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Andrea Levy's "World-Themed" Fiction: Curating the World Wars in *Small Island* and "Uriah's War"

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Abstract: The ways in which Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004) deals with the political, economic, and socio-cultural changes that occurred in British society in the aftermath of World War II have been widely discussed. Furthermore, many studies emphasize the novel's significant cultural work in rendering visible the contributions of the British Empire's black citizens in the Second World War. Yet Levy's approach to the imperialist and nationalist rhetoric around the World Wars has not received much attention. This essay explores this question by reading *Small Island*, specifically the scenes of encounter between white American and black British soldiers, together with "Uriah's War" (2014), a short story Levy wrote in the centenary of the outbreak of World War I. The short story takes place mostly on the Middle Eastern Front of World War I and describes a West Indian soldier's encounter with an Ottoman soldier, whom he calls "the savage Turk." Drawing on Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated* (2015), this essay argues that both *Small Island* and "Uriah's War" can be classified as "world-themed" works of fiction in that they consider the World Wars using temporal and spatial comparative frameworks and offer a transnational and anti-imperialist reading of the alliances and animosities that emerged during and in the aftermath of the World Wars.

Keywords: Andrea Levy, *Small Island*, "Uriah's War," the World Wars, world literature

> Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself.
>
> Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 355

Of all the novels by Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (2004) seems to be the most widely read, studied, and translated: it has travelled across the world and gained a global readership. Many scholars have commented on the novel's engagement with the political, economic, and socio-cultural consequences of World War II in post-war British society.[1] Building on these studies, this essay will deal with the more specific question of how Levy's novel approaches the imperialist and nationalist rhetoric around the World Wars. Her short story "Uriah's War" (2014), which has not been studied as much, lends itself well to exploring this question, too, because it takes place during World War I, mostly on the Middle Eastern Front. While scholars have examined Levy's fiction mainly via postcolonial theory and in relation to black British literature, this essay analyzes her work from a theoretical perspective at the intersection of postcolonial theory and world literature studies.[2] This approach foregrounds Levy's transnational approach to the issue of racism in her texts set at the time of the World Wars, which are characterized by strange encounters and the dysfunctioning of familiar frames of reference. Using concepts from Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (2015), I argue that both *Small Island* and "Uriah's War" can be classified as "world-themed" works of fiction in that they consider the World Wars using temporal and spatial comparative frameworks and offer a transnational and anti-imperialist reading of the alliances as well as animosities that emerged during and in the aftermath of the World Wars.

In *Born Translated*, Walkowitz contrasts multi-stranded novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with those written in the new millennium and argues that earlier novels such as Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and John Dos Passos' *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1938) "distribute their characters within cities and nations" (121) whereas the multi-stranded novels of the twenty-first

century such as Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore* (2003), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Peter Ho Davies' *The Welsh Girl* (2007) are "world-themed" (122). These novels construct storyworlds in which incidents take place not only across nations but also across different continents; characters travel and participate in "transnational activities such as humanitarian aid, undocumented labor, [and] wartime emigration" (Walkowitz 122). "Like an anthology or an atlas," these world-themed novels "gather materials drawn from disparate geographies" (121).

Walkowitz identifies three major devices essential to the structure of the contemporary multi-stranded novel, which are "sampling," "collating," and "counting":

> Sampling allows literary works to make very large-scale claims using relatively small-scale data. As readers encounter a narrative strand, they encounter both an individual and a kind of individual. . . . I call the arrangement of these strands collating because the multistranded novel curates as well as collects. By segmenting and ordering strands, collating adds meaning rather than simply organizing it. In a novel, collating requires decisions about category and order. What are the principles of organization? How will each strand be arranged? . . . Collating implies reciprocity: that each part is geographically, linguistically, or ethically comparable, and that the novel has generated a plausible system or container for those parts. Collating also anticipates counting, both the right to be enumerated and the gesture of enumeration. (123)

She states that although these devices "remain active" in multi-stranded novels written today, the process of "collating . . . is often multiplied" since these novels "introduce competing arrangements across geographic, calendric, or linguistic systems" (124). Using Walkowitz's terms, I argue that Levy's *Small Island* is a world-themed multi-stranded novel that collates its narrative material to generate comparative temporal and spatial frameworks. In *Born Translated,* Walkowitz focuses solely on novels because "the novel is the most international genre, measured by worldwide translation" (2).[3] Yet, as I discuss in this essay, a short story, too,

can participate in what Walkowitz calls "world-themed" fiction, especially if it is about a "transnational activity" such as the Great War. Like *Small Island*, "Uriah's War" is formally and thematically informed by the notion of comparison, which results in encounters between seemingly disparate stories that threaten the singularity of each.

Many studies of *Small Island* draw attention to the significance and implications of the novel's juxtaposition of the stories told by its four alternating narrators—Queenie, Hortense, Gilbert, and Bernard—about their lives in and before 1948 in diverse locations including London, Kingston, and Calcutta. Wendy Knepper, for instance, underlines Levy's use of "textual dislocations" such as "shifts in time and space and juxtapositions of multiple first-person testimonial accounts" (1) as a narrative strategy to "reorient the sociocultural imaginary. By interrogating empire and its afterlife as well as relaying perspectives that have been marginalized, silenced, lost, or repressed, Levy's work plays a disruptive role in contemporary culture" (2). Similarly, Corinne Duboin highlights the titling of the chapters as "1948" and "Before" throughout the novel and argues that

> "1948" and "Before" are two paratextual elements which set a visible contrast between two separate phases. They are the textual markers of historical passage from one period of time to another with a pivotal moment of arrival in London opposed to duration—life prior to 1948 in different parts of the globe. Yet, more than the signs of a temporal (and spatial) rupture, "1948" and "Before" are in close correlation: what happened "here" in London is the direct consequence of what preceded "out there" in the colonial world. Andrea Levy structures her discourse within, around and across the borders of her novel, within the interstices of her narrative. (29)

Duboin discusses the temporal division of the story in the novel by employing Gérard Genette's concept of the paratext, which he defines as "a threshold. . . . [T]his fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction"

(qtd. in Duboin 29). There are significant parallels between Duboin's Genettean analysis of *Small Island* and Walkowitz's remarks about the functions of collating in the multi-stranded novel. Levy's collation of the novel's narrative strands on the basis of temporal differences, which are signalled explicitly by paratextual elements such as the titling of the chapters, does not simply produce boundaries between the sections; rather, it establishes comparative frameworks and initiates a "transaction" between Levy and her readers. As Duboin indicates, Levy invites her readers to "correlate" the intersecting stories of these four characters, a white British couple and a West Indian couple, in the London of 1948—the arrival date at the Tilbury Dock of the *Empire Windrush* ship, which carried some five hundred immigrants from the West Indies—with what happened before in the colonies. As Maria Helena Lima puts it, by problematizing the distinction between "'home' and 'empire' as two separate spaces" (56), Levy's novel challenges "the fiction of a pre-existing England, . . . constituted outside and without imperialism" (57). In other words, through correlation of the narrative strands, *Small Island* renders problematic insular approaches to British history.

The novel also signals the centrality of its comparative logic with its title. The expression "small island" appears for the first time in Hortense's account of her life in Jamaica before 1948. She remembers a conversation that took place between Gilbert and her friend and colleague Celia, who, at the time, were planning to marry and leave Jamaica for England:

> He took her hands in his. 'We leave on the next boat.'
>
> 'And what about my class?'
>
> 'Your friend here can teach your class for you,' Gilbert joked. 'Hortense will take care of everything—won't you, Hortense? She will write to us of the hurricanes and the earthquakes and the shortages of rice on this small island, while we sip tea and search for Nelson on his column.' (Levy, *Small Island* 94)

Yet the intended marriage does not take place. Gilbert leaves his small island alone "on the next boat," the *Empire Windrush*, using the money Hortense lends him after having secured his word that he will marry her and send for her once he is settled in Britain. Gilbert refers to Jamaica as

a small island in some other scenes, as well. He tells his cousin, Elwood, for instance, "The world out there is bigger than any dream you can conjure. . . . This is a small island" (207). However, Gilbert has not always seen Jamaica in this way. In his account of his life before 1948, he asserts that "[w]e Jamaicans, knowing our island is one of the largest in the Caribbean, think ourselves sophisticated men of the world. Better than 'small islanders' whose universe only runs a few miles in either direction before it falls into the sea" (131). It is after his return from the World War II battlefield, where he fights as a Royal Air Force (RAF) volunteer, that Gilbert begins to see Jamaica as a small island: "With alarm I became aware that the island of Jamaica was no universe: it ran only a few miles before it fell into the sea. In that moment, standing tall on Kingston harbor, I was shocked by the awful realization that, man, we Jamaicans are all small islanders too!" (196). The comparative perspective that Gilbert gains makes him revise his insular understanding of being Jamaican.

In another narrative strand, Queenie's husband, Bernard, goes through a similar experience. Aboard the ship, leaving Liverpool for Bombay to join the war as an RAF mechanic, he sees his island diminish before his eyes: "England disappeared so quickly. Soon there was nothing but sea. My legs wobbled. Couldn't get my balance, find my grip. I sat down to watch the spot where my country dissolved" (406). This is the first time Bernard leaves his country and seeing it from a distance causes an unsettling change in his perspective: he, too, realizes his island is "no universe." This perspective is consolidated by his war experience in the colonies. Having returned home at the end of the war, he thinks, "England had shrunk. It was smaller than the place I'd left" (424). Undoubtedly, Bernard's remarks strongly suggest the ebbing of the British Empire after World War II. His first-hand witnessing of "[b]loody coolies. Wanting us out of India dead or alive" (393) cracks open his unquestioned subscription to the idea of Britain's greatness as an imperial power. As Duboin puts it, "the spreading of Empire, its geographical amplitude that ensured political pre-eminence[,] reinforced national pride and prestige" (21). Consequently, one major effect of decolonization was the inevitable "redefinition of Britishness" (Duboin

21), which the novel reflects in Bernard's altered perspective when his country appears "shrunk" to his war-tired eyes.

Equally significant in these passages is Levy's collation of Gilbert's and Bernard's experiences. Both Britain and Jamaica appear to be small islands when seen from a distance. *Small Island* shows the disengagement its characters experience from an insular connection to their countries, a disengagement that is caused by the comparative perspective that they gain. The novel exposes these characters' "'native' standpoints . . . as overlapping, interconnected and always more than singular" (Procter and Benwell 85). And, in both cases, their journeys overseas as a consequence of war enable them to revise their perspectives. As Duboin points out, "World War Two brought many local, national and global changes that affected their perceptions of their respective native island. Gilbert's and Bernard's parallel painful wartime experiences away from home give each of them the necessary distance to re-evaluate his homeland" (19). Walkowitz argues that world-themed multi-stranded novels problematize solipsism (126) and that they "solicit comparisons" (72) from the reader. Levy's *Small Island* illustrates these characteristics by drawing attention to the parallels between Bernard's and Gilbert's experiences of World War II; the novel does not allow the characters to be solipsistic in their relationships with their homelands, and as a consequence the reader is invited to partake in these characters' comparative perspectives.

The novel's comparative logic also contests nativist approaches to Britishness. As critics frequently point out, Levy's novel treats the encounter between white British citizens at home and Britain's black citizens in the colonies who volunteered to fight for the "Mother Country" as another factor that inevitably led to a redefinition of "Britishness." When Gilbert and his fellow West Indian RAF volunteers take evening walks in the English village of Hunmanby during their training, they meet people who see "darkies" (Levy, *Small Island* 137) for the first time. One of these villagers, an elderly woman, comments on the West Indian soldiers' use of English: "There, I told you," she tells her husband. "They speak it just like us, only funnier'" (138). According to Cynthia James, this exchange, informed by autobiographical West Indian oral histories about the encounter between the white British and West Indians during

and after World War II, "vivif[ies] their cultural confrontation" (49). The rest of the scene shows that not all reactions to the West Indian soldiers were as amiable as that of the elderly woman. Gilbert narrates as follows:

> A middle-aged man, not in uniform, kept his hands resolutely in his pockets before addressing me. . . . [T]his man, not looking on my face as he spoke, asked me, 'Why would you leave a nice sunny place to come here if you didn't have to?'
>
> When I said, 'To fight for my country, sir,' his eyebrows jumped like two caterpillars in a polka.
>
> 'Humph. Your country?' he asked without need of an answer. (Levy, *Small Island* 138)

Gilbert's rightful claim on Britishness discomfits this man, who is not willing to recognize "darkies" as fellow citizens. This scene foreshadows the racism Gilbert and Hortense, like other members of the Windrush generation, are exposed to in Britain in the ensuing years.

The reactions of Hunmanby's inhabitants to the West Indian soldiers is reminiscent of James Baldwin's well-known autobiographical account of his relationship with the people living in a small Swiss village, which he describes in his 1953 essay, "Stranger in the Village." "But I remain as much a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived," Baldwin observes, "and the children shout *Neger*! *Neger*! as I walk along the streets. . . . [T]here was no suggestion that I was human: I was simply a living wonder" (160). In "Stranger in the Empire," Ann Murphy also points out this similarity and contends that "a comparison of these two very different texts about arrival and interracial contact reveals the disheartening common and persistent dynamics of imperialism, power, and racism" (122). However, in the remainder of her essay, she emphasizes the divergences between Baldwin's essay and Levy's novel, written, respectively, by an "an African American male writer living in Europe" and "a black British female writer of a later generation" (123). Yet in what follows I argue that with regard to racism, *Small Island* foregrounds some significant convergences rather than differences between the American and the British context.

Small Island's treatment of the encounter between American soldiers and black soldiers of the British Empire during World War II has not received much critical attention. However, Levy's juxtaposition of the institutionalized racism in the United States and US army towards African Americans with the white British people's attitude to Britain's black citizens during and in the aftermath of World War II offers another comparative framework for understanding the racism suffered by the black British. Rob Waters, in his article focusing on Baldwin's "reading of Europe, [which is] always contingent on his reading of America," argues that Baldwin provides "a new way of coming to terms with Britain's colonial history, and of moving beyond it" (716). As I discuss below, Waters' analysis of Baldwin's comparative approach to race and racism in post-war Britain lends itself well to exploring Levy's comparative treatment of racism in the novel because, like Baldwin, Levy foregrounds the parallels between the American and the British context.

At the beginning of his essay, Waters observes a dominant tendency in Britain at the time regarding the issue of race. According to Waters, the representation of the Notting Hill Riots in 1958 in the British media is a remarkable illustration of Stuart Hall's observation that a "profound historical forgetfulness . . . has overtaken the British people about race and Empire since the 1950s" (qtd. in Waters 716). Waters contends that this tendency, which Hall describes as "pull[ing] race out from the internal dynamic of British society, and repress[ing] its history" (qtd. in Waters 716), made the post-war British media represent racism as "decidedly un-British and alien" (Waters 716).

In keeping with this tendency for "historical forgetfulness" on the part of the British public and media, Baldwin's critique of racism in the US was framed in Britain in a reductionist way (Waters 716). Although Baldwin's critique of American society and politics played a significant role in shaping the critical response in Britain to racism in America, Baldwin was represented as "a uniquely American voice" (Waters 717). An article published by *The Times* in 1954, for instance, claims that his writing reveals "'an emotional climate entirely alien to the English reader'" (qtd. in Waters 717).

As Waters indicates in his analysis of Baldwin's appearance in 1965 on the BBC's *Encounter* series, this episode of the show is quite telling of Baldwin's disagreement with the prevailing discourse around racism in Britain at the time. Underlining the historical legacy of slavery in shaping the present relations between black and white people in Europe, Baldwin replies to a question from a BBC journalist and author, James Mosmann: "when an Englishman or an American white man, in the main, looks at a black man, *he is also looking at his own past*, and a lot of what happens in the mind and heart of a white man looking at a black man is involved with his guilt, his guilt because I—after all—for nothing, went into the mines, and I, for nothing, built the city" (qtd. in Waters 718; emphasis added by Waters). Baldwin's drawing a parallel between "an Englishman" and "an American white man" in terms of slavery can be interpreted as his telling the British public on national television that "they were not recognizing their own history" (Waters 718).

Small Island focuses on an era that roughly coincides with the time period in which Baldwin advocates confronting the unsettling facts of history—including slavery—and their legacy in discussions on present-day racism not only in the US but also in European countries such as Britain. By fictionalizing the encounter between black British and white American soldiers who fought as allies in World War II, Levy's "world-themed" novel engages critically with the prevailing rhetoric around racism in Britain at the time and, like Baldwin, situates it within "a wider conceptualization." This war encounter invites a reading of racism that is not confined to the borders of a single nation.

Small Island contains more than one scene depicting racism in the US army. Although this may suggest that Levy's novel participates in the British post-war rhetoric about racism as an American problem, I contend that this is not the case. On the contrary, Levy invites her readers to compare racism in both societies. Gilbert's narrative of his experience as a member of the British RAF in World War II begins with his account of the time he spent at the military camp in Virginia, as a "guest of the American government" (Levy, *Small Island* 126). Tired

of eating nothing but "boiled-up potatoes, boiled-up vegetables—grey and limp on the plate like they had been eaten once before" (126), Gilbert and his fellow Jamaicans decide that "America is Paradise" (126) because of the abundance and variety of food they are served at the camp. However, they soon change their minds after being exposed to racist remarks about African Americans and witnessing the segregation in the US army: "While being shown round the camp a smiling face would tell us, 'You see, your American [n–] don't work. If his belly's full he won't work. When he's hungry again then he'll do just enough. Same kinda thing happens in the animal kingdom. But you boys being British are different'" (131–32). Gilbert returns to Britain "pleased to be leaving America behind" (132). This is not the only encounter between Gilbert and American soldiers. On his way back to his camp from an American base near Grimsby, Gilbert gives a ride to two African American soldiers. These men find it very hard to understand how Gilbert can be both black and British and enter a "white" American base because, they say, "a negro on that base 'bout as welcome as a snake in a crib'" (158). They tell him that "the American army is very strict about keeping black folks apart" (158) and that "you British do things different" (160).

In other scenes, Gilbert is directly exposed to the racist remarks of white American soldiers, something he has not experienced among the white British. When he runs into a group of white American soldiers outside his camp, for instance, one of them says,

> 'Salute your superior.'
>
> 'Fuck you, man,' I told him, before moving on.
>
> He called after me, the giggling one, he shouted, 'Off the sidewalk, [n–].' (174)

The most violent encounter between Gilbert and white American soldiers takes place in a scene in which Gilbert and his white English friends—Queenie and her father-in-law, Arthur—go to the cinema together to watch *Gone with the Wind.* The usherette asks Gilbert to sit in the back row, next to the black soldiers. Gilbert protests:

> 'This is England. . . . This is not America. We do not do this in England. I will sit anywhere I please.'
>
> 'Well, we do it here. It's the rules. All [n–] —' She stopped and began again. 'All coloureds up the back rows.' (184)

It soon becomes clear that the cinema enforces such an arrangement because white American customers expect segregated seating. Furious, Gilbert cries, "Segregation, madam, there is no segregation in this country. I will sit wherever I like in this picture house. And those coloured men at the back should have been allowed to sit wherever they so please. This is England, not Alabama" (185). The scene ends in a physical fight between black and white soldiers outside the cinema, which escalates upon the arrival of the American Military Police from the American base near Grimsby, who "assailed the group of black GIs. Defenceless skulls cracked like nutshells as panicked black men had nowhere to go but stagger towards the furious boots, fists and elbows of the white GIs. Oxygen to a dying flame, these MPs soon had this fight blazing again like an inferno" (190–91). A gunshot causes everyone to freeze. Arthur is accidentally killed, "his head burst an obscene inside-out by the bullet" (193).

These scenes in the novel that foreground the difference between racism in Britain and America may appear to suggest that Levy's novel participates in the post-war rhetoric that represents racism as alien to British society. Yet Levy's integration of some indices[4] in these scenes and the novel's emphasis on the difference between Gilbert's experiences in Britain during the war and his experiences in the aftermath of the war as part of the Windrush generation indicate that *Small Island* invites its readers to consider racism in British society in connection with racism in the US. It thus asks readers to question any claim that treats racism as independent from the myths of white supremacy, slavery, and imperialism—what Waters calls "the global dimensions of race and modernity" (726).

To begin with, the scene that takes place in the village of Hunmanby foreshadows the hostility that the immigrants from the West Indies face in post-war Britain. Similarly, in the cinema scene above, the usherette's

utterance of the word "[n–]" before correcting it to "coloureds" shows how easy it is to leap across national divides in deploying the belligerent semiotics of American racialization alongside what the usherette clearly believes to be the more digestible language of British racial discourse. Remarkably, the fight in the cinema does not take place merely between white American and black British soldiers; rather, the "battle" breaks out between black and white people more generally:

> Rows of black GIs at the back. Rows of white GIs at the front. And a rump of civilians in their dowdy clothes sitting guileless in the middle. . . . [A]s sure as Napoleon and Wellington before Waterloo, that usherette had drawn us up a battlefield. And every GI was now on his feet.
>
> Black shouting: 'Who you calling [n–]? We ain't taking that from you no more.'
>
> White screaming: 'Fucking uppity [n–]. Shut your mouths.' (Levy, *Small Island* 187)

The symbolic position of (white) British civilians in the middle of the fight between black and white soldiers suggests that they will not be able to maintain this "guileless" state for long—they will soon be politicized and have to take sides. Moreover, that the black soldiers become allies against the racist threat of white soldiers shows how racism cannot be confined to the narrow framework of the nation. Gilbert's concluding narration of this scene is equally indicative of the novel's transnational approach to racism. Looking at Arthur now lying dead in the street, Gilbert reflects, "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). Gilbert's question suggests an emerging sensibility regarding racism—an understanding that racism exists outside the context of war. As Knepper observes, "Levy calls attention to World War II as an event that transformed race relations for a short time, but also initiated longer term changes. African American authors, such as Walter Mosley, have already shown the ways in which

World War II led to altered race relations at home following demobilisation. Levy follows in this path" (6). *Small Island* deals with the question of racism by moving beyond the nation-state paradigm and offering, from an international perspective, a reading of World War II as a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in colonialism and that consolidates racial hierarchies and discourses in both the metropolis and the colonies.

Gilbert's and Hortense's accounts of their lives in Britain in 1948 illustrate significant differences concerning race relations. For example, soon after Hortense arrives in Britain, she is attacked verbally while walking down the street with her landlandy, Queenie: Three young men follow Hortense and Queenie, and one of them throws a half-eaten bread roll at the women (Levy, *Small Island* 334). Hortense then recounts that "Mrs. Bligh [Queenie], after regaining some composure she had lost to the ruffians, was instructing me on what she assured me was good manners. I, as a visitor to this country, should step off the pavement into the road if an English person wishes to pass and there is not sufficient room on the pavement for us both" (335). This scene of racial violence and discrimination directed at Hortense first by the group of young men and then Queenie, who calls her "a visitor" to Britain, echoes Gilbert's wartime experience with the white American soldiers who ordered him off the sidewalk. This is another example of Levy's collation of narrative strands. The novel solicits a comparative reading of this scene, against the background of the racism of the soldiers.

Similarly, soon after his return to Britain on the *Empire Windrush*, Gilbert discovers that "these English landlords and ladies could come up with excuses" for not having him as a lodger because of the "color prejudice" (215). "If I had been in uniform—still a Brylcreem boy in blue—would they have seen me different?" he thinks to himself (215); "[w]ould they have thanked me for the sweet victory, shaken my hand and invited me in for tea?" (215). Queenie rents a room to him mainly because she is in dire need of financial help but also because they had met and formed a friendship during the war. However, when Bernard, Queenie's husband, returns from the war, Gilbert realizes that he and his wife are no longer welcome in this house, either. "There was something I recognized on the face of Bernard Bligh," Gilbert says; "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" (445). The animosity Gilbert recognizes on Bernard's face is precisely what Baldwin claims to be operating between "an Englishman" and "a black man"—that is, when Bernard looks at Gilbert, he is also looking at his own past. It is the look of the (white) colonizer that interpellates the colonized as a racialized subject. What troubles Bernard is the location of this encounter. "[T]hese blasted coloured colonials," he thinks; "I've nothing against them in their place. But their place isn't here" (Levy, *Small Island* 469). Bernard Bligh's refusal to welcome the "coloured colonials" in his house is undoubtedly symbolic of the racist hostility the Windrush generation experienced in "Blighty," a term for Britain, popularized by British soldiers during World War I. As Waters underlines in his discussion on Baldwin's comparative reading of the racial dynamics in post-war British society, Baldwin claimed that

> it was the spatial distance separating the white European metropole from its black colonial possessions that allowed questions of race to remain in the abstract within Europe. . . . [T]he end of empire and decolonization would mean, precisely, that those unspoken racial codes which implicitly structured European culture and self-identity would be, as they had been in America, thrown into sharp relief as Europe confronted the reality of its colonial history in the first person. (Waters 724)

Indeed, the racial tension between white American and black British soldiers during World War II in Levy's novel emerges as a comparative framework for reading the racist encounters between white and black British citizens after the war. Contrary to the prevailing approach to racism in post-war British discourse, *Small Island* suggests that America is not exceptional in matters related to racism. Rather, racism in America represents "a further point in the logical historical progression of relations between the black and white in a globalized world that had begun with Europe's imperial conquests from which, sooner rather than later, Europe would catch up . . . with America" (Waters 724).

"Uriah's War," a short story Levy wrote in the centenary of the outbreak of World War I, also unfolds through comparative frameworks and thereby invites readers to understand the Great War from a transnational and inclusive perspective. The historians Emmanuelle Cronier and Victor Demiaux point out that a paradigm change has been taking place in the historiography of World War I since the 1980s. Embracing a more comparative approach, scholarship on the Great War has moved beyond the national framework and begun to include areas that have long been ignored, such as "the Eastern and Balkan Fronts" (142). Yet Cronier and Demiaux add that historians have only recently started to "look at the intercultural contacts that may have come into play on the ground" (142): "The Great War was an unparalleled period of circulations and exchanges. . . . The wartime mobilization, whereby more than 70 million men were called up between 1914 and 1918, was first and foremost a movement—in the literal sense—that brought them into contact with other soldiers, other populations or other places" (142).

"Uriah's War" is the fictional memoir of a Jamaican soldier who participates in the Great War and fights in Palestine and Egypt against the Ottoman Empire as a member of the British West Indies Regiment. In her introduction to the short story, Levy writes that she was surprised to recently find out that her "grandfather had been at the Somme in France during the First World War" ("Uriah's War" 111). This discovery inspired her to write "Uriah's War" so that she could "add the experience of West Indian troops to the record" (111). Through both *Small Island* and "Uriah's War," Levy revisits (fictional and non-fictional) accounts of the World Wars in which the participation of men like her grandfather is not recorded. In addition, as a "world-themed" work of fiction, "Uriah's War," just like *Small Island*, does not limit "the collective" to the national; the collective imagination the text contributes to is much broader than that of the British public. As a fictional counterpart to the scholarship on the World Wars' transnational cultural history, Levy's short story foregrounds "intercultural contacts," subscribing to an understanding of "the Great War . . . [as] a time of unprecedented intermingling and circulation within the coalitions. Metropolitan and colonial soldiers, civilian workers, refugees, and

displaced persons left their familiar frame of reference by the millions" (Cronier and Demiaux 141).

The short story begins with Uriah's account of his war experience first in the British army camp at Seaford, then in Alexandria, Egypt as a part of the "Egyptian Expeditionary Force" (Levy, "Uriah's War" 117), and lastly at a camp in Taranto, Italy, where he awaits the ship that will take him and his fellow West Indian soldiers back home. The fictional memoir comes to an abrupt end with Uriah's narrative of the discrimination West Indians face at the camp. When ordered by a white sergeant to clean the latrines used by Italian labourers at the camp, Uriah's friend, Walker, protests and disobeys the order, which results in his imprisonment. Uriah's last words are "I intend to go to the sergeant to demand to speak to the Brigadier General about this injustice. Walker must be released. The most gallant and courageous soldier is being crucified under this charge" (125). The fictional memoir is followed by an "Epilogue" narrated by Walker, who lets us know that his "good friend Uriah Williamson has been shot dead. Killed by a sergeant attached to our battalion" (125).

As in *Small Island*, the temporal structure of "Uriah's War" plays a significant role in generating a comparative reading. Although Uriah and Walker once subscribed to an imperialist discourse on the Great War, the memoir's retrospective narration highlights Uriah's newfound critical perspective on this discourse. Consequently, the text undermines celebratory and sentimental wartime rhetoric and emphasizes instead the racial discrimination black soldiers in the British Empire were subject to. Uriah draws attention to the difference between his initial perspective on war and his current attitude. He recounts that while sitting at a hotel taproom in Seaford, he and Walker were approached by a man who asked them why they were willing to fight in this war between white men. The two felt very resentful: "I might smile now when I recall," says Uriah, "but at the time Walker and me found nothing funny in it. Nothing funny at all. He was belittling our patriotism. And we were full of it then" (114). Uriah adds that it was Walker who persuaded him to volunteer for the British West Indies Regiment: "He heard the King's appeal as if whispered by His Majesty into his ear alone: I ask you, men

of all classes, to come forward voluntarily and take your share in the fight" (114). Uriah underlines the strong sense of attachment they used to have to the Empire, which they believed was their "protector" (115). "[T]hat is how we thought," he says, "England was great, sort of thing" (115). The narrator's retrospective addition of "sort of thing" generates an ironic distance between the narrator and the imperialist ideology he once subscribed to. He applies the same strategy when giving an account of the reason he and Walker volunteered to fight for Britain, saying that it was "[o]ur chance to show the British what black men can do. That was his [Walker's] creed. 'Buckle your armour for fight! Sons of the Empire rise' . . . sort of thing" (115).

Uriah's critical attitude towards the war stems from the racism that West Indian soldiers face after the truce at the camp in Taranto. "[A]t the armistice we patted the backs of our imperial comrades—from Britain, New Zealand, Australia, India, Africa—and they patted ours," Uriah says. He then cites a line from a source that Levy herself used in constructing the story: "From over the seven seas the Empire's sons came . . ." (121).[5] Yet the imperialist rhetoric of camaraderie is soon belied. Uriah learns from a Jamaican private who has been "waiting for too long to leave" Taranto that "[b]lack men are barred from using the cinema and the canteen at this camp. . . . They are only for British Tommies with white skin" (121). The private also lets Uriah and Walker know that "no native unit was to receive . . . [the] pay rise" that the white members of the army will get (122). The unrest among the West Indian soldiers caused by racial discrimination culminates in Walker's arrest. Despite the West Indian soldiers' protests, the white sergeant insists that they clean the toilets:

> Four white men then seized Walker. Threw him to the ground. Knelt on him. On his back. On his legs. His face was rubbing in the dirt. And he was struggling to fight them fierce. While the sergeant yelled on us black men that [n–] should expect no more than this! . . . My friend who was once mentioned in dispatches for his coolness and devotion to duty is shackled in fetters like a . . . like a slave." (124–25)

Uriah's unsettling observation that Walker is treated as a slave is reminiscent of the fight scene between black and white soldiers outside the cinema in *Small Island*. Gilbert's question at the end of the fight—"which war?"—is raised here in a more pronounced manner. The service of thousands of black men from the colonies in the Great War does not amount to what Walker had naively hoped: "If we joined this battle then the King and Empire would be honour bound to reward our duty with equal treatment. Our sacrifice would see the black race uplifted" (126). Instead, he reaches a sobering realization: "I must state that I am alive to the fact that we West Indians were unfairly discriminated against in this war" (126). This realization, however, awakens him to the need for another war: "In consequence, I turn my back upon Britain, my Motherland, . . . [a]nd turn my face to my island home of Jamaica. This war was fought for the principles of democracy and freedom. I now demand those principles for the black man. And to that fight shall all my energies be placed. For the right to vote, the right to work. But most of all, the right to live without insult" (127). Walker's concluding remarks reflect the transnational perspective that emerged among black soldiers as a consequence of the Great War.[6] Levy's short story shows that Uriah's war—which is also Gilbert's war—is in fact a war against racial injustice and white supremacy.

As I point out above, historians of the Great War draw attention to what Cronier and Demiaux call the unprecedented "intermingling and circulation" (141) that took place across the world in this time, which rendered people's familiar frames of reference dysfunctional. "Uriah's War" portrays one such strange encounter that takes place on the battlefield in Egypt between West Indian and Ottoman soldiers. This scene creates a disorienting comparative framework not only for Uriah but also for the readers whose understanding of the Great War has been limited by narratives, fictional and non-fictional, that approach it from an insular perspective. Astrid Erll identifies four modes of "literary remembering" in European war literature of the twentieth century: "the monumental," "the antagonistic," "the experiential," and "the reflexive" (40). In the monumental mode, a literary text remembers the war by locating it within a mythical framework; Erll gives the example of Ernst

Jünger's *In Stahlgewirten* (1920), in which German soldiers are compared to mythological figures (41). The antagonistic mode is characterized by "negative stereotyping" such as "calling the Germans 'the Hun' or 'beasts' in the initial English First World War poetry" (41). The experiential mode, on the other hand, represents the past as "lived-through experience" (40) in that "[a]cts and the specific qualities of witnessing war can be staged in literary texts by autodiegetic and I-as-witness narration (as in Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 1930)" (40). Unlike the other three modes, the reflexive mode emphasizes "processes and problems of remembering" by employing explicit commentary on the failure of memory and "the juxtaposition of different versions of the past" (42). Levy's "Uriah's War" problematizes monumental and antagonistic representations of World War I and instead invites readers to remember the conflict through Uriah's experiential narrative, which is informed by comparison. In this "world-themed" short story, Uriah's narrative is "located comparatively rather than uniquely" (Walkowitz 127), resisting the solipsistic perspective that marks monumental and antagonistic modes of remembering the Great War.

Uriah's narrative parodies the monumental mode of wartime storytelling. While marching across the Sinai Desert in "one hundred and twelve degrees in the shade," Walker tells Uriah to "'Think of Moses.' . . . 'Remember your Bible story? Moses pass over the Sinai. And he did not give up.' What was he chattin'? Moses could strike a rock and out would come water. Our gallon was all our ration. My spittle was powder" (Levy, "Uriah's War" 117). Uriah humorously renders profane Walker's attempts to translate their wartime experience into solemn epic language. This can be seen in the following example, too. Commenting on a scene of combat that takes place at Umbrella Hill against the Ottoman army, Uriah writes, "One hundred and one men were counted dead that day. But that raid had those Turks on the run! Walker slapped me upon the back. 'We break them, Uriah man, we break them!' And the light from his eyes nearly blinded me" (119–20). Uriah's final sentence creates an ironic distance between Walker, who at that moment of glory on the battlefield feels extremely proud, and Uriah, who seems to find his friend's reaction naively exaggerated.

Levy employs a parodic tone in some other instances in the short story. In Uriah's writing, first, the Germans—and then the Turks—appear as "the enemy." In the beginning of his memoir, Uriah writes, "You should have heard the stories of the barbarous Germans that swept the breeze. They were burning houses and churches and women and children. Some were eating babies. Well, that was one of the tales. Looking back now perhaps that was a little . . . embellished. But everyone believed it at the time" (Levy, "Uriah's War" 115). Soon after their battalion left Britain for Egypt, "the Turk was our new firm foe," writes Uriah: "They were burning churches and houses and women and children" (117). Uriah's critical perspective from his vantage point at the end of the war informs his representation of the enemy. By noting the "embellished" descriptions of the violent deeds of the enemy that he hears as "stories" and "tales," Uriah underlines their fictitiousness. His use of the same expressions to describe both the Germans' and the Turks' actions further undermines the reliability of these narratives. Such moments in the text problematize the antagonistic mode of representing the enemy.

What makes Uriah's narration of his encounter with the enemy, "the Turk," more interesting is that it indicates both his ironic participation in antagonistic imperialist discourse and his unsettling realization of how similar he and his enemy are. Uriah comes face to face with "the Turk" during a raid on their trenches:

> In the clearing dust I saw him up close. Dark as me! A Turk! Determined as me to kill. But I was quicker. My bayonet twisted in him before he raised his rifle. He fell at my feet. . . .
>
> Oh, how I wished Walker was there to see me. Proud is what he would have been. But instead five more Turks were advancing upon me, bayonets ready. I left that trench so quick! All around my comrades were retreating before this swarm of howling Turks.
>
> They had us on the run now. Shells exploded at the tip of my boot with every step I took. . . . I was trapped, locked between the savage Turk and this shrapnel barrage. (119–20)

The prevalent rhetoric around the operations of the British army in the Middle East during World War I was steeped in the notion of the crusade. As James E. Kitchen explains, "[f]or many historians, the EEF's [Egyptian Expeditionary Force] campaign can be understood simply as a holy war fought in a landscape that abounded with innumerable references to the Bible and the crusades" (142). Saving Palestine from the grip of the Muslim Turk was commonly represented at the time in Britain as a Christian duty, which is also reflected in a large number of fictional works written at the time about the Middle Eastern front in World War I.[7] Uriah's use of animal imagery—"this swarm of howling Turks" and "the savage Turk"—seems to be informed by stereotypical representations of the Ottoman soldiers as heathen enemies of what Kitchen calls the "khaki crusaders." It is of course ironic that Uriah uses the same adjective, "savage," that is commonly employed in European imperialist discourse to refer to colonized peoples, including himself. As a participant in an imperialist war, he subscribes imperialism's othering. The imperialist discourse, however, loses its divisive, antagonistic hold on Uriah for a brief moment when he realizes that "the Turk" can look very much like him.[8] By bringing together two seemingly disparate figures, a West Indian and an Ottoman soldier equally "determined to kill" (albeit for different empires), this scene invites readers to question which war they are fighting.

Both *Small Island* and "Uriah's War" render visible the contributions of the British Empire's black citizens in the World Wars. Levy's decision to conclude *Small Island* with Churchill's words—"Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few"—indicates the significance she attributes to literature as a means of configuring how we remember the past. As Waters argues, "those subjects who always existed on the periphery of the English consciousness . . . were real enough to be listening to Churchill's speeches" (724), and Britain's colonial soldiers were a part of that "so few" to whom, Churchill thinks, the nation owes a debt of gratitude. Similarly, Walker writes of his "comrades who volunteered to leave family and home, to fight, shed blood and die in foreign fields" (Levy, "Uriah's War" 126). He addresses white Britons in his epilogue: "Uriah and I did not fail you. We were British

soldiers. But you have failed to recognise our contribution" (126–27). "Uriah's War" attempts to reclaim their contribution.

Beyond this reclamation, *Small Island* and "Uriah's War" reconfigure the prevalent British discourse and render problematic nationalist and imperialist rhetoric around the World Wars by shedding light on the stories of black soldiers from a global perspective. Both texts depict the racial discrimination the British "coloured" troops faced and recognize it as deeply informed by Britain's position as an imperialist country that enforced racial hierarchies between the colonizer and the colonized. Furthermore, Levy's "world-themed" texts tell the stories of black British characters in comparison with racialized characters from other nations, offering a reading of racism and white supremacy from a global perspective. This is in keeping with the trajectory of Levy's fiction, which gained a postcolonial dimension from her third novel, *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), onward. And, as my discussion of *Small Island* and "Uriah's War" suggests, Levy's perspective "rerout[es] the postcolonial"[9] to illustrate that "to be global is first and foremost to be postcolonial and to be postcolonial is always already to be global" (Krishnaswamy 3). Similarly, Walkowitz notes that postcolonial literature "has always needed to compare and translate among regions, languages, and literatures" (169), or, as Robert Young puts it, it is "inherently comparative" (qtd. in Walkowitz 169). Levy's use of comparative frameworks in *Small Island* and "Uriah's War" invites us to think of connections, relationships, alliances, and animosities that transcend the insular framework of nations and foreground the idea that there is always the other side.

Notes

1 See James and Baxter, Pirker, McLeod, Evelyn, Perfect, Muñoz-Valdivieso, and Thomas for their analyses of *Small Island*'s representation of British society in the aftermath of World War II.

2 In 2011 Young claimed that "the relation of world literature to postcolonialism remains virtually unmarked territory. There has been little direct exchange between these two separately demarcated domains of literary study" (213). Since 2010, however, many studies have emerged that illuminate the interconnection between these two fields. See, for example, Bhattacharya, Sturm-Trigonakis, Boehmer, Burns, and Cheah.

3 Translation is a key term in Walkowitz's *Born Translated.* As the title of her book suggests, she discusses translation not only in relation to the role it plays in the worldwide circulation of novels today but also as a characteristic that may be built into the form of a novel (6), with thematic and conceptual functions (4). "Refusing to match language to geography, many contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time," observes Walkowitz (6). In that regard, there is a close conceptual affinity between translation and comparison: a born-translated text demands to be read comparatively.

4 In "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Barthes identifies three levels to be found in every narrative: the levels of functions, actions, and narration (88). He defines a "function" as a "unit of content" (90) and distinguishes between two types of functional elements: "functions proper" (92) and "indices" (92). While the former leads to "complementary and consequential act[s]" in the narrative, the latter are paradigmatic units in that they contribute to meaning in their accumulation.

5 In her Introduction to "Uriah's War," Levy acknowledges Smith's *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War* as a major source for her short story. In this book, Smith refers to "the legendary bayonet charge" (96) of the British West Indies Regiment, which, he points out, was celebrated by many, including the historian Frank Cundall in his book, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War* (1925). Cundall himself refers to W.T. Massey's *How Jerusalem was Won* (1919), in which Massey commemorates the participation of men from all over the Empire in the Great War as follows: "From over the Seven Seas the Empire's sons came to illustrate the unanimity of all the King's subjects in the prosecution of the war" (qtd. in Smith 97).

6 According to Mathieu,

> [s]ervice in the Great War . . . brought together a motley collection of black servicemen from across the Black Atlantic world, who, from France's port cities or Belgium's trenches were awakened to a more global racial sensibility and to transnational black alliances that called into question the shared foundations of white supremacy—be they segregation, apartheid, or colonization. (233)

7 According to Bazian, these include *Khaki Crusaders* (1919), *Temporary Crusaders* (1919), *The Modern Crusaders* (1920), *The Last Crusade* (1920), *With Allenby's Crusaders* (1923), and *The Romance of the Last Crusade* (1923).

8 As in the British army, the imperial army of the Ottomans in World War I consisted of a diverse group of soldiers in terms of race, ethnicity, and religion. It is thus not surprising that Uriah encounters an Ottoman soldier who is "dark" like him. Beşikçi explains that "the Anatolian Muslim peasants always constituted the backbone of the Ottoman army, and of them most were Turkish by

ethnicity" (123–24), but during the Great War "the recruitment effort" used "all elements in the empire for pragmatic reasons" (124). There was, however, "a dual category of military service in the Ottoman conscription system: 'armed service' and 'unarmed service.' While the former was filled by trusted elements in the Empire (Turks and most Muslims), distrusted elements [non-Turks and non-Muslims] were assigned to the latter, which were mainly assigned to manual labor and construction projects" (124).

9 See Wilson, Şandru, and Welsh for their concept of "rerouting the postcolonial."

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