corinne Duboin contends, the house is "an in-between space, a place of interaction that reveals the nation's racial divide" (14). Thus, the birth of the child gives the main characters the opportunity to come to terms with the inevitable changes taking place in England and the undeniable truth that Black people have come to stay and should be given a cultural and physical space of their own. Thus, contrary to Bernard's opposition to having Black tenants in his house, one sees him accepting Queenie's child and considering offering him a space in his house even though he knows that he is not the father.
Conversely, if one takes Queenie's house as an allegory of the nation, one sees the social transformation that takes place with the arrival of immigrants. As the novel reveals, Bernard's and Queenie's house is legendary because of its historical background. Reflecting on the importance of the room that Gilbert occupies in his house, Bernard notes that the room is not only important because of the many white births that it produced but also of its vantage position, as his mother used to see the city from there:

> Ma used to use this room. Sewing, mending, reading and suchlike. Always when I lost her, me a little boy, I would climb the stairs. If the door was closed I knew she was there. I'd tap three times, softly. (…) Only then she'd tell me to come in. (…) Pa rarely came up here. (…) 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 without anyone realizing, she said. It was the top of her world. (338)

In other words, the house is an enclosed space occupied only by White British citizens. However, Hortense and Gilbert's occupation of this room displaces Bernard from his homogenous White culture and the history that shapes it and literally places Hortense and Gilbert above Bernard and Queenie, who live below them. Hortense notes that she has to climb many stairways to reach the room and each step she takes moves her farther away from the ground and by implication, from Queenie and Bernard. The stairways become a liminal space[4]

[4] The term, "liminality" comes from the Latin word "limen" which means threshold. In his 1960 book, *The Rites*

and a pathway to social elevation as Hortense and Gilbert rise above their social position as the "wretched of the earth." As Bhabha contends in *The Location of Culture*:

> 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 the 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. (4)

Hortense's occupation of the room allows her to see the world from there. Like Queenie, whose father informs her after her encounter with the African man that the world is under her feet, Hortense's position at the house places the world under her feet as she is privileged to spy the world from there just like Bernard's mother. By extension, she not only takes her place in British society but gazes back at its citizens.

It is also significant to note that it is from her position as the nurturer of a new nation that Hortense delivers Queenie of her baby. The child becomes the arc that connects Hortense to different places and things. The child connects her to Queenie and the British cultural heritage and becomes the bridge that links the domestic space to the public. Thus, by delivering and nurturing the baby, Hortense helps in the building of a new multiracial society that the child symbolizes. Conversely, she draws attention to the position of (Black) women in the reconstruction, reframing, and re-narration of British historical narrative and identity.[5] By performing these roles, Hortense silences and displaces Queenie, and other male characters in the novel to occupy a prime place in the rewriting of history. By locking men out of the feminine space (the "birth-place" where Queenie's child is delivered) she becomes the voice through which both the delivery of Queenie's biracial child and its underlying history is told. Thus, while Bernard and Gilbert are fighting over the custody of Gilbert's rented room—a room associated with white births and British homogenous culture—Hortense and Queenie are creating an alternative space for a new birth of a nation and a people. The alternative birthplace is significant because it symbolizes rebirth, fluidity, multiracial, and multiethnic identities. In other words, this "'birth-place" becomes a liminal space where identities are contested and renegotiated. It is at this "birth-place" that Gilbert questions Bernard's racial identity, superiority, and homogenous culture to call for a need to work together to build and nurture a multiracial society that Queenie's child symbolizes.

The *her-story*[6] that Hortense reconstructs from this vantage point speaks of inclusion, especially of the minority voices and groups that she represents. More importantly, she subverts the racist ideology that Bernard and his likes embody. On many occasions, Bernard stands in strong opposition to the presence of Black people in Britain. As he argues after the war, "the war was fought so people might live amongst their own kind. Everyone had a place. England for the

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of Passage, Arnold van Gennep, defines it as a new beginning and a transitional step in rites of passage. For van Gennep, to "cross the threshold is to unite oneself to a new world" (20).

[5] In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that nationalism comes not so much from political ideologies but from cultural systems that preceded it. As such nations can be imagined and stories of origins of nationhood can be retold to create new boundaries.

[6] "Her-story" or "herstory" is a term that denotes history written from a feminist perspective in order to portray the experiences of women. It is an alteration of history as many feminist scholars believe that history was written from a masculine point of view and as such it becomes "his-story." Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "history emphasizing the role of women or told from a woman's point of view; (also) a piece of historical writing by or about women." Casey Miller and Kate Swift explain in their book, *Words and Women*, that "when women in the movement use herstory, their purpose is to emphasize that women's lives, deeds, and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued in standard histories" (146).

English and the West Indies for these coloured people. (…) I've nothing against them in their place. But their place isn't here" (388-9). But Hortense demonstrates that Black people have come to stay and be a part of English society. *Her-story* as Stuart Hall contends "breaks down boundaries, between outside and inside, between those who belong and those who do not, between those whose histories have been written and those whose histories they have depended on but whose histories cannot be spoken" (48). In other words, her rewriting of history becomes a rhizomatic womb-space through which she critiques the polar divisions that characterize British relationships with other nations.

The rhizomatic womb-space is a term I coined from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of rhizome, on the one hand and from Ancient Greek theory of the wandering uterus/womb, on the other hand. The rhizomatic womb-space pushes for new social formations and relations that are informed by multiplicity, divergence, and connectivity. As Deleuze and Guattari explain in their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, the rhizome gives room for multiplicity and interconnectivity and establishes a non-hierarchical relationship where different unrelated things are connected (6-7). The rhizome resists fixed points of emergence and rootedness. According to them, "when a rhizome is broken in one location, it emerges elsewhere with multiple openings and growths" (9). In this regard, a rhizome does not produce a single trait but leads to other connections, thereby creating multi-dimensional assemblages that can come from one of its old lines or a completely new line. Thus, the rhizome defies any rigid classification as it seeks to disrupt even the root that produces it. In connecting the concept of the rhizome to the Ancient Greek theory of the "wandering womb," my goal is to show how women have not only resisted their subjugation but have also redefined themselves through migration and other cultural and social relations.

As a theoretical construct, the rhizomatic womb-space is defined as a site of radical openness that pushes for new social formations and relations that are informed by multiplicity, divergence, connectivity, and quest for change. It is a social, creative, intellectual, and ideological (feminine) space that is interested in questions of identity, gender, (un)belonging, and the critical interventions that women make in their immediate families and nations at large. It is also a biological space that explores mother-child relationship and how women have been able to redefine the sociocultural and political landscapes through childbearing and rearing. In situating characters in a rhizomatic womb-space, therefore, what is important is not race, class, gender, or nationality but making connections, giving voice to the voiceless, redefining women's social positioning, and fostering new social relations geared towards creating a conducive environment for people as well as breaking not just one new ground but multiple ones as people begin to question and critique the binary oppositions that set them apart, and to create new spaces for minority voices to be heard and for minority stories to be retold.

The *her-story* that Hortense constructs from this rhizomatic womb-space is a subversive one that is geared towards fostering new social relations and giving voice to the voiceless. Not only is she a Black woman speaking about the changes taking place in England, but she also refuses to be seen and treated as a second-class citizen by the likes of Queenie and Bernard. *Her-story*, in other words, marks the moment of transition, transformation, and change taking place both in their personal lives and in the nation. Similarly, Hortense's rewriting of history can be read as colonization in reverse—not only because Hortense and other immigrants are demanding their rightful positions in post-war Britain but also because they are actively engaged in redefining and rewriting British history and cultural identities. By colonizing England in reverse, these immigrants are able to write themselves back into history as their presence changes the alleged homogenous British culture into a multicultural one. Significantly, the new narrative is told by a colonial subject and a Black woman, two minority groups and identities that have been silenced in the British historical narrative. Thus, while Levy notes that the war has brought many White people to their knees, she contends that it empowers immigrants as

they are emboldened by their encounter with White people during the war to question their exclusion. Thus, the dissolution of the British Empire or what is metaphorically referred in the novel as "the war bringing the Europeans to their knees" (341), helps to usher in a new social order, one that is built on respect and the recognition of the important roles different people play in rebuilding the nation. The war also makes it possible for immigrants to renegotiate their identities and to build their diasporic homes as they move from their marginal position to the center. As Hortense explains:

> I never dreamed England would be like this. Come, in what crazed reverie would a white Englishwoman be kneeling before me yearning for me to take her black child. There was no dream I could conceive so fanciful. Yet there was Mrs. Bligh kneeling before Gilbert and I, her pretty blue eyes dissolving beneath a wash of tears, while glaring on we two Jamaicans, waiting anxious to see and call him our own? Not even Celia Langley, with her nose in the air and her head in a cloud, would have imagined something so preposterous of this Mother Country. (433)

This scene captures the transformation that is taking place in Britain, especially in terms of social relations. It portrays a moment in history when Britain is made aware that it can no longer continue to lay claim to its homogeneous culture but needs to come to equal terms with those other nations that have contributed to its growth, and whose presence it can no longer ignore. On the other hand, it depicts the crumbling of the Empire as Queenie—the archetypal figure of Mother Country—has been brought to her knees by the war and its aftermath.
While Queenie is brought to her knees, Hortense is elevated to the status of a Mother Country when she accepts the responsibility of nurturing Queenie's biracial child as her own. In other words, while the changes taking place have brought white Britons on their knees in different ways, immigrants are rising above these challenges as they refuse to be brought down on their knees again, regardless of their challenges. Gilbert attests to this when he tells Hortense that no wife of his will be on her knees for whatever reason: "I cannot see you on your knees so soon. I did not bring you to England to scrub a floor on your knees. No wife of mine will be on her knees in this country" (263). Thus, when Hortense and Gilbert leave Queenie's house, they have a house of their own and the new British national identity to nurture. Hortense's final encounter with Queenie and her exit from Queenie's house marks her severance from the culture of exclusion and its homogeneity as well as her silencing of Queenie—the old British Mother Country and all she represents to the Black immigrant community. Explaining this final moment with Queenie, Hortense states that she feels no remorse leaving Queenie and her house, especially in relation to the ways in which Queenie uses her position as the landlady to include and exclude Blacks from her house.

> No compunction caused me to look back with longing. No sorrow had me sigh on the loss of the gas-ring, the cracked sink, or the peeling plaster. At the door to Mrs. Bligh's home I stopped. I tapped gently three times. There was no reply. I tapped again, this time calling her name. Still no one came. (…) She was there—I knew. 'Goodbye, Queenie,' I called, but still she did not come. (438)

Thus, unlike Hortense who sees her marginal space as a site of power and resistance, Queenie's displacement leaves her trapped and powerless as the society transitions to a multicultural and multiethnic one.
The birth room, though a physical space, is also a radical and maternal womb-space that alters the existing social relations as it produces new ones needed to build a multicultural British society. It is a place where new birth, ideas, identities, and growth are nurtured and brought to life. For instance, when Bernard tells Gilbert that he is unworthy of taking care of Queenie's biracial child when Queenie pleads with him in the birth room to take the child as his, Hortense

explains that Gilbert:

> Sucked on his teeth to return to the man's scorn. 'You know what your trouble is, man? Your white skin. You think it makes you better than me. You think it give you the right to lord it over a black man. But you know what it make you? You wan' know what your white skin make you, man? It make you white. That is all, man. White. No better, no worse than me—we both just finish fighting a war—a bloody war—for the better world we wan' see. And on the same side—you and me. We both look on other men to see enemy. You and me, fighting for empire, fighting for peace. But still, after all that we suffer together, you wan' tell me I am worthless and you are not. Am I to be the servant and you are the master for all time? No stop this, man. Stop it now. We can work together, Mr. Bligh. You no see? We must. Or else you just gonna fight me till the end? (435)

Although Bernard declines Gilbert's call to build a multicultural British society together, Queenie and Hortense understand the need to do so and work towards making it a reality. This is demonstrated in the child they deliver together. It must be stated that Queenie's encounter with the African man in the prologue changes her worldview, especially her perception and relationship with minority groups. Unlike Bernard who refuses to change despite his encounter with the minority group during and after the war, Queenie's intracity movement connects her to different people and ideas that would later help her to develop an intimate relationship with Michael, a Jamaican soldier during the war, and would also consequently lead to the conception of a biracial child. Thus, when Queenie and Hortense deliver the baby, they demonstrate not only the position of women in the restructuring and nurturing of a new British society but most importantly of the nurturing of a multiracial society in the *womb-space.* They also bring to bear the role of women in nation building, as the domestic space becomes a microcosm of the British nation. As Hortense informs Bernard when he insists that they let him into the house, "it's just a women's matter, Mr. Bligh. Soon come. No worry! I told him through the wood every time I passed the opening. No man is required at a birth but any fool could see why Mr. Bligh would be considered an intruder" (396). Hortense is bold to state categorically that the nurturing of future Britain lies in the hands of women for the history that men have constructed is divisive and racial as demonstrated in the argument between Bernard and Gilbert. In view of this, she bars Bernard from entering this maternal womb-space of sociocultural rebirth as she considers him an intruder to the new world order that women construct.

Conversely, although Queenie and Hortense work together to deliver the baby, Queenie leaves the narration and reconstruction of this maternal history in the hands of Hortense. As Hortense indicates, Queenie is only a vessel through which the much-awaited change comes. Hortense refers to the baby as "a new life for this world" and goes on to state "it was only I who could perform this… task" (399), of not only welcoming and nurturing the new nation that the boy symbolizes but also in severing the tie between Queenie and the baby as she cuts the umbilical cord. Thus, the rhizomatic womb space that is opened through the birth of the child gives Hortense the opportunity to rewrite the dominant history to incorporate the voices of women and other minority groups that have been silenced in the old historical narrative. Her discourse—as Bhabha explains in "DissemiNation"—"contests genealogies of 'origin' that lead to claims for cultural supremacy and historical priority" (157). Similarly, the alternative new space they create, therefore, is one in which the minority voice can begin to articulate and reshape British identity differently. It is also one that invokes a different history—one not informed by colonialism, imperialism, and unequal power relations but one constructed and informed by love and mutual respect. As Queenie informs the reader, the baby is conceived out of love and mutual understanding. However, Queenie is aware that her house cannot provide a home and the comfort the baby needs to take on the challenges ahead of him, hence her desire to give him away to Hortense and Gilbert.

Hortense's rhizomatic womb-space, therefore, becomes one that produces social bodies and social relations that are needed for the new British nation. By being a site for reformation and reconstruction of social relations rather than one that gives birth to biological children, Hortense transcends the traditional gender roles that limit women to child-bearing and rearing. In other words, by taking the responsibility of nurturing this new birth and the new nation that it symbolizes, Hortense bridges the gap between the domestic and the private spheres as she demonstrates that women can be actively engaged in the two spheres without compromising one or the other. This is one of the interventions of the rhizomatic womb-space theory to place women at different strata of the society as they chart a new course for themselves. In this regard, Hortense's rhizomatic womb-space becomes a site for new beginnings for both Black and White people as she welcomes all to this new space regardless of race, culture, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sex. In many ways, she resists the racial stereotypes with which Black people have been associated to create a space of dialogue, renegotiation, and reformation geared towards social change. Like a rhizome that is broken, Hortense's rhizomatic womb-space emerges not from a single trait of either Black or White ideology but from multiple openings and growths. Thus, the Hortense that one sees at the end of the narrative is one that has not only reclaimed her true identity but has also redefined herself as she embraces her Black cultural heritage and British identities thereby making room for a fluid identity formation for her adopted child and a new British society that she nurtures in her rhizomatic womb-space. Her resilience and determination to build a new home in England regardless of her many challenges offer hope to many other minority groups who are faced with similar challenges as it encourages them not to give up in the fight for inclusion and racial justice.

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