

## Work, Gratitude, and “The Good Immigrant”: Rereading Andrea Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* (1994) and *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996) after the Windrush Scandal

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**Abstract:** Written more than twenty years before the Windrush scandal broke, *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and *Never Far from Nowhere* foreshadow the British state’s betrayal of the Windrush generation and express scepticism of the promise that respectable work leads to acceptance and equality in British society. In these novels, Levy interrogates the figure of “the good immigrant” and exposes the precarity of her Windrush-generation protagonists. While older characters keep their heads down, their British-born children assert their right to be ungrateful and unhappy, just like anyone else. Returning to these works in the light of the Windrush scandal, I examine Levy’s early preoccupation with the same anxieties around the figure of the needy, unworthy immigrant she later raises in her short story “Loose Change.” I focus specifically on the role of work and education in the immigrant experience and argue that Levy’s early 1990s works speak directly to the urgent questions highlighted by the Windrush scandal around national identity and belonging.

**Keywords:** Andrea Levy, the good immigrant, Windrush scandal, work, education

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In Andrea Levy’s short story “Loose Change” (2005), the unnamed narrator, a Londoner of Caribbean descent, meets Laylor, a young Uzbek woman who has fled her homeland and is sleeping rough in a London

square. Laylor's story prompts in the narrator a desire to perform an act of kindness. The narrator resolves to take the homeless girl home; she will wash, feed, and clothe her before directing her to a place of safety. This benevolence, she imagines, will be deeply appreciated: "All Laylor's grandchildren would know my name" (Levy, "Loose" 76). However, underlying this fantasy of care, generously given and gratefully received, is a persistent suspicion that she is being taken advantage of: that the young immigrant has "cunningly made me obliged to her" (74). Although the narrator initially assumed she was a holidaying student, Laylor's revealed impoverishment suddenly makes her a monstrous figure of corruption and defilement: "Imagine her dragging that awful stink into my kitchen," shudders the narrator, "[c]upping her filthy hands round my bone china. Smearing my white linen" (74). The narrator instinctively rejects the unspoken call for hospitality and generosity that Laylor's destitution makes on her relative affluence.

Levy's story speaks to contemporary anxieties around migration, integration, and responsibility. It also touches on questions of obligation and self-reliance that underpin narratives of "the good immigrant" and exposes the complex crosscurrent of rights, claims, and prejudices that shape the discourse of national belonging. Although the narrator can conceive of a temporary, delimited act of charity, she balks at a long-standing commitment to engage and sustain relations with the other, worrying: "How would I ever get rid of her?" (74). After the narrator recalls her Caribbean immigrant grandmother, herself once the recipient of the kindness of strangers but who now speaks of "scrounging refugees" and "asylum seekers who can't even speak the language, storming the country" (75), the story ends with a rejection of obligation as the narrator walks away from Laylor, evading her feared neediness.

This article returns to Levy's first two 1990s novels, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Never Far from Nowhere*, and examines her interrogation of the figure of "the good immigrant"—the foreign-born resident or native-born person of colour who overcomes the dominant construction of "bad immigrants—job-stealers, benefits-scroungers, girlfriend-thieves, refugees" (Shukla, "Editor's Note") to become the acceptable

exception in the popular consciousness. Levy’s work exposes the manner in which this identity is bound up with work, education, and productivity but also imbricated by expectations shaped by the immigrant’s class and gender. In her first two novels, *Windrush*-generation immigrants such as couples Beryl and Winston and Newton and Rose attempt to secure their status as good citizens through employment—working for the Post Office, on buses, and in schools and hospitals, i.e., the kind of essential but often low-paid jobs that were commonly filled by first-generation Caribbean immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s. Work for these characters is a means of integration and respectability and a badge of self-sufficiency (which is often demanded, formally or informally, of immigrants), while education is a route to employment and class mobility for their children.

Recalling her own Jamaican parents, who “came to Britain on British Empire passports in order to find more opportunities for work and advancement,” Levy writes that they “believed that in order to get on in this country they should live quietly and not make a fuss. They should assimilate and be as respectable as they possibly could” (Levy, “Back” 5–6). In the semi-autobiographical *Every Light in the House Burnin’*, she instills the same values in Beryl and Winston Jacob, who are motivated by work and family and who, like conscientious guests being reluctantly hosted, are determined “to be no bother at all” (Levy, *Every Light* 88). In the later *Never Far from Nowhere*—a less autobiographical text but one which nevertheless leans heavily on Levy’s own experiences of growing up on a London council estate as the child of immigrants—Vivien, the younger of two sisters, reflects on her Jamaican parents: “I used to think how lucky this country was to have them. How grateful people should be that they came here and did such responsible jobs” (5). This meditation on gratitude draws comparison with journalist Musa Okwonga’s 2016 essay “The Ungrateful Country,” in which he writes about growing up as the British-born child of refugees fleeing Idi Amin’s Uganda:

It was as if, even though we had been born here, we were still seen as guests, our social acceptance only conditional upon our

very best behaviour. I began to have less tolerance for this infantilising outlook, particularly when I looked at how much of the capital's, and indeed the country's, lowest-paid work was being done by immigrants with very little complaint. If there was anyone ungrateful about their presence in the country, it wasn't them, it was Britain. (231)

Okwonga's essay speaks to what he sees as persistent demands in the British cultural discourse for gratitude, humility, and exceptional behaviour from immigrants (particularly, but certainly not exclusively, from refugees) and from British-born people of colour who retain a kind of permanent "immigrant" status in the popular imagination: a level of conduct that is crucially not required of their white British-born peers. Okwonga identifies expectations of "gratitude" as a form of racial exclusion, and he, like Levy's second-generation characters, rejects the insidious assumptions that he ought to be grateful.

Levy's early novels of Windrush-generation parents and their British-born children predate the Windrush scandal, which came to public attention in 2018 but was the culmination of a series of hostile political actions against Commonwealth citizens, most notably the Home Office's destruction, in 2010, of thousands of landing cards of Windrush generation arrivals. ("The Windrush generation" usually refers to immigrants from the Caribbean arriving between 1948 and 1973.)<sup>1</sup> These registration slips were often the only official documentation of a person's date of legal entry into the United Kingdom. Over the following decade, Commonwealth citizens living legally in Britain for decades fell foul of the UK government's 2012 "hostile environment" immigration policy and increasingly found themselves classed as undocumented, denied access to services, and subject to deportation orders.<sup>2</sup> As MP David Lammy—an outspoken critic of Theresa May's Home Office's handling of these cases—observes, the effect of the policy "was to dehumanise, demonise and victimise" a cohort of legal British residents (Lammy). It was, to adapt the title of an account by Amelia Gentlemen, whose journalism was crucial to exposing the scandal, a betrayal of the Windrush generation by the British state.

Written more than twenty years before the Windrush scandal broke, Levy’s early novels foreshadow this betrayal. Levy diagnoses, with considerable acuity, the precarity of her Windrush-generation protagonists and displays a significant scepticism towards the promise that respectable work is a route to acceptance and equality in British society. Where Newton and Rose, like Beryl and Winston, keep their heads down and aspire to be “the truly acceptable face of other people from the Commonwealth” (Levy, *Never Far* 7), their British-born children—following Sara Ahmed’s analysis of happiness as a principle “used to justify oppression” (2)—assert their right to be ungrateful and unhappy, just like everyone else. In light of the Windrush scandal, these works represent Levy’s early concern with some of the same anxieties around the figure of the needy, unworthy immigrant she later raises in “Loose Change.” Focusing specifically on the importance afforded to work and education in the immigrant experience, I argue that Levy’s first two novels speak directly to urgent questions of our current moment, highlighted by the Windrush scandal, around national identity and belonging.

Long before the Windrush scandal was exposed, Levy was cognisant of the precarity of her immigrant characters. When Beryl, well-settled in Britain—having worked multiple jobs and raised her children while retraining as a teacher after her Jamaican qualifications were rejected—finally thinks to visit relations in America and Jamaica, she suddenly experiences unexpected barriers to her free movement: “She needed a passport. They wouldn’t let her have one. After thirty years of living in Britain, teaching British children, paying British taxes, learning British ways, she wasn’t British. She needed to apply and pay £200” (Levy, *Every Light* 8). Beryl’s encounter with the officialdom of citizenship documentation is delivered without narratorial comment. Levy’s lines, however, are resonant with significance: multiple renditions of Britishness accumulate before butting up against the official verdict: “she wasn’t British.” Once decreed, Beryl’s status enters a realm of bureaucracy, requiring paperwork and financial means. When we return to *Every Light in the House Burnin’* today, this brief scene takes on new resonances, speaking unexpectedly loudly to the Windrush scandal and its fallout for a generation of legal residents in Britain suddenly made insecure by the state.

### **I. Birthrights: “My heritage is Britain’s story, too”**

Levy’s legacy as chronicler of the Windrush generation is assured. Her work, as John McLeod observes, speaks to the manner in which “the small island of Great Britain has always been impacted by, and is perpetually mixed up with, the international and racial relations of the outside world” (49). This is as true of her first two highly localised novels set on council estates in North London as it is of *The Long Song*, with its early nineteenth-century Jamaican plantation setting. Levy’s canon attests to what Jeanette Baxter and David James term her “insistence on the transnational and transcultural dimensions of British literature” (2). Having come to writing relatively late, Levy describes herself as disconnected from British literary traditions, only belatedly discovering “the golden thread of Black British writing—Sam Selvon, George Lamming, Jackie Kay, Caryl Philips, Fred D’Aguiar amongst others” (“Andrea Levy Interview”). Her turn to writing in the late 1980s was prompted by a desire to “explore my British Caribbean ancestry, and to place that heritage where I think it belongs—squarely in the mainstream of British history” (“Andrea Levy Interview”). Her work subsequently speaks to the inextricable entanglement of Britain and the Caribbean. “Britain made the Caribbean,” she points out; “[i]n return my ancestors, through their forced labour and their enterprise, contributed greatly to the development of this country. My heritage is Britain’s story, too” (qtd. in Lea).

This claim of a reciprocal influence and shared heritage and fortunes pervades and drives Levy’s fiction. Talking with Gary Younge, Levy observes: “I was not at all curious about Jamaica as a child. . . . We were told, not in so many words, to be ashamed of it” (“I Started”). Indeed, Levy recalls that she only discovered that her father came over on the *Empire Windrush* when images of the ship appeared on television and he casually mentioned it as he was doing the ironing. She describes how, through creative writing, she came to understand that her own deeply inculcated shame about her Jamaican heritage, which had seemed to signify a rejection of black experience, was better understood as an expression of the contradictions, pressures, and fissures of her identity—that “my experience of growing up in this country,” internalising racism and rejecting blackness, “was part of what it meant to be black” (Levy,

“Back” 11). In *Every Light in the House Burnin’ and Never Far from Nowhere*, Levy mines her parents’ experiences of emigrating to Britain in the late 1940s as well as her own memories of growing up as the child of immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s in a predominantly white, working-class area to construct state of the nation narratives of British identity in the late twentieth century.

The state of the nation that Levy writes is, for her young black characters, complicated. Appearing on a rising tide of black British fiction, in a decade when, as Sara Upstone writes, the newly recognised genre “found its confidence and declared itself a permanent fixture on the literary map” (123), *Every Light in the House Burnin’ and Never Far from Nowhere* do not necessarily betray the same “1990s commitment to black British confidence and belonging” (131) for which writers such as Caryl Phillips and Hanif Kureishi and—slightly later—Zadie Smith and Monica Ali were lauded. In a 2014 revisionist essay, Dave Gunning argues against the common reading of Levy’s first three novels (including her 1999 work, *Fruit of the Lemon*) as bildungsromane: a designation which imposes “a celebratory vision of individual and social transformation on novels that in fact are far more concerned to trace the constraints and lack of meaningful change in the lives of their young female protagonists” (9). Rather than narratives of development and progress, he argues, Levy’s early works are better understood as “explorations of loss and limitation” (9). In my own reading of Levy’s first two novels, I similarly identify a more cautious, less celebratory exploration of social limits and constraints than that which is commonly ascribed to black British writing from this period.

Gunning’s essay is primarily a response to Mark Stein’s influential reading of black British “novels of transformation,” as he calls them in the subtitle of his book. Stein identifies Angela in *Every Light in the House Burnin’* as typical of a wave of confident, combative young British-born characters created by a generation of writers who “speak and write from a much more empowered position than the *Windrush* veterans” (17), such as Selvon and Lamming. Stein centres Levy in this confident new cohort when he cites, as characteristic of their outlook, her declaration: “If Englishness doesn’t define me, then redefine Englishness” (17). *Every*

*Light in the House Burnin'*, concludes Stein, embodies a generational progression by "contrasting an accepting and passive Mr Jacobs with a determined and therefore successful Ange" (48). The stark generational contrast that Stein draws, however, minimises the nuance of Levy's novel. For Stein, Winston's agonised deathbed raging—"The loudest noise he had ever made in his life" (Levy, *Every Light* 243)—articulates a belated fury and signals the novel's "outright didactic" depiction of the suffering of the migrant generation and their failure to promptly and adequately protest their condition (Stein 48). However, in prioritising "Ange's success story" (47), Stein's reading diminishes the difficulties that her parents faced, trying to survive and raise children in a new and often hostile environment. It also overlooks the multiple contradictory pressures that shape Angela's development. Angela's new, confident middle-class British identity, as Levy makes clear, is forged at the expense of her class and racial filiation, and a cognate transformation is similarly both sought and mourned in *Never Far from Nowhere*, in which Vivien muses: "I had grown too big for our council flat, but not sure where else I would fit" (281).

Stein's reading of Levy's early work is rooted in lines such as the following, from *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, in which Angela, offering to mediate with health professionals on behalf of her sick father, reflects: "I knew this society better than my parents. My parents' strategy was to keep as quiet as possible in the hope that no one would know that they had sneaked into this country. They wanted to be no bother at all. But I had grown up in its English ways. I could confront it, rail against it, fight it, because it was mine—a birthright" (88). This claim to a "birthright" sidesteps gratitude; it functions as a declaration of native entitlement. At the same time—and as Stein notes—despite her grammar school and college education and subsequent social advancement, Angela retains "a learned fear of authority" (Stein 88). In this novel, as in *Never Far from Nowhere*, teachers, health visitors, doctors, and council workers are gatekeepers to advancement, services, and knowledge. Even when Angela, towards the end of the novel, is a graphic designer moving in middle-class circles and thinks to herself, "I had made that social climb to a position where I could have influence" (Levy, *Every Light* 198), she



still continues to face barriers, both external and internal, founded on both class and race. When Angela encounters an insolent nurse on her father’s hospital ward, she is prepared (unlike her mother) to challenge the woman but also instinctively self-polices in order to avoid being perceived as aggressive or threatening to resist the racist trope of the “angry black woman.” She observes: “I tried to make myself smaller in case she felt intimidated” (152). The confrontation with the dismissive nurse leaves Angela agitated—“I could feel my face redden and my heart pound” (152)—and envisioning a fantasised violent response in which “I kicked her and kicked her” (153). Instead, Angela is left powerless in the face of the woman’s casual disregard for her father’s dignity. Angela’s hard-won, middle-class professional status and the seemingly secure social standing it conveys, like that of Vivien in *Never Far from Nowhere* who follows a similar trajectory of grammar school and art college, is, as the title of the latter novel suggests, always precarious. In recognising this precarity, Levy does much to problematise optimistic narratives of the growing confidence and assurance of the British-born children of the Windrush generation. While her early novels partially fit Stein’s model of black British novels of transformation, by paying attention to the limitations of her young protagonists’ sense of security in their British identity, we can see how Levy’s work tempers celebration with caution.

*Every Light in the House Burnin’* is rooted in the story of the Windrush generation and their ongoing legacy as it plays out across British society in the twentieth century. For Levy, understanding the context and impact of Windrush—common shorthand for Britain’s centuries-long imperial ventures in the Caribbean and the subsequent ties to the imperial centre that drew economic migrants from that region in the mid-twentieth century—is crucial to understanding Britain today.<sup>3</sup> In “Back to My Own Country,” she excavates her motivation for writing, recalling Stuart Hall’s commonly cited observation: “*The very notion of Great Britain’s ‘greatness’ is bound up with Empire. . . . Euro-scepticism and little Englander nationalism could hardly survive if people understood whose sugar flowed through English blood, and rotted English teeth*” (qtd. in Levy, “Back” 17; emphasis in original). In “Un-Settling ‘The Heritage,’

Re-Imagining the Post-Nation,” the published version of a lecture from which similar ideas can be drawn, Hall discusses the manner in which the nation-state uses notions of heritage and culture to construct a national narrative, cementing relatively modern principles of free speech, the rule of law, the welfare state, and other treasured characteristics, as intrinsic to “what came to be known, misleadingly, as *the* British way of life” (6; emphasis in original). Whereas these values are explicitly drawn upon to shore up the national narrative, Hall notes that silences and absences also perform a crucial function, including “that great unspoken British value—‘whiteness’” (7).

Levy’s early fictions, as I discuss below, expose such silences; they point to the manner in which her characters can inhabit and perform the minutiae of working-class British culture—reading the *Daily Mirror*, watching Val Doonican on the TV, holidaying by coach to Butlins—and yet remain marginalised. And while her novels may stand somewhat apart from the kind of manifestations of “Heritage-construction” that Hall interrogates—art galleries and museums, i.e., the cultural institutions that comprise the British Heritage industry—they nevertheless participate in the same “unsettling and subversion” (Hall 8) of the definition of British culture that Hall calls for. *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and *Never Far from Nowhere* construct narratives of black, immigrant, working-class, female experience (those shared by characters such as Angela, Vivien, and Olive), and they present them, crucially, as quintessentially British narratives. As Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips observe in *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*, “the *Windrush* sailed through a gateway in history, on the other side of which was the end of Empire and a wholesale reassessment of what it meant to be British” (6). In her fiction, Levy contributes to that reassessment.

For Phillips and Phillips, the fundamental significance of the struggle faced by the Windrush generation did not pertain to individuals and their acceptance into British society but to a more crucial existential inquiry into the nature of multi-racial Britain: “if our citizenship was to mean more than the paper on which it was written,” they observe, “it would be necessary for the whole country to reassess not only its own identity, and its history, but also what it meant to be British” (5).

Published in 1998, this account precedes the Windrush scandal, which was inextricably bound up with issues around documentation, but the offhand reference to written confirmations of citizenship carries a peculiar weight today. With the implementation of the hostile environment policy, the Home Office required from Windrush generation citizens official documentary evidence for every year of residency before 1973, placing the burden of proof on the individual to demonstrate their legal residency in the UK. In what Gentleman terms “a final shrug of post-colonial nonchalance” (9), the government—having destroyed the landing cards that would prove date of disembarkation—purposefully reclassified a group of legal long-term residents as illegal immigrants with the sole aim of meeting political targets for reducing net migration figures. “[F]or many,” writes Gentleman, “the official scepticism about their status set off a devastating existential crisis that punctured any sense of security about their identity and the notions of belonging and home” (8). As Levy’s work demonstrates, the precarity and vulnerability to the whims of the state experienced by her black working-class characters—a precarity exposed by the Windrush scandal—extends beyond and long precedes the scandal itself, much as the hostility of the state is revealed long before the hostile environment becomes policy.

Notions of security, belonging, and home are central to Levy’s early narratives, which often focus on housing, in all its emotive, class-laden symbolism. Discussing the significance of council housing and the welfare state in *Never Far from Nowhere*, Matthew Taunton observes that houses and flats “operate as markers of class, and the council estate in particular is a symbol of poverty, crime and unemployment” (24). Housing also functions in Levy’s first novels as a marker of subjection to the regulatory bodies of the state. Because her characters live in social housing, their capacity to shape and define their domestic environment is always circumscribed by external governmental forces. In *Every Light in the House Burnin’*, Winston and Beryl, annual pilgrims to the Ideal Home Exhibition, spend years on housing waiting lists, visiting prospective properties when sent “a ‘choice’” (Levy, *Every Light* 217). “We were always full of hope,” recalls Angela; passing through “lovely leafy places. Places where you’d love to live,” the family dream of receiving the

offer of a comfortable, desirable home, only, inevitably, to be met with another poorly designed council estate: places where “[n]obody *wants* to [live]—they have to” (217–18; emphasis in original).

Similarly, when Olive in *Never Far from Nowhere* applies for housing for herself and her young daughter, she must first battle various local authority agencies. When her sister Vivien congratulates her on her pleasant new flat, telling her, “you’re really lucky,” Olive retorts: “It’s not luck. . . . I worked hard for this. No one has ever handed me anything on a plate” (Levy, *Never Far* 232). With these words, Olive rejects what she knows is assumed about her: as a young, black, working-class single mother living on benefits, she epitomises the stereotype of the ungrateful feckless poor. As Taunton reveals in his article, however, Levy’s novel exposes the manner in which the ostensibly progressive equality of the welfare state—the fundamental principle that “it’s the same for everyone,” as the social security woman tells Olive (Levy, *Never Far* 194)—is an artificial parity. In reality, “only the poor have to go through the humiliating experience of trying to extract what little they are entitled to from the intransigent representatives of the state” (Taunton 33). Social housing, on which Taunton focuses, is the most visible example of Levy’s exposition of how an “unfeeling bureaucracy” (Taunton 33) forces citizens such as Olive, who is repeatedly belittled and humiliated—framed at one point for drug possession by representatives of the state and threatened with having her child taken into care—to become supplicants to the state’s “generosity” in granting the services and provisions to which they are entitled. The vulnerability of Levy’s characters to the vagaries of the state, as Beryl discovers when she finds herself in need of a passport, also extends beyond housing and into the fundamental freedoms and entitlements of citizenship.

## II. Work and Happiness

If Levy’s early novels are alert to the precarity of her Caribbean immigrant characters and their British-born children, they also typically depict the pursuit of security and rootedness through work. Work is the driver of emigration, the means of settlement and “better opportunity” (Levy, *Every Light* 6), an indicator of class, and also, crucially,

a flag to signal usefulness, respectability, diligence, and self-sufficiency. In *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, Levy models Winston and Beryl on her own parents, Winston and Amy Levy—middle-class professionals in Jamaica who found their social status much reduced when they moved to Britain. In the novel, Winston, “a man thought up in the 1930s and 40s” (Levy, *Every Light* 2), works the late shift for the Post Office, without comment or complaint: “If you asked what he did at work, he’d shrug and say that he worked for the Post Office” (3). When Beryl, like Levy’s mother, finds that “the English wouldn’t let her teach” (7), she takes in sewing until she can afford to study for the diploma that will enable her to return to her profession. Levy’s portrait of these parental figures is one of fortitude and resilience, and in *Never Far from Nowhere*, these same values are transferred to Newton and Rose.

Newton, as Vivien recalls, works for London Transport, starting as a ticket collector on buses before “he got what he called a ‘chance’” and trained to be a mechanic—“a skilled job,” he proudly tells his daughter, “a training” (Levy, *Never Far* 2). Assured that his labour helps sustain his local environment, Newton is embedded in his adoptive city through his work. Without him, he tells Vivien, “them buses stop halfway up hill, ‘em wheels spinning and not going nowhere, puffing black smoke” (2). Without him, “the fleet of London buses would be in a very poor condition” (2). Rose similarly derives a sense of pride and proprietorship from her work. Doing two jobs, working as a school dinner lady and in the local outpatients department serving refreshments, she declares that, with the tea trolley profits, “[w]e are buying new wings for the hospital” (3; emphasis added). Through work, Newton and Rose contribute to their new communities and assert their usefulness as good citizens.

Rose is a complicated figure in the novel, her pride bound up with a racialised investment in her own superiority over other immigrants. As Olive describes it, “[a]lthough she knew that she and my dad were not the only people who came over here from Jamaica in the fifties, she liked to think that because they were light-skinned they were the only decent people who came” (7). Through Rose’s notions of superiority and in the contrasting experiences of Vivien and Olive, Levy exposes what she refers to in an interview with Susan Alice Fischer as

the “pigmentocracy”—the internalised system of colourism that values whiteness above all else, a system “handed to black people as a way of dividing and ruling” (“Andrea Levy in Conversation” 135). Levy later explores the faux-scientific categorisation of “mulattos” and “quadroons” and its roots in slavery in *The Long Song*, but in *Never Far from Nowhere*, she demonstrates its persistence in the internalised colourism of contemporary Britain. Rose’s attitude brings her into conflict with dark-skinned Olive, who struggles to explain to her mother her need to define herself and her white-passing daughter Amy as black: “I liked being black. I wanted to be black. Being black was not a bad thing, being black is something to be proud of” (Levy, *Never Far* 7–8). Black, for Olive, is political, whereas for Rose, hampered by snobbery and internalised racism, it is something to be minimised and overcome. When she urges Olive not to teach Amy that she is black—“she’ll grow up confused”—Olive retorts: “No, *I* grew up confused—she’s growing up black” (8; emphasis in original).

These fault lines between the generations run deeper and deeper through *Never Far from Nowhere* as Olive accumulates experiences of racist aggression and becomes increasingly frustrated with her mother’s refusal to acknowledge Olive’s lived reality. While the children in Levy’s first two novels each seek their own path through growing up black in Britain—whether through education, travel, politics, or relationships—the parents, as Younge observes, are instead “more interested in keeping their heads above water than in issues of race, racism and class inequality.” This instinctive social conservatism, a survival tactic for the economically and socially vulnerable, frequently exacerbates the distance between parents and children in Levy’s work and between Rose and Olive in particular.

At the same time, despite the frustrations of London children with their Jamaican parents, both *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and *Never Far from Nowhere* are at their most tender and compassionate when they recognise the largely unacknowledged labour of the older generation. Angela recalls her mother juggling teacher training with home life: “After three years of washing, cooking, college, feeding, homework, bed, washing, cooking, college, feeding, homework, bed, she got her

diploma” (Levy, *Every Light* 7–8). Later, studying part-time with the Open University while teaching and raising her family, Beryl would go grocery shopping and cook dinner before retreating into her bedroom where, with no room for a desk, she “sat on the edge of her bed and splayed her books out around her and read and wrote for her degree” (8). In *Never Far from Nowhere*, Vivien recalls, in a similarly reflective tone of retrospective recognition, how after working two jobs, Rose “always came home exhausted and would fall into a chair, legs splayed, with her coat still on. Then after five minutes in this undignified position she’d get up and start her jobs at home” (Levy, *Never Far* 3). While Rose is a more ambiguous, difficult character than Beryl—more invested in an insidious internalised colourism, more closed, less forgiving of her daughters—this early description of her weary body in an unguarded moment again calls for compassion. In both novels, the parental figures are described early and in terms of work, indicating that work—its demands and aspirations—is the first step to understanding who they are.

Gainful employment, for each of Levy’s Windrush-generation characters, is a prophylactic against becoming the bad immigrant. When Olive imagines her mother’s fantasised arrival in the UK, she pictures a bowler-hatted official welcoming Rose and Newton, declaring them exactly “what we in this country are looking for,” while telling the ramshackle remainder that they may stay, “if you don’t make a noise and don’t breed” (7). The unnamed mass from which Rose and her husband will naturally be sifted are the immigrants who must be tolerated and whose uncivilised behaviours must be tamed. Rose’s fears of being mistaken for a bad immigrant are comically rendered but nevertheless rational in the face of prevalent prejudices, many of which litter the text, such as that expressed by Nick, a public school boy who says that “most people on council estates don’t work at all. . . . [T]hey just scrounge off the state” (204), or the “compliment” that Vivien receives from a friend—“but you’re not coloured like them others” (87)—a commendation that distinguishes her as the exception to the rule. Rose, justifiably, always feels under social pressure to prove herself respectable.

Work—from education to jobs and career aspirations—becomes more complicated for the second-generation characters. As with all other state

institutions Levy depicts, the education system, commonly championed as a straightforward route to social advancement, is shaped by underlying racism and classism. While grammar school provides opportunities for Angela and Vivien that are unavailable to those, like Olive, who remain in the comprehensive system, education presents covert barriers to progression for each of these characters. Under pressure from their parents, who have experienced the realities of economic insecurity and want financial independence for their children, the younger generation are taught to walk a line between betterment and pragmatism. When Angela is encouraged by a charismatic teacher to apply to drama school, her parents are appalled. "You don't want to get fancy ideas," says Winston, "—you'll only be disappointed" (Levy, *Every Light* 192), while Beryl advises, "You want to go to college, get a good job, then you can think about doing all your fancy things in the evening" (192). In much the same way, having given up on trying to influence rebellious Olive, Rose pushes Vivien towards what she considers to be a sensible career, urging her to "study hard if you want to be a teacher or a nurse" (Levy, *Never Far* 115).

These modest aspirations are bound up with gender expectations. When Angela eventually leaves for art college, her father asks, "what are you doing at college—typing and that?" (Levy, *Every Light* 63). They are also crucially forged by both race and class. For Taunton, while *Never Far from Nowhere* is commonly read as being "about" race, the prominence of the setting pushes us to "understand Olive and Vivien as being defined as council estate dwellers as much as they are defined by being black" (26). In *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, the middle-class confidence of Angela's teacher evades Winston and Beryl, who are haunted by a persistent fear, rooted in class insecurity, of being embarrassed. Even as Winston is dying painfully of cancer, Angela's mother is reluctant to have her daughter speak with the doctor: "she was scared I'd make a fuss, scared I'd shame them" (Levy, *Every Light* 87). At the same time, however, class is always entwined with race for Levy's characters. When Angela's parents tell her "We're not like everybody else" (84) or "People like us don't get famous" (192), race is the unspoken, insuperable factor that directs their advice.



Ambition and being happy with your lot are in precarious balance in Levy’s work. When Angela tries to persuade her parents of the economic viability of an acting career, Beryl urges her to pragmatism: to disconnect work from happiness. She advises her daughter:

“[A] job is a job, you don’t have to like it. You just have to do it—you have to live. Look at me and yer dad, we do our job to earn money and we do other things that we enjoy.”

“Like what?”

“Like other things—I can’t think at the moment—other things.” (191)

Angela exposes her mother’s lie that life and happiness can somehow exist on the periphery of a working day. Like both Olive and Vivien, she is not prepared to sacrifice happiness for getting by. Where the parents urge caution, prudence, and modest aspiration, their children are more critical, demanding, ungrateful, and sometimes unhappy.

As Levy’s younger-generation characters reject the requirement to perform as “the good immigrant,” they also counter related demands to be grateful and happy. In her feminist critique of happiness, Ahmed dissects the pressure towards happiness in contemporary cultural discourse and observes that the history of feminism is “a history of making trouble” by women refusing “to follow other people’s goods” or “refusing to make others happy” (60). Feminists, she argues, unsettle and disturb the status quo when they fail to find happiness where it is promised: in marriage, in motherhood, in domesticity. The figure of the “feminist killjoy,” she suggests, sets out purposefully to dispose of an oppressive, limiting “joy” imposed on her by others (65). Ahmed also extends this feminist analysis to consider the ways the expectation of happiness and gratitude has been imposed on broader groups. As she observes, “[i]f an oppressed person does not smile or show signs of being happy, then he or she is read as being negative: as angry, hostile, unhappy and so on” (66). In Levy’s novels, repressed anger and tension repeatedly surface in the text. A childhood squabble over a game quickly escalates to cries of “go back to where you came from—Blackie” (Levy, *Every Light* 57). Echoing the discourse of the good and bad immigrant and simultaneously exposing

the fallacy that to be good means to be welcomed and accepted, Vivien, the “good” daughter who benefits from grammar school and social mobility, observes early on in an unsettling line that, from childhood, “I knew that English people hated us” (Levy, *Never Far* 5). Olive, her “bad” (troublesome, unhappy, ungrateful) sister, increasingly refuses to tame or deny her anger: “I was born a criminal in this country and everyone can see my crime. I can’t hide it no matter what I do. It turns heads and takes smiles from faces. I’m black” (272). When Olive refuses to be silent, she knowingly breaks a code of appeasement and accepts her role as a problem. As Ahmed writes, “[t]o speak out of anger as a woman of color is to confirm your position as the cause of tension; your anger is what threatens the social bond” (67–68). For Olive, there is no easy solution to be found to her discomfort in Britain, and eventually she determines to move to Jamaica.

### III. Conclusion

In an introduction to *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Zadie Smith describes reading Hanif Kureishi’s 1990 novel for the first time and the pleasure of encountering black British characters who “gleefully upended” received notions of class and race: “The immigrants here are not always good and hardworking, and Karim is neither consistently right-on nor especially grateful. There is an equal opportunity policy here when it comes to bad behaviour—everyone is shown to be capable of it.” Written just a few years later than *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Levy’s first two novels contain a generation of Caribbean immigrants who, like her own parents, work hard and cause no trouble. These texts are also concerned, however, with depicting a younger generation who are less confident in both the efficacy and desirability of this survival tactic. Different in many respects, Kureishi’s and Levy’s novels nevertheless share an instinct to decentre whiteness in their depictions of late twentieth-century London and—just as Kureishi’s Karim declares himself an “Englishman (though not proud of it)” (Kureishi 3)—to lay claim, without gratitude or apology, to their Britishness.

In his essay “The Ungrateful Country,” Okwonga describes attending Eton College, being “grateful for the opportunity I had been given”

(226), and his youthful determination to be “an unofficial ambassador for black people” by working harder than anyone else (225). This sense of gratitude, however, is sundered by the 1993 murder of Stephen Lawrence, which exposed what would eventually be acknowledged as the institutional racism of the Metropolitan Police. For Okwonga, “Lawrence’s death annihilated the lies we told ourselves—that if we were just good little black boys and girls, that if we just stayed away from the bad crowds, no harm would come to us” (227). In *Never Far from Nowhere*, Vivien remains deeply invested in the narrative of hard work and successful integration. Surrounded by “certificates for exams passed and merits for jobs well done,” she refuses to believe her sister’s warning: “you’ll never be accepted” (Levy, *Never Far* 276–77). In contrast, Okwonga eventually concludes that hard work and a pleasant demeanour will never change the attitude of white Britons towards immigrants but could only ever make one an exception to the rule, and, like Olive in Levy’s novel, he determines to leave Britain for good.

For Olive, the crisis point that pushes her to abandon her country comes when she is pulled over by police for a traffic violation and subjected to racist abuse before being arrested for the possession of cannabis the police have planted. Vivien thinks her sister’s decision to “return” to Jamaica (a country she has never visited) is wrongheaded and naïve and before her court date tries to reassure her: “if you’re innocent then you’ll be all right” (Levy, *Never Far* 269). However, Olive, whose darker skin has always attracted a level of attention and aggression that her pale-skinned sister has rarely experienced, anticipates sheltered Vivien’s rude awakening into the persistent realities of British racism. “[O]ne day,” thinks Olive, articulating the precarity and the threat of dispossession with which Levy imbues the novel’s title, “she’ll realise that in England, people like her are never far from nowhere. Never” (273).

Levy’s first two novels are historical works—set between the 1960s and 1990s and rooted in emigration patterns of the 1940s and 1950s—but reading them today, in the 2020s and after the Windrush scandal, they take on a renewed significance. While *Every Light in the House Burnin’* makes visible the casual racism experienced by Angela and her family as she grows up in the 1960s and 1970s, Levy’s second novel

is more consciously troubled and unsettled in its trajectory. *Never Far from Nowhere* is often celebrated for its closing lines, as Vivien replies to a stranger's query about her origins: "'My family are from Jamaica,' I told her. 'But I am English'" (Levy, *Never Far* 282). Nevertheless, Olive's prophecy of Vivien's precarity foreshadows these seemingly confident lines, weighing them down with a bleak pessimism about the reality of black lives in Britain at the end of the twentieth century that the novel attempts to overcome but can never fully bring itself to erase. Just as in "Loose Change," written twelve years later, Levy exposes the insidious cultural narrative of needy, "scrounging," lazy, dishonest immigrants, a narrative that corrodes good will and generosity, so, in this early novel, she offers some optimism for Britain's multicultural future but remains cautiously sceptical of the willingness of Britain to expand its limited definition of Britishness to include all citizens. "Loose Change," with its encounter between an undocumented political refugee and a British-born descendant of a Commonwealth citizen, expands Levy's concern for divergent histories of migration that provide complex transnational encounters that move beyond simple configurations of race, nationality, and migrant status. Like the novels, however, the short story foregrounds Levy's scepticism of any too-comforting progress narratives of Britain's post-Windrush history.

## Notes

- 1 The 1971 Immigration Act, which restricted Commonwealth citizens' entitlement to indefinite leave to remain (a legal status indicating one's permanent lawful status in the UK as a settled person), came into force in 1973.
- 2 In a speech given in the House of Commons on 22 October 2013, the Home Secretary Theresa May stated: "This is not just about making the UK a more hostile place for illegal immigrants—it is also about fairness" (May). The commonly used phrase "hostile environment," however, originates in a 2012 interview in *The Telegraph*, in which May explains: "The aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration" (Kirkup and Winnett).
- 3 The term "Windrush," taken from HMT *Empire Windrush*, which docked at Tilbury on 22 June 1948, is commonly evoked to signify Britain's experience of large-scale post-war immigration from the Caribbean. In *Beyond Windrush*, Brown and Rosenberg cite Stuart Hall's declaration that "the history of the black diaspora in Britain begins here, [with the arrival of the *Windrush*]" and argue that

[i]n contemporary Britain, ‘Windrush’ stands metonymically as a marker for the emergence of an increasingly multicultural national polity, in which the old self-understanding of Englishness as racially white gradually cedes prominence to a newer conception of Britishness—one that strives to include the burgeoning population of citizens who trace their heritage back to the once-colonized spaces of the British Empire. (3)

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