

July's People: Adoption and Kinship in Andrea Levy's Fiction

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Abstract: This essay sees Andrea Levy's prolonged preoccupation with matters of family, kinship, and adoption as central to her literary articulation of race, empire, and slavery. It explores how Levy presents the colonial legacies that have entangled Britain and Jamaica as distinctly bodily affairs that impact upon kinship and family-making and argues that her representation of these histories is part of her firm attempt to expose the centrality of colonialism and slavery to the constitution of both Britain and Britons. Yet in pursuing this vital and politically urgent task, Levy risks upholding the synchronisation of *corporis* and *cultura*—the body and its historical cultivation—essential to colonial modernity's exalting of “blood cultures” that assume the sanguinary transfusion of historical and cultural particulars within the body itself. This risk can be sighted particularly in Levy's representation of transracial adoption and her appropriation of the rhetoric of “illegitimate” kinship. With particular reference to *The Long Song* (2010), the essay considers how Levy's invaluable attention to the history of forced adoptions at the heart of slavery's brutality is problematised by adoption's figurative requisitioning for wider (well-intentioned) critical purposes. Ultimately, the essay claims that Levy's laudable literary mission does not always exert sustained pressure on the biocentric norms of colonial modernity's sanguinary imagination.

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I. Kinsman, Kinship

When the British Library announced on its website in February 2020 the acquisition of the Andrea Levy archive for the sum of £140,000, it provided links to a number of fascinating images of Levy's papers. These included a handwritten working draft of the incident in *Small Island* (2004) when Hortense and Queenie go shopping amidst the grey austerity of post-war London, a page titled "Number six" that maps out an idea for a novel unrealised at the point of Levy's untimely death, and a note that records a family connection between the characters of *Small Island* and *The Long Song* (2010). That Levy was rather taken with the existence of this link is evidenced by her mention of it in interviews at the time of *The Long Song*'s publication. "There is also a link to *Small Island*," she told Pam Johnson, for example. "I'm not going to tell you what it is! I put it in for the careful reader to find! It gave me a great deal of pleasure to have that link between *The Long Song* and *Small Island*" (Johnson). The link is also mentioned in one of the "Reading Group Questions" appended to the initial United Kingdom hardback publication of *The Long Song*: "There is a link between *Small Island* and *The Long Song*. Did you spot this?" (328). The archived note clears up the mystery.¹ It reveals that Louise Kinsman, one of the three grandchildren of July, the first-person narrator of *The Long Song*, is the young version of Gilbert Joseph's mother, Louise, who makes a brief appearance in *Small Island* when Gilbert mentions her marriage to his Jewish war-veteran father who converted to Christianity on the battlefield of Ypres: "My mother, Louise, took him in, pleased to be parading round this nearly white husband" (Levy, *Small Island* 109). As a means of intertextual connection, this detail is exceedingly slight—even the most "careful reader" can (and, in my case, did) easily miss it—but also remarkably telling. It signals a recurring preoccupation in Levy's fiction that underpins her literary approach to history, culture, and empire more generally: biogenetic relations and the bloodlines of kinship.

As the British daughter of Jamaican migrants, raised in the white working-class environs of North London's Highbury, kinship came to matter greatly to Levy, not least because of the remoteness—in terms of

both knowledge and geography—of her wider family relations. She told Susan Alice Fischer in 2005:

I can't tell you what it's like to grow up in an *incredibly* nuclear family—a nucleus—because we had nobody else at all. And then you have a sense that actually you do have family, that you have a connection, that you do go back. It sounds crazy, but it's a revelation because I've just grown up in this tiny, tiny world. So when people talk about grandparents—I never knew a grandparent. When my grandmother died it meant nothing to us kids—which is incredible. Connecting with that again—I think that's where it started off. Now I want to know *everything*. (123; emphasis in original)

As Faith's journey in *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) testifies in particular, Levy's pursuit of family histories is the lens through which readers witness the wider longstanding entanglements of Jamaica and the UK due to colonialism, slavery, and post-war migration. To uncover lines of filial connection to ancestors several generations previous, as does Faith while on her life-changing visit to Jamaica, is indeed to "know *everything*": not just one's consanguineous connections to a whole host of people who dwell in Jamaica that include Arawak indigenes, Scottish colonists, Irish overseers, and African-descended slaves, but to the entire cat's cradle of cultural and historical connections that explains why so many peoples and cultures arrived in the Caribbean, bonding inevitably if rarely equitably. For these reasons, in Levy's writing there is barely a distinction between the seemingly private or discrete matter of family-making and the brutal public and global affairs of empire and its aftermath. "[Britain] provided the people—black and white—who made up my ancestry," she declares at the close of her essay "Back to My Own Country" (2014): "My heritage is Britain's story too" (19). In tracing the bloodlines of kinship, we uncover the interlinking ligatures of generational entanglement that make us all related to each other in one way or another. Ancestry, it seems, is simultaneously biological and discursive, to the extent that the domains of *corporis* and *cultura*—bodies

and the social, cultural, and historical matters within which they are situated—merge into one. Consider Faith's declaration as *Fruit of the Lemon* nears its climax: "I am the great-grandchild of Cecelia Hilton. I am descended from Katherine whose mother was a slave. . . . Let them say what they like. Because I am the bastard child of Empire and I will have my day" (Levy 327). Histories transfuse bodies: the bloodlines of kinship transport the bloody history of colonialism and slavery that ultimately shape subjectivity. In Levy's fiction, family is the modality in which empire is lived.

Critics have remarked upon Levy's preoccupation with family as the primary prism of history. Jeannette Baxter, for example, reads Faith's triumphant vocalisation of her filial relations as clinching *Fruit of the Lemon's* history lesson: "Faith comes a little closer to understanding her own, individual history as it exists in an intricate, and often difficult, relation to a rich ancestral collective" (87). Yet we might pause to enquire further into Levy's alignment of biogenetic and historical lines of relation and consider critically the tensions that emerge if we put her rhetoric of kinship under pressure, as is my purpose in this essay. In particular, I am concerned with two elements of Levy's tendency to see history through the lens of kinship: her perception of consanguineous kinship as transporting historical materiality and her use of specific kinds of kinship relations, especially those germane to adoptive families, primarily for symbolic purposes. As regards the latter, Faith's embrace of bastardy is a case in point. Strictly speaking, Faith is no bastard—she was not born out of wedlock—and her tale never significantly engages with the troubling experiential domain of living an "illegitimate" ² life. In reaching figuratively for the standpoint of "the bastard child," Faith fashions an "illegitimate" personhood sourced in an unsanctioned history of colonial Jamaica—one in which children born beyond the bonds of betrothal abounded (as the sketch of Faith's family tree testifies), not least because of the sexual exploitation and assault of women on the plantations. In declaring herself a bastard, Faith acknowledges the pernicious kinships wrought by colonialism and slavery, which contradict the myths of racial purity and distinctiveness, and presents an alternative genealogy in which the realities of kin breach the

borders of racial kind. Family *is* history, again. Her strategic use of the troubling term “bastard” fully admits a submerged history of cloistered and condemned kinships. As Saidiya Hartman observes, “[b]astard was what the Dutch called their mixed-race brood; the term implied an illegitimate child as well as a mongrel” (78). Faith’s pronouncement may be less concerned with signalling an eager membership to a “rich ancestral collective,” as Baxter suggests, than it is keen to identify the violence of ancestry as a mechanism of racism and dispossession. As I demonstrate below, it is for these reasons that *The Long Song* is especially preoccupied with those “wayward lines of descent” (Hartman 77), to borrow Hartman’s phrase, that result from “murky adulterated bloodlines, rapacious masters, derelict fathers, and violated mothers” (78). As Hartman conveys in her chilling account of the lives and kinships broken by Atlantic slavery, *Lose Your Mother* (2007), countless enslaved peoples spent their servitude “catering to sexual appetites and bearing children in the role of concubines and wives” (68). Levy’s final novel does significant service in exposing its central character’s fortunes as tied firmly to this impoverishing regime of abuse.

Yet in enfolding the concrete matter of history within a principally figurative presentation of kinship—“*I am the bastard child*” (Levy, *Fruit of the Lemon* 327; emphasis added)—Faith’s pronouncement also threatens to evacuate the very materiality of that history and the “illegitimate” children conceived as its consequence at the very moment they are valuably centred. As I shall explore further, Levy’s work does not so much align the linked realms of family and history as risk dissolving the materiality of the latter into the figurative resources of the former. The tensions this dissolution creates can be readily discerned when we turn our attention, as I do below, towards Levy’s representation of those unlike Faith who are conceived, either through passion or brutishness, outside the legitimating mechanism of wedlock: empire’s bastard children delivered as such. While Levy’s attempt, especially in *The Long Song*, to attend to their untold stories is driven by her highly laudable quest to expose the hypocrisies of colonial and racist imaginaries, her representation of these figures is constrained by a sometimes modest apprehension of the concrete particulars of these distinctly

precarious lives. When this happens, the very historicity that Levy seeks to lay bare threatens to recede.

II. Empire's "Illegitimate" Children

Levy's later fiction is preoccupied with empire's "illegitimate" children. Their conception and informal adoption play a considerable part in both *Small Island* and *The Long Song*. In placing their presence and stories centre-stage, Levy valuably participates in the wider recent exposure of *ad hoc* family-making as a pivotal but not exceptional outcome of colonialism's racial and economic order. With genealogical relations sourced in slavery often so hard to trace—as Hartman notes, because of the concealing of relations considered murky and wayward—their pursuit has become a preoccupation on both sides of the Atlantic. A recent example is Hazel Carby's compelling tale of filial and colonial histories, *Imperial Intimacies* (2019), that traces her extended family's fortunes across centuries and continents and demonstrates how it is bound up with the colonial entanglements of Jamaica and the UK. Carby's account of her connections through the ages to Bristol and Kingston, Coleby and Hope Bay, exposes time and again how kinship and parenting are rarely left unscathed by race and austerity. The repositioning of children within wider kinship structures, raised by those not strictly their progenitors, has been empire's regular business. To regard such repositionings with recourse to the language of adoption, as I do in this essay, is both enabling and something of a risk. Barbara Yngvesson writes that, strictly speaking, adoption as it is understood and practiced worldwide today is first and foremost a legal contracting of kinship that sanctions adopters' parental relations while usually delegitimizing the rights and claims of birth parents. Such contracted kinships usually establish "strangers" (i.e., not blood relations) as acceptable parents and sever the claims of birth parents to their progeny in perpetuity.

Carby's book—and indeed Levy's novels—are not primarily concerned with contracted adoptions, yet the utility of adoption studies to an analysis of Levy's writing opens up some important critical opportunities. Adoption contracts might seem to expose matters of blood relations and race as ultimately arbitrary in the legal legitimization of

intimate kinships, but in practice adoption usually upholds the dominant mode, as Yngvesson points out: "Adoption operates as a kind of legal 'laundering' of a child whose capacity for belonging in its nation of birth is jeopardized by such factors as the marital status of its mother; its gender, ethnic identity, skin color, and health status; and more generally its 'origins' in a population whose poverty bespeaks its abandonment by the nation state" (26). The social practice of adoption is often a means of assimilation rather than transgression; it brings disruptive children safely into the fold by repositioning them in an acceptable domestic unit through a perceived act of humanitarian rescue. The informal rather than legal rearrangement of family relations operates under the same dynamics that stabilise belonging by laundering precarity. So while the legal contracting of adoption does not happen in *Small Island* and *The Long Song*, Levy embeds her representation of family-making within the wider discursive domains of the time, which regulated kinship and rendered certain figures "illegitimate" or removable because of their precarious origins. In this essay, then, I deliberately read these novels' representation of family-making through the lens of adoption in order, first, to witness (as does Levy) the history of child surrender and removal rarely accounted for in histories of colonial and postcolonial family-making, and, second, in order to draw on the vocabulary and modes of enquiry of adoption studies in my critique of Levy's literary achievement.

To get the measure of the issues that arise when Levy fictionalises empire's "bastard" children in *The Long Song*, let us first briefly consider *Small Island*, the climax of which famously turns on the birth of a child, baby Michael, to Queenie Bligh. The child is the result of a night of passion with Jamaican airman Michael Roberts as he passes through London on his way to Canada after the end of World War II. Queenie's subsequent surrendering of her mixed-race baby to her Jamaican tenants, Hortense and Gilbert Joseph, as her racist husband Bernard looks on, is often read as progressive. Witness, for example, Ann Murphy's interpretation of the child's adoption as tentatively symbolic of a positive post-Windrush futurity: "[T]he mixed-race child of Queenie and Michael helps bring Hortense and Gilbert together, and

points the characters and the novel towards an ambiguously hopeful and racially mixed post-colonial future” (126). However, this tendency to read the child as figuring futurity rather than embodying the materiality of intimate relations during the period erases an important element of the novel’s history lesson on the evolution of post-war British racism. Queenie’s sexual liaison with Michael fictionally realises the wartime fears of a number of British officials who had become highly concerned with the consequences of stationing black servicemen in the UK, especially Americans, because of their proximity to and relations with white women. As Lucy Bland explains, as soon as the wartime government learned that United States troops were to arrive, “there was concern in official circles about the consequences of the presence of *black* GIs. The Home Secretary Herbert Morrison, for example, was anxious that ‘the procreation of half-caste children’ would create ‘a difficult social problem’” (16; emphasis in original). Sabine Lee estimates that approximately seventeen hundred mixed-race children were eventually born of “African American descent” (163) as a consequence of liaisons between white women and black men in wartime Britain. While some mothers raised their children—known in the dismal language of the day as “brown babies”—many surrendered them for adoption (as Carby explores in *Imperial Intimacies*), because of, in Bland’s words, the

difficulties facing a woman who bore an illegitimate, mixed-race child in the 1940s: the stigma of illegitimacy, with the concomitant pressure from immediate family and possibly also the Church to give up the baby; the additional stigma and scandal of having a mixed-race child; the constraints often subsequently placed on the mother to control her movements and behaviour. (45)

Although Queenie’s surrendering of baby Michael is not fully contextualised by these circumstances—it is 1948, and Michael Joseph is a colonial serviceman, not an African American—they nonetheless constitute part of the wider ideological matrix of race and gender within which baby Michael’s conception takes place and both his and Queenie’s post-partum fortunes are shaped.³ Indeed, Levy is careful to situate the child’s

birth precisely in relation to the advent of “brown babies” and the racist childcare economy of the 1940s: Queenie makes specific reference to the “sons, daughters of coloured GIs mostly” (Levy, *Small Island* 432) surrendered to orphanages when pleading with the Gilberts to become her child’s parents. Part of the value of *Small Island* is its acknowledgement of the rarely commented upon history of intimate encounters engendered by the presence in the UK of black servicemen effected by World War II—of how sexual relations were circumscribed by the cheerless social norms of the time that declared certain partnerships, and indeed persons, as “illegitimate.”

That said, the novel’s representation of the surrendering of baby Michael, as well as the symbolic value with which it freights this mixed-race adoptee, threatens to overwhelm and obscure the materiality of the very phenomenon—transcultural adoption—on which the novel relies for its *denouement*. Significantly, Queenie presents her decision not to parent her child as based on personal imperfections rather than public pressures. When thinking of possible conflicts ahead as the mother of a mixed-race child, not least the prejudice that will surely be experienced by baby Michael, she admits that she lacks the gumption to act: “I haven’t got the guts for it. I thought I would. I should have but I haven’t got the spine. Not for that fight. I admit it, I can’t face it, and I’m his blessed mother” (432). Given what we know of the increasingly entrenched racism of post-war Britain and the identity crises awaiting so many people of colour, we might understand why Queenie thinks her son should be raised by his “own kind” (432). Yet the representation of this decision-making process is curious. Firstly, Queenie’s explanation sounds a strangely false note in terms of her characterisation. As a figure who has dealt with a tough upbringing on a farm and a challenging move to London, coped with the horrors of the Blitz and the unexplained disappearance of her husband, faced the shooting of her father-in-law and the sorry condition of London’s newly homeless, and welcomed migrant lodgers to 27 Nevern Street despite the stern racist opprobrium of her neighbours, Queenie might seem to be an especially strong figure, so that her admission of spinelessness when it comes to parenting is something of a surprise. Ever undaunted, forever

determined and single-minded, is she not the ideal mother for baby Michael? As well as risking her character's consistency, Levy is in danger of making the matter of birth-mother⁴ surrender appear to be the consequence of Queenie's personal failings rather than compelled by conditions that threaten her capacity to parent. This manoeuvre potentially upholds the mendacious myth of the birth mother as morally ambiguous, a myth that was in circulation at the time of the novel's 1940s setting (and often since). In so doing, the novel detaches from the politics as well as the concrete particulars of adoption at a vital moment.

Small Island also falls foul of a troubling tension between its engagement with adoption as a distinctive historical phenomenon and adoption's rhetorical requisitioning for the purposes of narrative closure. There is a significant disjunction between baby Michael as a resonant symbol and an adoptable subject, with the aesthetic fecundity of the former obscuring the materiality of the latter. For evidence of this, we need look no further than Helen Edmundson's 2019 adaptation of *Small Island* for the National Theatre, in which the body of the mixed-raced infant appears in the closing stage directions as "made by all of us—floating into an uncertain world" (130). He appears as a symbol of Britain's inevitable pluralised *cultura* mystically clinched by his mixed-race bastard *corporis*. To add further complications, Queenie's assumption that the Gilberts can magically forge kinship with the child because of their black ancestry arguably bypasses baby Michael's singularity as mixed-race and British-born. "Who'll tell Michael what [a humming-bird] is like?" (Levy, *Small Island* 431), Queenie wonders, when imagining how to describe her son's father's country of origin, although this ancestral line is only one of several that might constitute the child's heritage. Furthermore, her refusal to countenance Bernard as the child's father, while entirely understandable because of his dreadful racism, rules out the possibility of future change, and of the mixed-race family as an agent of such change. Queenie's admonishment of Bernard is certain and total: "One day [Michael will] do something naughty and you'll look at him and think, The little black bastard" (431). This constraining of baby Michael within a pejorative and racist imagined future sits at odds with the critical requisitioning of his nativity as a symbol of

hopeful proleptic transformation. As a symbol, the infant is the British-born child of "us all"; but as a subject, this "little black bastard" best belongs with a migrant black family already experiencing dark days of racialisation and minoritisation in the mother country.

These tensions between symbol and subject make Levy's representation of adoption a much more troubling and contradictory matter than critics such as Murphy perceive. While Queenie's child's biology might be regarded as symbolic of the racial and cultural admixture of post-war Britain within which a post-racial future might be seeded, *Small Island* constrains baby Michael until the novel's end as the bastard child of Empire whose "illegitimacy"—born out of wedlock, conceived to racially different parents—needs to be kept secret within the normative confection of kinship understood in terms of one's "own kind": a black family. The novel reveals the insoluble problems that arise when Levy tries specifically to make the mixed-race adopted subject the symbol of reconceived heritage and belonging. The issues raised by the adoptee's materiality do not readily square with and cannot be conveniently expunged by his figurative requisitioning.

III. Unsettling Heredity

These complexities of representing "illegitimacy" and adoption pose a significant set of challenges in Levy's last novel, *The Long Song*, which is predominantly set in the final days of slavery in 1830s Jamaica. Here, too, Levy's writing engenders a conflict between the symbolic and material dynamics of the "illegitimate" child when such figures are placed at the heart of a fictional enquiry into family-making during slavery and colonialism. In its depiction of the sexual assaults and relations that produced a number of births and Sunderings in colonised Jamaica, *The Long Song* expands upon the genealogical relations sketched in the family tree that grows in detail as *Fruit of the Lemon* progresses. Especially brutal is the conception of the character narrator, July, because of the "rude act" performed by the white overseer of the Amity plantation, Tam Dewar, on the enslaved Kitty: "[She] felt such little intrusion from the overseer Tam Dewar's part that she decided to believe him merely jostling her from behind like any rough, grunting, huffing white man would if they

were crushed together within a crowd" (Levy, *The Long Song* 7). As a toddler, July is taken from Kitty, brought to the plantation house, and renamed Marguerite by Caroline Mortimer, the sister of Amity's owner, John Howarth. July later bears two "illegitimate" children of her own. The first, Thomas, she conceives with Nimrod, a free slave, but slyly surrenders Thomas into the care of Jane and James Kinsman, seemingly with little upset, who raise him in England. The second, Emily, she conceives with her lover Robert Goodwin, the white British man who marries Caroline and succeeds John Howarth as Amity's owner and who tries in vain to reverse the fortunes of the failing plantation as manumission approaches. When they leave Jamaica, Caroline and Robert steal away with Emily, much to July's horror. Amidst so much sundering, the novel offers partial filial consolation. Later in life, July is traced by Thomas, who returns to Jamaica after an apprenticeship as a printer in London to set up a successful business on the island. July ends the novel as grandmother to Thomas and his wife Lillian's three daughters, having moved in with the family in Kingston, where she writes the narrative of *The Long Song* in dialogue with Thomas' critical appraisal of her tale. Yet Emily Goodwin remains unfound, and the novel ends with Thomas' request to readers to discover her whereabouts, a request made partially because of July's curiosity: "[July] has asked me, for example, whether Emily lives as a white woman in England? Does she reside within a fancy house or is she used as a servant?" (308). As we shall see, Emily's disappearance into the domestic horizon of Britain is the novel's ultimate symbol of the mother country's long entanglements with Jamaica, the consequences of which are as much consanguineous as they are cultural and historical.

In shaping July's genealogy as such, *The Long Song* offers an alternative mapping of conception and heredity that counters the official parameters of legitimate heritage and rightful endowment so beloved by colonial modernity's blood cultures. The novel challenges the racist invocation of pure or noble bloodlines by exposing the racial and cultural intermingling that exists at the core of everyday life in colonial contexts. This family tree's branches record often unacknowledged relations that have been sundered, exploited, or otherwise expunged—a

veritable inheritance of loss through which the illicit, immoral, and “illegitimate” can at last be traced. In making Thomas remark, when wondering about Emily’s unknown whereabouts at the end of the novel, that “[i]n England the finding of negro blood within a family is not always met with rejoicing” (308), Levy strikingly foregrounds the longstanding existence of so-called hybrid progeny that can be discovered at the core of British prestige and privilege, not confined to its tropical margins, and makes a mockery of social differences that turn on rare descent. The novel’s commitment to alternative mappings of heredity is indexed when the renowned painter Francis Bear paints a portrait titled *Mr and Mrs Goodwin*, in which July appears offering Caroline a tray of sweetmeats on bended knee. It recalls the well-known portrait of the cousins Dido Elizabeth Bell and Lady Elizabeth Murray painted in 1779 and attributed to David Martin, which Levy mentioned when discussing her creation of July with Susan Alice Fischer:

I was thinking about a wonderful painting of somebody called Dido Elizabeth Belle. She lived in Kenwood House. She was an illegitimate child and taken in and brought up, with a cousin of hers who was white. It’s a picture of these two young women, and the white woman is at the centre of the picture, but Dido absolutely steals it by the look on her face and her demeanour. (qtd. in Fischer 134)

Born in 1761, Belle was the offspring of Marie Belle, a slave, and Sir John Lindsay, a warship captain stationed in the Caribbean. She was brought to London and entrusted to the care of Lindsay’s uncle, William Murray, the Lord Chief Justice. In Martin’s painting, Belle wears a white turban; July’s sporting of a “red silk turban” (Levy, *The Long Song* 223) in Bear’s composition recalls Belle’s headwear. In both July’s genealogy and the artistic analogue, Levy foregrounds all those whose very presence and “illegitimate” status purloins purity and propriety (“Dido absolutely steals it”). Such evidence of unsanctioned lives permeates history, heredity, art, and (as Emily’s unknown fate hints) the unsuspecting white British family. *The Long Song* seems at long last to bring the bastard children of empire into the clear light of day.

When concluding his Afterword to July's tale, Thomas urges readers not to approach Emily Goodwin, should she ever be found, "too hastily with the details of this story, for its load may prove to be unsettling" (308). As a last word, "unsettling" seems an apposite description of the wittily subversive purpose of *The Long Song* as a novel keen both to displace and redraft authorised narratives of colonialism and the Caribbean. This intention is captured in the novel's form, as the tale is squabbled over between July as its writer and Thomas as an editor and printer who is often keen to suggest changes to his mother's account. Formulated as such, *The Long Song* reminds us, appropriately, that no narrative is solely authored or arrives unadulterated by the presence of others; it also sustains attention to the unequal gender relations that remain at the novel's end. July's entire life has been subject to the injunctions and injuriousness of men, and the telling of her tale remains circumscribed by Thomas' agency and attitudes, no matter how sympathetic he might be in its telling. Her account can never settle fully in her possession. But at the same time and for all of its laudable purposes and subversive achievements, *The Long Song* is unsettling in other ways that route us back to the tensions that arise when the empire's bastard children are rendered in terms of both aesthetic symbolism and material subjectivity.

IV. Myths of Blood

While *The Long Song* unsettles many ideas and attitudes, one key notion remains intact: modernity's presupposition that blood is a significant arbiter of identity. Lawrence Hill powerfully notes that blood is accepted as a "bold and enduring determinant of identity, race, gender, culture, citizenship, belonging, privilege, deprivation, athletic superiority, and nationhood" (66). But its explanatory utility is an illusion that masks the essentially metaphorical provenance of blood as a determinant. "We have bought the metaphor so fully," argues Hill, "that we have come to believe it to be fundamentally true" (142). Hill describes a manoeuvre essential to colonialism's epistemology (and one very much still with us). Robert Young explores at length the emergence of "the organic paradigm" (4) across nineteenth-century European thought that legitimated the denigration of colonised cultures by making pejorative claims

about “natural” biogenetic provenance. In this line of thought, colonised peoples were regarded as essentially uncivil due to their biological specifics. Modernity's discourse of race was one chilling result: the bodily matter of the colonised or enslaved subject was understood to evidence their perceived abasement. In proposing that racial inferiority was derived biogenetically from skin, bones, and blood, the ideological processes of racialization were conveniently obscured. As Cathy Hannabach observes, blood has been promoted as transporting much more than oxygen, platelets, and plasma—in our blood, we have been led to believe, are transfused history, identity, experience, belonging: “Even under a microscope [blood] refuses to reveal social differences such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and citizenship, yet it is often invoked to define those categories” (12). Modernity's close coordination between the cultural/discursive on the one hand and the body on the other through the figurative work of blood is highly suspect and should alert us to the dangers of all renderings of personhood in biocentric terms.

The arboreal image of the family tree is the metaphor par excellence of organic matter perceived as carrying heritage, heredity, culture, history, and more as exalted explanatory components of the subject's identity and belonging. In *Fruit of the Lemon*, this image underwrites Faith's declaration of and dedication to bastardy, despite her “legitimate” status as Mildred and Wade Jackson's daughter; she refashions her identity in terms of her genealogy, firmly fusing history and ancestry. Levy works cunningly with the assumption, to borrow adoption studies scholar Cynthia Callahan's words, that blood “naturalizes kinship, locating it in the body and making it inherent” (17). If kinship is inevitably a matter of biogenetic provenance, and if everyone is ultimately related to everyone else due to the intimate intermixings of cross-racial relations, then perceptions of racial purity and incommensurability cannot hold because all share a common polyform ancestry. Emily Goodwin's presence in England as one, according to Thomas, who will transport “negro blood” (Levy, *The Long Song* 308) into the heart of Britain encapsulates Levy's self-confessed desire to “put the Caribbean back where it belongs—in the main narrative of British history” (“Back to My Own Country” 19). Yet, while the pursuit of hidden bloodlines offers a

critical means of unsettling received histories of nation, race, and family, this strategy worryingly risks upholding modernity's synchronisation of *corporis* and *cultura* by making historical rewriting a matter of biocentric bodily retrieval. Emily Goodwin's potential for undermining dominant narratives of British identity—like Faith's and baby Michael's—is in her blood. Much is unsettled in *The Long Song*, to be sure, but modernity's organic paradigm seems not always fully countered.

In Levy's writing, the matter of blood is often transfused with a symbolic viscosity that makes historical conditions appear anatomically incarnated, as ingrained as kinship—even though, as Callahan observes, kinship does not depend on “shared genes” (17). Consequently, it does not always make a distinctive challenge to the exalted notion of biogenetic personhood typical of modernity. Such adherence to bloodlines can be discerned in *Small Island* when Levy makes baby Michael's adoptive mother a blood relation: although none of the characters ever realise it, Hortense is actually Airman Michael Roberts' cousin. As Michael Perfect shrewdly notes, this “improbable” coincidence underscores “the importance of the connection” (63) that already exists between adoptive mother and son, one that, as I argue elsewhere, is revealingly legitimated in normative terms of blood (McLeod 57–66). Baby Michael's is not a “stranger” adoption, strictly speaking, because bloodlines are already (secretly) in place that naturalise and normalise Hortense's prospective motherhood.

The problematic deployment of myths of blood also permeates *The Long Song* due to Levy's commendable decision to position matters of family-making, child-surrender, and adoptive life at the centre, not the side, of colonial history. But writing about adoption inevitably brings into play political issues concerning its representation. While adoptive matters are found throughout numerous literary traditions and across centuries, the extent to which they articulate the materiality and experiential horizon of adopted life for all concerned is uncertain. As Marianne Novy notes, “[a]doption has figured importantly in literature for a number of reasons” (6), as shown by her considered analyses of work by Sophocles, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Edward Albee, and Barbara Kingsolver. But the

rendition of adoption in literature, she argues, is often “inadequate” (23): while adoption has long been a topic of interest for those keen to interrogate “definitions of family and the importance of heredity” (6), more often than not literary texts gladly support the norms of biocentric kinship—blood-relations, exalted origins, and belonging as a natal fixture rather than a contingent fiction. In addition, much literature about adoption pays little attention to the phenomenological and material facticity of adopted life across the so-called adoption triad of birth parent, adoptive parent, and adoptee. This is not to say that only members of the triad can write well about adoption—there are plenty of works by the non-adopted that quickly disprove such naïve identitarianism—but it is useful to note that those writers who research adoption’s particulars usually have more to offer than cliché.⁵

At one level, *The Long Song* attends to the materiality of adoption as an important mechanism of colonial intrusion and control (not just in the Caribbean, of course) —as the “intimate face of colonization” (Oparah et al. 7), to borrow the uncompromising words of Julia Chinyere Oparah, Sun Yung Shin, and Jane Jeong Trenka. The establishment and rearrangement of families in Levy’s novel captures the common practice of relocating the children of oppressed or enslaved peoples to privileged and powerful ones, an act often represented as utilitarian and carried out by benevolent and selfless saviour figures. In such representations of adoption, the disruptive presence of distressed birth mothers is usually erased. Levy’s rendition of the adoption triad exposes the darker aspects of this practice. Crucially, July is twice a birth mother, making this often-missing voice the primary one in the novel. July’s mother, Kitty, is also important. Her sudden transformation from mother to birth mother when Caroline seizes July as a toddler is profoundly painful and indexes the intrusive and brutal agency of colonialism’s intimate face. While Miss Rose, the enslaved midwife who attends July’s birth, tries to ameliorate Kitty’s upset by speaking favourably about July’s removal and positioning it in terms of upward mobility—“Is merriment you mus’ be feel. Miss July at the great house! Come, she will get shoe” (Levy, *The Long Song* 38) —Kitty performs dangerous nocturnal trips to the house to “lean against the window with anguish to glimpse her only

child, July, there within" (38). July's fortunes also act as a precursor of sorts to those of her son, whose transracial adoption by Jane and James Kinsman is central to the novel's denouement. Adoptive mothers are also witnessed in the novel, like Jane Kinsman and, as she boards the ship to depart Jamaica with July's daughter Emily, Caroline Goodwin.

Yet the extent to which Levy's characters are grounded in the affective turmoil of adoption under colonialism is uncertain. When July gives birth to Thomas, the consequence of her intimacy with Nimrod, her response to her son's arrival is startling:

July, at that time, did look upon this tiny newborn and think him the ugliest black-skinned child she had ever seen. There, these words are true—so does my son find joy within them? He has a mama whose lip curled with disgust when first she saw that a child of hers was black as a nigger. . . .

July had no intention to suckle this misbegotten black pick-aninny. But neither did she wish to leave him mewling upon a mound of trash, nor whimpering within the wood. (143)

It is not made readily clear why July has "no intention" of parenting her child. The primary reason, it seems, is race: July's unhappy response to Thomas' appearance suggests the extent to which she has glumly internalised hierarchies of race based on skin tone, so her son appears to her as devoid of value as the "mound of trash" upon which she might abandon him. These hierarchies are acknowledged throughout the novel as a significant consequence of the racism of the Jamaican plantations, not least through the mixed-race figure of Miss Clara, the former slave turned businesswoman, whose upwardly mobile aspirations, epitomised by her lodging house on Trelawny Street, are fundamentally racialised. During one encounter, for example, she chides July for walking without a parasol: "You be get very dark" (190). July's decision to leave Thomas by the Baptist minister's house makes reference to the influence of race—"July had heard tell that minister-men did say that even ugly-ugly slaves with thick lips and noses flat as milling stones were the children of God" (144)—to the extent that any maternal sentiment on her part seems entirely overpowered: "There was no

hesitation shivering in her breast as July placed her baby upon a stone by the gate" (144). The mode of narration of this crucial life-changing moment in which mother and son are changed into birth mother and adoptee problematically obscures any affective substance. July narrates her past by casting herself in the third person, inevitably opening a potential rift between herself as narrating character and experiencing character, but her narration in turn is mediated further through Thomas' editorial designs. It is hard to tell if July's narration of her surrender of Thomas to the Kinsmans is a bloodless act of cunning because the alternative—remembering the pain of separation—is too tender to touch. Are we really meant to believe that there was "no hesitation shivering in her breast"? Why mention it at all?

These matters of representation are complicated further when July makes mention of Jane Kinsman's published account of her adoption of Thomas in which an upset July begs Jane to raise her child so he will not be sold into slavery by Caroline. July hints that her actions were something of a performance in order to manipulate Jane: "[H]ow [Jane's] article did make me laugh. . . . [I]t was exactly how July behaved upon that day; come, how else was she to get this white woman to raise her black baby?" (150). It may be that July wishes to present Thomas' adoption as a wily act of forethought on her part, mobilised by her desire to protect him from the privations of racism and slavery that blighted the lives of so many at Amity—one that may recall Sethe's desperate decision in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), despite the very different fate of these two women's children. Yet—and unlike in Morrison's novel—the elision of any affective response on the mother's part to her child's departure risks perpetuating the myth that the surrendering of children by birth mothers is a slight rather than substantial act and, as is the case with *Small Island's* Queenie, primarily the consequence of birth-mother "choice." Such an absence appears all the more peculiar when we recall that the pain of separation drives Kitty to her daughter's window each night or consider July's desolation when she learns of Emily's departure, much to the houseworker Elias' surprise: "But what, Miss July, did you wan' keep that little pickney for you own?" (Levy, *The Long Song* 273). In other words, Levy seems to obfuscate the experiential domain of

birth-motherhood at the very moment she valuably brings it into view as part of the intimate mechanics of colonialism and slavery.

Subsequent tensions arise in *The Long Song*'s depiction of Thomas' tracing of and reunion with July. Here, the novel's engagement with genre requires some attention. As Novy proposes, British and North American culture has "typically used three mythic stories to imagine adoption" (7): the disastrous adoption and consequent search for birth families, the happy reunion, and the happy adoption. Novy's concerns about each stem from the mismatch she perceives between the tidiness of these story-forms, especially the assumption they hold that "a child has, in effect, only one set of parents" (7), and the untidiness and variety of adoptive life which does not always fit such neat normative moulds. Because *The Long Song* turns on Thomas' return to Jamaica and discovery of July, it situates itself deliberately within the longer history of the English-language novel's fascination with orphans, foundlings, and blood relations (especially in many of the nineteenth-century texts that Thomas reads while apprenticed to the printer Linus Gray) and draws on elements of prevailing mythic stories of adoption. The Kinsmans' adoption ultimately proves disastrous when James denounces Thomas as a blasphemer and charlatan due to Thomas' querying of the Baptist faith as a consequence of reading John Locke and Thomas Paine. Having been furnished with the skills of printing and a handsome bequest by Gray, Thomas rediscovers July at a court hearing after he has returned to Jamaica.

July and Thomas' meeting is, on the whole, a happy one: July never again occupies a position of domestic servitude once she joins Thomas' family in Kingston. While still aware of Thomas' race—she is surprised by the presence in court of a well-spoken "negro; a nigger; a black man" (Levy, *The Long Song* 288)—she very quickly revises her attitude when discovering his presence not just as her son but as "a gentleman, a printer of high repute, a wealthy black man of commerce" (303). The reunion is presented as a thoroughly benign and problem-solving affair: as per convention, it brings about an upturn in fortunes by reconvening the biogenetically related family, with July once again a mother as well as a grandmother. It even affords July the opportunity to revise her

previous narrative of disposing of Thomas by the Kinsmans' gate: the now-successful Thomas is described as "July's stolen pickney" (305), not the "ugly-ugly" infant that she was so keen to exchange.

V. At the Limits of Imagining Adoption

In shaping the material particulars of surrender, adoption, and reunion with recourse to well-worn symbolic and aesthetic resources, Levy once again risks detaching a tale of adoption from the experiential domain of adoptive life. As a consequence, she does not unduly trouble modernity's conflation of *corporis* and *cultura*. This argument might be regarded as a rather stern and threadbare critique of an inventive and deliberately witty work of historical fiction; after all, no literary text can ever fully capture the material circumstances it evokes. So let me be clear: it is not that Levy fails to think herself into and write from the position of an enslaved Jamaican who has surrendered children—that would be an impossible task—but that she is only dimly aware of a subjective realm of affect and upset which ultimately lies beyond the horizon of her fictional design. The happy reunion of birth mother and adoptee is a case in point. The many accounts of so-called reunions found across a wide range of cultural contexts and historical moments frequently tell of their difficulties, problems, conflicts, and unhappiness. As testified to by the work of other black writers of Britain such as Caryl Phillips (*Crossing the River*), Hannah Pool (*My Fathers' Daughter*) and Jackie Kay (*Red Dust Road*), reunions persistently confound happy endings and mark the beginnings of new, often unsteady relationships rather than the frictionless recommencement of older ones. The assumption that consanguineous reunion always brings closure and narrative resolution is the result of the tidy mythic imagining of adoption. Like the final chapter of Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), *The Long Song* conforms to generic expectations and risks compliance with an essentially biocentric model of kinship.⁶ The decades of separation between Thomas and July do not seem to impact their capacity to be mother and son; their blood relations override the very real differences of class, wealth, opportunity, literacy, experience, and migration that divide them. In its deployment of the narrative trope of adoption reunion in relation to Thomas, *The*

Long Song prefers to follow the protocols of genre rather than dwell on the privations of filial sundering and so cannot help but keep in place normative ideas about kinship, family-making, and exalted origins that have historically underwritten modernity's myths of blood. Once again, Levy elides a requisitely sensitive cognisance of the material and experiential particulars of adoption even as she valuably places adoption at the centre of her historical envisioning of black life in colonised and enslaved Jamaica.

The conflicts between the adoptee as both symbol and subject that permeate Levy's writing are epitomised by Emily, who slips out of the novel's field of vision when she is taken by Caroline and Robert, with the collusion of Miss Molly, the plantation's cook, on a ship to England. To a certain extent, Emily's disappearance and the subsequent mystery of her whereabouts offset too tidy a closure of the novel in terms of kinship reunion; *The Long Song* conforms generally but not fully to the mythic stories of adoption that Novy describes. July is clear that, ideally, she would end her tale by not "dwell[ing] upon sorrow. . . . July's story will have only the happiest of endings and you must take my word upon it" (Levy, *The Long Song* 304). But her word is not the novel's last and her narrative production of happiness is only achievable by dismissing the unfound Emily from view. Indeed, as Thomas remarks in the Afterword:

[U]pon several occasions my mama has become quite fretful when enquiring of me whether I believe her daughter Emily knows the real circumstances of her birth or remembers her mama? But then the pain of that parting soon causes that dear old woman to put all thought of Emily from out of her mind and feign indifference when any further mention is made of her. (307)

Thomas's Afterword inhibits July's quest for the "happiest of endings" by refusing to elide Emily as the novel reaches its conclusion. As an adoptee unreturned to her birth mother, Emily remains supplementary to and unaccommodated by July's attempt at narrative closure in *The Long Song*. Like the newborn in *Small Island*, she marks the limits of the

novel's imagining of adoption. Her fate is to act primarily as a symbol of polyracial consanguinity, born in the past and borne into the future, in a parallel fashion to baby Michael's oft-celebrated presence as a figure of multicultural futurity. Both July and Levy can only wonder at the fate of those who have experienced "stranger" adoptions—in other words, those who were born to parents of whom they remember virtually nothing and were raised by those not blood-related—when (unlike Thomas) they are situated beyond the tidy generic formulations of mythic adoption stories. In the end, Levy's writing struggles to represent the subjectivity of adoptees and birth mothers. In particular, the symbolic agency of adoptees works in service of a postcolonial re-envisioning of British and Caribbean relations, at once personal and political, which redeploys rather than disassembles the association of *corporis* and *cultura*. While I, for one, wholeheartedly support Levy's political and intellectual aims throughout the corpus of her work, when viewed from the vantage of adoption studies, the literary delivery of these aspirations remains constrained. In Levy's fiction, adoption is both manifest and obscured, at once an invaluable preoccupation and a narrative lacuna, never fully figured with requisite cognisance or materiality.

As recorded in "Number six," the note acquired by the British Library, Levy had imagined next writing a love story between a mixed-race heterosexual couple—she black, he white—that would turn on unexpected discoveries from the past: "[F]or example, he may find he's black or she may find something unpalatable" ("Number six"). Given her fascination with genealogy, which propelled her decision to make July's granddaughter Gilbert Joseph's mother, one is tempted to wonder if Emily Goodwin might have been glimpsed again as Levy fictionalised the family histories of either of the two unnamed lovers, tracing back through a history of "illegitimacy" rather than unearthing sanctioned roots. And as a writer committed to investigation, to discovering and imagining the lives of those left out of the received metanarratives of history and culture, perhaps it was only a matter of time before Levy dwelt in depth upon the experiential domain of those bastard children of empire whose "illegitimacy" was more a concrete than symbolic concern. While I have pursued in this essay the perturbing tensions that

emerge from Levy's best intentions, the difficulties I have probed must not obscure the significance of her decision to locate adoption's existence at the heart of—and as a part of—empire and its legacies. Her work empowers important critical conversations about adoption and empire—if only more novels did. For me, as both scholar and adoptee, Levy's focus on matters of adoption, despite the dilemmas that emerge, unequivocally constitutes a major part of her rare and considerable literary contribution.

Notes

- 1 To view the note, see "Complete Archive."
- 2 Throughout this essay I will enclose "illegitimate" in quotation marks to sustain recognition of this term as a discursive fiction with discriminatory intent. For many adoptees (such as myself) born in the latter twentieth century and designated "illegitimate" in legal documents, the pejorative nomenclature of "illegitimacy" still retains unwholesome assumptions concerning the precarious moral—not just legal—condition of the adopted subject.
- 3 For a literary rendition of the specific circumstances that engendered the birth of the so-called "brown babies" during wartime Britain, see the section titled "Somewhere in England" in Phillips' *Crossing the River* (1993).
- 4 There is a longstanding debate in the adoption community about the appropriateness of the term "birth mother," with some much preferring the term "first mother." While I acknowledge the very real concerns attached to this terminology, I worry about the designation of birth and adoptive parents in terms of primary and secondary positionings. This is why I regularly choose the term "birth mother" when engaging with matters of adoption.
- 5 See, for example, Barry's novel *The Secret Scripture* (2008), his prolonged literary engagement with postcolonial Ireland's adoption machine, readily supported by the Catholic hierarchy and the Free State, in which thousands of women found themselves forced to surrender their children against their will. Barry is neither an adoptee, birth parent, nor adoptive parent.
- 6 Evaristo's description of the reunion between the elderly Hattie and Penelope, the biological daughter she surrendered, which occurs as *Girl, Woman, Other* concludes, states: "[H]ow wrong [Penelope] was, both of them are welling up and it's like the years are swiftly regressing until the lifetimes between them no longer exist" (452). The assumption that consanguineous kinship transcends historical and material facticity and magically guarantees emotional connections between blood-related strangers (usually tracked by tears) is frequently challenged in adoptee writing and adoption scholarship.

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