

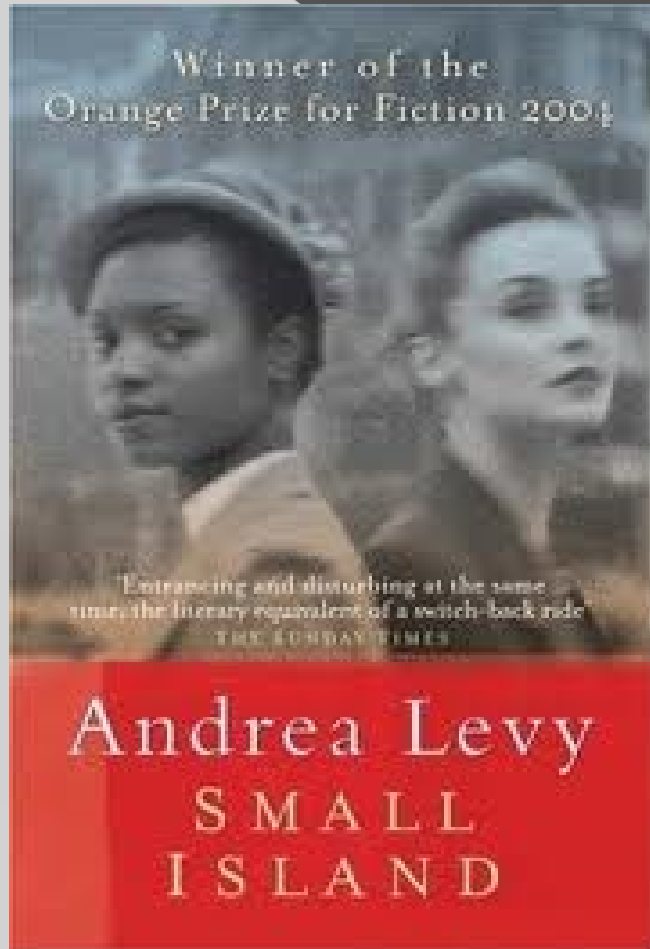
Revisioning Cultural Memory:
Alternative Narratives of 1940s Britain
in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

Sonya Andermahr,
University of Northampton
Sonya.andermahr@northampton.ac.uk

Outline

- ◉ *Small Island* as postcolonial 'trauma' novel that revises cultural memory of WWII
- ◉ Stef Craps' postcolonial critique of trauma theory's founding texts
- ◉ Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory
- ◉ Varieties of traumatic cultural memory in Levy's text
- ◉ Storytelling and humour as narrative healing of traumatic rupture and historical erasure

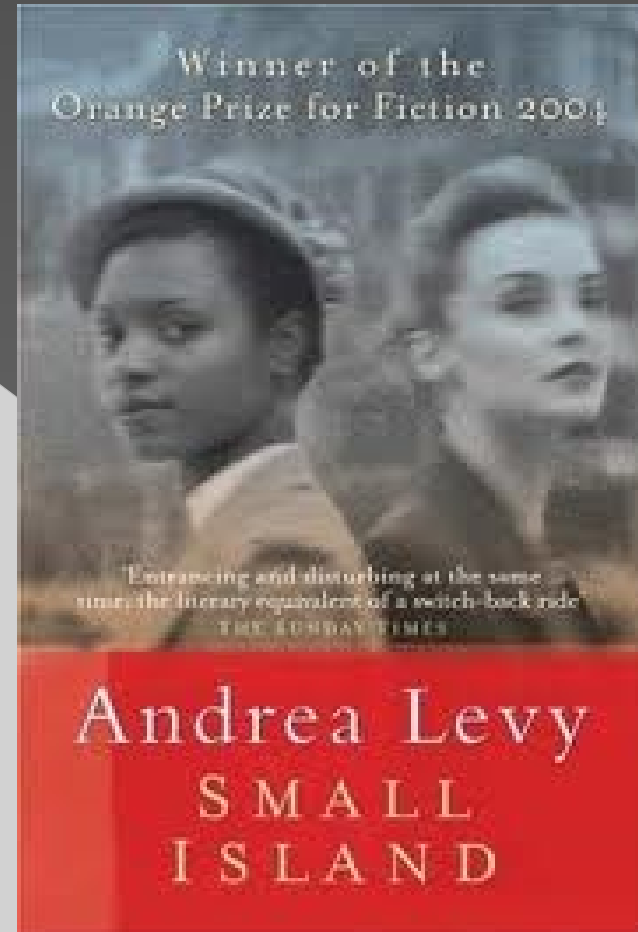
Small Island, Andrea Levy



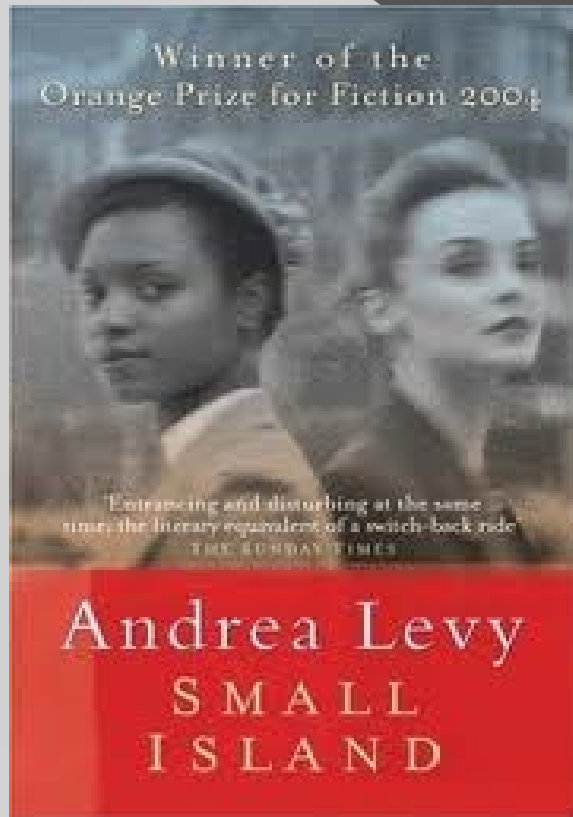
- Published in 2004
- Levy's 4th novel
- Winner of Orange, Whitbread, and Commonwealth Writer's prizes
- Tells hidden story of Black servicemen's contribution to WW2;
- Explores post-war 'Windrush' migration as traumatic rupture with past

Small Island

- ◉ Employs an aesthetic based not (only) on the dominant Western model of fragmentation, rupture and alienation but on the power of storytelling, narrative memory, and the use of humour.



Small Island



- Utilises a notion of cultural memory as 'multidirectional' rather than singular and competitive.

Levy on writing Caribbean history



- “A lot of the story about the Caribbean people think they know, but they don’t. I grew up thinking I was worthless and the story of the Caribbean was worthless. But I discovered that people were interested and wanted to know about it and understand it [...] Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out.”
- (www.andrealevy.co.uk)

Stef Craps, Decolonizing trauma theory: the four challenges

- 1. Redress the marginalization of non-Western and minority traumas
- 2. Challenge the supposed universal validity of Western definitions of trauma
- 3. Provide alternatives to normative trauma aesthetics
- 4. Address the underexplored relationship between First and Third World traumas.

Michael Rothberg, 'multidirectional memory'

- “What happens when different histories of extreme violence confront each other in the public sphere?”
- “Collective memories of seemingly distinct histories—such as those of slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism—are not so easily separable.” (Rothberg, ‘From Gaza to Warsaw’ 523-4)

Multidirectional Memory

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

Small Island: Four narrators, two time frames

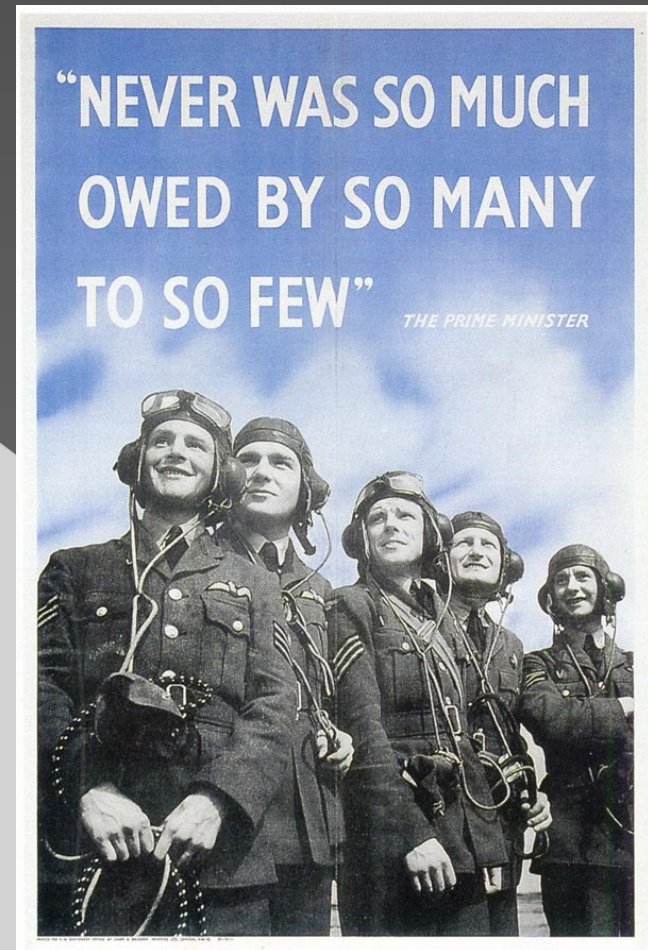
- Hortense - a Black, well-educated Jamaican woman who emigrates on The Windrush in 1948
- Gilbert - a Black Jamaican Man serving in the RAF in the UK and later emigrating
- Queenie - a white British working class woman running a boarding house
- Bernard - a white British middle class man posted to India and caught up in Partition strife.

- Before/1948



1. Challenging marginalization of non-Western and minority traumas

- ◉ Levy's coda
- ◉ Reorientates Churchill's 1940 homage to (white) RAF fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain to the unacknowledged contribution of Black service men and women in WWII.



West Indian servicemen

- In the West Indies, thousands of men joined the local home guard and the British Army. They were eventually sent to Europe for training, but few were allowed to fight on the front line. Approximately 5,500 West Indian RAF personnel came to Britain in 1944-5. From 1944, West Indian women served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) in Britain.
- (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar>)

Black servicemen's testimony

- ◉ Novel foregrounds experiences of Black servicemen through Gilbert's and Michael's stories:
- ◉ "It was inconceivable that we Jamaicans, we West Indians, we members of the British Empire would not fly to the Mother Country's defence when there was a threat." (Levy 142)

2. Challenging the universality of Western definitions of trauma

- “Cultural trauma theory continues to adhere to the traditional event-based model of trauma, according to which trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event.” (Craps 31)

Racism as challenge to event-based trauma model

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

Small Island – challenge to Western definitions of trauma

- ◉ Individual, social and institutional racism as traumatizing
- ◉ Racism experienced in the military by Black servicemen during wartime
- ◉ Experienced by migrants at all levels in post-war British society: housing, employment, everyday encounters

Post-war racism in housing - Gilbert

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

3. Providing alternatives to normative trauma aesthetics

- “Levy employs a non-linear narrative structure and four narrators ... to tell the story. In doing this, she addresses the historical rupture of the Windrush—symbolised in the novel by its division into two sections entitled ‘before’ and ‘1948’—and complicates the notion that the history of migration belongs only to those who migrated.” (Birk Laursen 64)

Traumatic rupture-when?

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

4. Addressing the underexplored relationship between First and Third World traumas

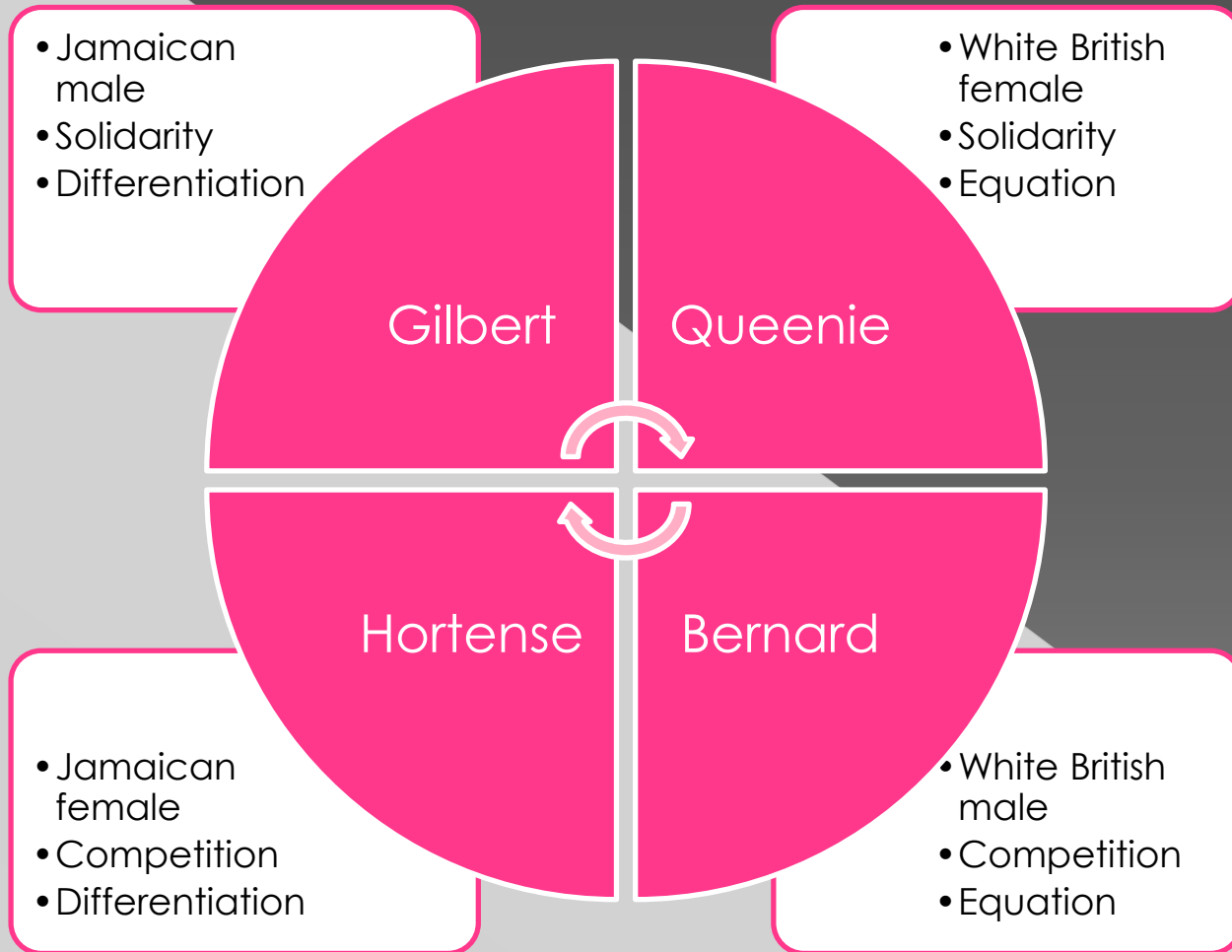
- “ ‘Get away from her nigger.’ Only now did I experience the searing pain of this fight – and not from the grazing on my face or the wrench in my shoulder. Arthur Bligh had become another casualty of war – but come, tell me, someone ... which war?” (193



Small Island as example of multidirectional memory

- *Small Island*'s treatment of WWII may be seen as an example of a “multidirectional act of memory that engage[s] with the transnational legacies of colonial and racial violence” (Rothberg 525).

Axis of political affect, axis of comparison



Bernard

- “The war was fought so people might live amongst their own kind. Quite simple. Everyone had a place. England for the English and the West Indies for these coloured people. Look at India. The British knew fair play. Leave India to the Indians. That’s what we did. (No matter what a hash they make of it.) Everyone was trying to get home after the war to be with kith and kin. Except these blasted colonials. I’ve nothing against them in their place. But their place isn’t here.” (469)

Gilbert

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

Storytelling and humour as healing traumatic rupture

- ◉ Stories provide link with lost past and heal wounds of past
- ◉ Humour leavens sense of traumatic loss and enables resilience
- ◉ Queenie's baby, Michael, as new beginning *and* bearer of legacy of the past

Hortense

- “What a thing was this! A wondrous sight perhaps – for there was the round head complete with curly dark hair matted with blood pushing out from within her. A new life for this world. But it was quite the ugliest sight I had ever beheld. Only a few days before this pretty white woman was going about her business ... now, prostrated by nature, she was simply the vessel for the Lord to do His work!” (479)

Act of reconstruction

- “Levy’s work serves as an act of reconstruction, a belated intervention, which is both sequel (*epigones*) and prologue to the story of the Windrush generation. [...] *Small Island* presents multiple, often contesting, representations of a fraught historical moment of racial/ethnic and gender conflicts, but at the same time the discourse functions as a space of potential reconciliation among various competing views”. (Ellis 69)

Conclusion

- *Small Island* foregrounds process of storytelling and testifies to the importance of historical reconstruction and cultural memory;
- It functions as a self-reflexive act of remembering and forgetting, exploring the gaps, silences, and contradictions, the 'memory frictions', in accounts of British wartime experience.
- It evinces a desire both to record untold or overlooked aspects of collective British history, and to intervene in History by giving symbolic and narrative shape to previously marginalised Black and working class experiences.

Bibliography

- Birk Laursen, Ole. ' "Telling her a story": Remembering trauma in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*.' *EnterText*, 'Special Issue on Andrea Levy,' 9 (2012): 53-68.
- Craps, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- Ellis, Alicia E. 'Identity as cultural production in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*.' *EnterText*, 'Special Issue on Andrea Levy,' 9 (2012): 69-83.
- Levy, Andrea. *Small Island*. (Great Britain: Headline Review, 2004).
- Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- --. 'From Gaza to Warsaw: mapping multidirectional memory.' *Criticism* Fall (2011), Vol.53, No. 4: 523-4.