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Speaking from Memory: Thoughts and Recollections from a Life with Andrea Levy

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Abstract: In this article, I look afresh at the novelist Andrea Levy's work from two points of view. First, the political message that is present in all her writing. By looking at the various adaptations of her novels for stage and screen I track the slippage that can occur between her political intent and her sometimes more simplified reception amongst white British audiences. Is her work polemical, conciliatory, or both? I also highlight the changes in attitude that have occurred amongst the professionals involved in the different adaptations of her novels and what this can tell us about shifts in wider British society around issues of race and Britain's colonial history. Second, I look at Andrea's literary style. By exploring the issues of child abandonment and adoption that occur in several of her works I try to clarify her motives and intentions around the use of these plot lines. I argue that there is no overt symbolism intended in those works or in any of her writing, but that these events grow out of her essentially realistic use of fiction to document events and attitudes that were commonplace in the times and places she was writing about. My approach in writing this article is unique in the sense that it is personal rather than academic. As Andrea's husband, I witnessed the creation of all her works. My approach is part memoir and part insight based on my close knowledge of Andrea. In my opinion, her background and ancestry are key to understanding her work and I explain something of what we know of them. My aim is to provide an informed contribution to the existing scholarship around her work.

Keywords: literary style, adaptations, abandonment, symbolism, unbelonging, ancestry

I. Introduction

In the autumn of 2011, Andrea Levy was on a book tour in the United States to promote her novel *The Long Song* (2010). As her husband, and as was usual with us, I accompanied her. We took some time out from her publisher's promotional fixtures to visit a university campus in upstate New York where she gave a reading to students of postcolonial literature. During the question time that followed, a student asked if Andrea could elaborate on her use of birds as a symbolic metaphor in her work. With a chuckle in her voice she replied, "Birds? Have I written about birds?!" There was a ripple of laughter in the room. But it was not a put-down or a brush off. She used the moment to make a more general point and went on to explain to the questioner, and to the entire academic audience, that she was probably not the best person to ask about the metaphors and literary techniques in her work, but that just because she often found herself befuddled by academic debate didn't mean that she didn't respect it. "I don't really follow much of the analytic discourse on my work," she said, "but I do recognise how important it is that you do it—how much it develops the interest in and the future currency of literary works. I'm very grateful to you for it."

It was a typically honest and down-to-earth reply and it drew applause. But it made me, sitting at the back of the hall, think about the two aspects of Andrea's work. There was what she wanted to say—the message—and how she said it—the art. It was the art part that she was never keen to talk too much about, almost as if its very vocabulary would get in the way of her doing it. She was happy to leave that to the academics. The message, on the other hand, was of enormous importance to her. It was, as she often said, the very reason that she wrote and she was at pains to explain it, spread it, and protect its integrity whenever possible.

What follows here are my recollections and thoughts concerning these two aspects of Andrea's writing, and I should stress that they are my memories and my opinions. I am not trying to speak for Andrea. The role of a long-term spouse or partner to an author is an informal and generally undocumented one. It can encompass the roles of confidante, interlocutor, research assistant, secretary, personal assistant, first reader,

editor, close observer, and companion. She and I were very close companions and her writing was part of that closeness. I am white; Andrea was black. Through her writing she was on a journey politically, creatively, and even geographically (all those book tours around the world) and in every aspect of that journey I was literally and figuratively tagging along, trying to keep up with her—witnessing, talking, listening, learning, supporting. That doesn't mean that I can represent her here, or that my thoughts about her work are any more insightful than anyone else's. I am not an academic and my engagement with literary fiction and postcolonial politics is purely personal rather than professional. But I do feel that my proximity to Andrea and her work and my memories of how it all came about are worth documenting for the record, and it is in that spirit that I am writing this article. Because of my relationship to its subject I have found it awkward to refer to my late wife as Levy throughout. I therefore use Andrea, the name that I knew her by.

I will return later to the question of art that Andrea dodged so elegantly in the university lecture hall, but let me start by looking at the nature of her political message and to what extent it has stayed intact or been subtly altered in the reception and adaptation of her work.

II. Levy Novels: Polemical or Conciliatory?

Around the turn of the millennium, Andrea and I had been together for nearly twenty years. Our fathers were both dead but our mothers were very much alive, one living in London and the other in Sheffield. They were always politely curious about one another, routinely enquiring how the other one was, but they never met. We could easily have engineered a meeting but we never did. I'm not sure why. We would sometimes speculate jokingly about how they might get on, and this would then grow into a fantasy about all four parents meeting up somehow back in the late 1940s, a white couple from the north of England and a black couple newly arrived from the Caribbean. What would have happened? How would they have reacted to each other? Clearly this was one of the seeds for the plot of *Small Island* (2004), and it prompted us to record long interviews with both mothers to gather as much information as possible about their lives, much of which went into the novel. The locus

for the novel was always going to be London, and the year had to be 1948, the year Andrea's parents arrived.

But there was a much more pressing imperative for the novel than a simple "What if?" plot line. After writing three earlier novels exploring her own generation's black British experience, Andrea had equipped herself with a raised political consciousness, a deeper knowledge of British Caribbean history, and the confidence and desire to take on Britain as a nation over its racism and end-of-empire mythmaking. *Small Island*, for all its humour, well-drawn white characters, and close understanding of English culture, is an intentionally polemical novel with British racial and political attitudes clearly in its sights. When it came time to find a publisher for the book, Andrea's literary agent showed it to a range of publishers, casting the net wide to try to gauge its worth. We thought that there might even be a bidding war. But there was no interest from anyone. Her previous three novels had been well reviewed but had achieved modest sales and it was perhaps this fact, rather than the potential of *Small Island*, that put off publishers' marketing departments. The exception was Headline, the company that had loyally published her previous novels, and her editor Jane Morpeth immediately recognised its quality. But we took the general lack of interest elsewhere as an ominous sign. Maybe the book was too polemical, too controversial, we thought, and when the book came out with Headline I think we were nervous about a backlash—bad reviews and poor sales.

As we now know, that's not what happened. Reviewers and academics alike have speculated that part of the reason for the book's success is the even-handed nature of the storytelling. As Henghameh Saroukhani observes, Andrea's "demotic, cross-cultural, and seemingly conciliatory approach to historical representation has, one could argue, contributed to the wide appeal and mainstream success of the novel" (114). I think it is true that the strong white characters and the book's easy familiarity with English life, speech, and humour helped a large swathe of white, broadly liberal readers in Britain to accept and embrace the novel and its message. (The other part of the reason, we should not forget, was that it is a fine piece of literature.) Saroukhani's critique highlights a tendency amongst some critics to see the book as *too* successful in some

way, that in becoming so mainstream the political message was diluted and the work was easily absorbed into an establishment narrative that was modified only very slightly by the book, if at all. Saroukhani draws a very apt parallel between the reception of the book in some quarters and Danny Boyle's London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony in which the Windrush arrival was depicted in a sanitised, celebratory fashion that fixed it as just another chapter in an essentially benevolent British history. I think this is a really interesting issue and one that I know Andrea was keenly aware of. Perhaps the most illuminating way to look at this is through the development over time of the various TV and stage adaptations for both *Small Island* and *The Long Song*.

III. Adapting the Novels for Other Media: A Faustian Pact?

One of the attractions of the novel form for Andrea was the sole and total control that it affords the author. But once her work was written and published, she was keen to explore more collaborative ways of adapting it, even though she knew that doing so would mean a certain loss of control. In her view, the book—the original—would always be there. She had long been interested in the storytelling power of television, cinema, and theatre, which for her were forms that seemed to hold out the promise of a non-formulaic and very creative type of storytelling. Theatre had given her, she once said to me, unquestionably the best (but also occasionally the worst) evenings of cultural entertainment she could remember. In 2015 a regional theatre approached her agent with a request to secure the rights to *Small Island* for a stage adaptation. It was the first hint of real interest from the theatre world, and it could have offered a closely collaborative and empathetic adaptation process. I was keen, but to my surprise Andrea was not. After thinking it over, she declared, "I think we can do better." From a purely commercial point of view, she was clearly right. The novel was already an international bestseller and a BBC adaptation had already aired on primetime television. But Andrea was interested in how big a theatre audience the production would reach, and whether a more prestigious national institution could—or more to the point, *should*—be prepared to take it on. As always, she wanted this story well and truly out there, not on

the margins but in the mainstream where it would have most effect and where, from a political point of view, she felt it belonged.

This is what eventually happened when the National Theatre picked it up, and I will discuss the results of that in more detail. But this dilemma of who, how, and on what scale to adapt for stage and screen is a complicated one. In her article "Sites and Sightlines," Deirdre Osbourne examines a range of adaptations of Andrea's novels. I think it is fair to say that Osbourne feels the inevitable cutting and rearranging process of adaptation, production, and direction has tended to blunt (and even disarm) the cutting edge of Andrea's political message, and that the hitherto overwhelmingly white make-up of those creative professions has been a culprit in this. It is an issue that Andrea struggled with, and I have no doubt that on one level she would have agreed largely with Osbourne's critique. But on another level, as I have already hinted, it's complicated, and I think Andrea was keen to take a long view of how a nation's understanding of itself and its history could slowly be changed one step at a time. I would like to try to unpack some of the problems and issues that Andrea had to face and how they have changed somewhat even over the last decade or so.

IV. *Small Island* on Television

The first visual adaptation of *Small Island* was the BBC television drama in 2009, which started development in the hands of an independent production company run by two women producers—one black, one white—who were very committed to the book. It slowly gained traction, funding, and a script by Sarah Williams, a white adaptor. But after filming, and as it passed into the hands of the BBC, there was suddenly the sense that the network executives were worried about its reception, or at least that is how it seemed to us as there was no direct communication between the BBC and Andrea, just delays and vaguely reported concerns. To address these concerns, they brought in the established screenwriter Paula Milne to make alterations. These consisted of a soothing voice-over that intruded from time to time throughout the drama and a new scene at the end in which baby Michael was a granddad with a happy mixed-race family living in present-day Finsbury Park. This

was pre-Windrush scandal and clearly provided the cosy "It's-all-okay-nowadays" ending that steadied BBC nerves. Andrea and the two original producers were strongly against these changes but at this point the power lay completely with the BBC executives. I think Andrea's feelings were that a basically good adaptation (with great performances from up-and-coming world-class actors) had been needlessly marred, but that on balance it was still worth it. The story, albeit in a diluted form, had reached a wider audience that was now primed to engage with issues of immigration and racism. If a work becomes popular enough to be adapted—to become in some sense part of the canon—then it increases its chances of being revisited, readapted, and explored in greater depth.

V. *The Long Song* on Television

It's interesting to compare this television adaptation to the one that happened a decade later for *The Long Song*. The rights to the novel were acquired by Heyday Films (which produced *Harry Potter* and *Paddington Bear*, among other films), a much more prominent production company. It was originally planned as a feature film. Unfortunately one of the financial backers became involved in Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave* and decided to pull out (TWO films about slavery were evidently too much for them), and so it was reimagined as a three-part television drama. Heyday's status and perhaps the fact that Andrea's stock had risen in the wake of the *Small Island* miniseries meant that the BBC was more receptive this time round, and although Andrea still had no official role, her opinion and her goodwill were clearly valued. The same adapter, Sarah Williams, produced the script, but now for the first time there was a clear consensus that the director should be a person of colour. Mahalia Belo, a big fan of the book who had a clear understanding of the issues around race, slavery, and colonialism, was the perfect choice. Although the budget was bigger than that for *Small Island* and filming took place over several weeks in the Dominican Republic, it was still a very tight budget and this had quite an impact on the final product. Several scenes that had been imagined had to be cut or abandoned. Andrea had met and talked with the actors and production team before filming began, but she was not well enough to travel and could not be on set. She was

sent the scenes as they were shot each day, however, and felt involved and connected to the production. In the end she felt moved by the power of the drama and generally happy with the final result.

The Long Song TV drama was produced before the death of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the wider revelation of the Windrush scandal, all of which have accelerated the pace of change, but already political attitudes around race and representation had begun to shift as a result of continuous pressure from black activists, writers, and professionals. The websites of cultural organisations at the time were full of progressive-sounding mission statements, even if they were still little more than words. But the mood seemed to boost the confidence and the commitment of everyone involved in *The Long Song* TV drama, even up to the very white peaks of the BBC.

VI. *Small Island* on the Stage

A similar subtle shift is discernable in the story of the stage adaptations, and because of the nature of the theatre medium—live performances night after night with audience reactions and social media coverage—it's perhaps possible to gauge the impact of the works a little more. The National Theatre acquired the rights to adapt *Small Island* in 2016, and early on it was evident that they envisaged it for the Olivier, the theatre's large main stage. The first adaptor approached was a playwright from a South Asian background; she was keen but had to withdraw because of other commitments before Andrea had even met her. Then the issue of who should, or could, write successfully for a huge, high-profile stage like the Olivier came to the fore. Andrea had no formal role in this selection process but her position was that black professionals were needed both generally, in the interests of industry diversity, and specifically, for sensitivity to the play's particular issues, and they should be sought out with some energy. But knowing how small the talent pool for writers of all backgrounds was at that point, she also felt that in the end the priority should be a successful adaptation that would work well on the huge Olivier stage, and if that meant collaborating carefully with an experienced white adaptor then so be it. Helen Edmundson, a white person, eventually emerged as the safest pair of hands that was free and

available at the time. She had an impressive track record as a stage adaptor, and after meeting and talking with her Andrea felt that she could, and would, do a good job.

Adapting a big epic novel into just two or three hours on stage, or screen, inevitably means a considerable loss of detail, nuance, and indeed whole storylines. The first exercise is always to decide what can most easily be chopped out wholesale. In the case of *Small Island*, Bernard's wartime story in India and Burma was the obvious choice for the chop, both for narrative and budgetary reasons, and in every adaptation thus far we have lost his story more or less completely and he has become a lesser character, a rather contradictory stereotype, as a result. This is a real loss, and an irony given the depth and quality of research Andrea put into his story. Andrea often said that she could have written a whole novel just about Bernard, and in many ways his character's journey gets closest to examining the true nature of Britain's particular brand of imperial racism. Similarly, in the case of *The Long Song*, Thomas Kinsman's childhood in Crouch End and his training as a printer in London is the bit that gets routinely chopped. Even readers of the novels sometimes find Bernard's and Thomas' back stories slightly jarring, perhaps because they both involve a sudden shift of place late in the novels. My own feeling is that these characters' stories are superb pieces of descriptive writing with very significant subtexts, and I look forward to them being properly explored either through adaptations or more focused attention to their passages in the novels.

But in the end, the leisurely book form has to be reworked for stage (or screen) and a completely different type of audience consumption—and almost always with time and cost constraints. When comparing these adaptations with the book it is always going to be easy to spot what's missing or reduced from the original. The salient thing to examine, then, is how much is retained of the core message and the atmosphere of the book. Edmundson consulted closely with Andrea and they had a trusting relationship, but Andrea never got to see Rufus Norris' final production so I can't say how she would have reacted to it. My own feelings are mixed. I regret the losses of storyline, the slight shift of emphasis towards the white characters, the odd touches of caricature

in the actors' performances, the humour that is still there but often of a different kind than Andrea's. Having seen many performances of the play at different stages of its run, I noticed a certain drift in delivery style and body language as the actors react, adapt, and pander to audience reactions. But despite this, or perhaps even because of it, there is no denying that the production is staged with style and panache and has been a spectacular success with packed houses, much more ethnically diverse than ever before, standing ovations, and excited appreciation from the audience members both black and white—on the night, and later on social media. Even if the message of the piece is reduced to "This happened in Britain in 1948; it was shameful; how much has changed?" the piece has still achieved quite a lot.

VII. *The Long Song* on the Stage

The Long Song's journey to the stage was itself a long one. Charlotte Gwinner, an independent theatre director, had been inspired by the book and, linking up with Chichester Theatre, optioned the rights to adapt it. Andrea was happy to be involved but slightly unsure of the project's prospects, and indeed she felt the first draft of the script—again by a white, much-in-demand adaptor—to be a rather uninspired effort, a faithful precis of the book but without the political understanding, and therefore the confidence, to give it any flare or imagination. At this point Andrea tried to walk away from the project, but she was persuaded to stay on board by Gwinner and Daniel Evans, the artistic director of Chichester. A new adaptor was found, this time a woman playwright of colour, Suhayla El-Bushra, who knew the book (and the issues) well. She produced a strong and imaginative script. Progress was slow, however, and interrupted by COVID, and Andrea died before it finally went into production. I attended some early rehearsals with the talented cast and was kindly accepted as her representative of sorts.

I finally saw the play on the Chichester stage at its very first preview. And here is where I have to admit that I was disappointed. It was a bit rough around the edges, as previews often are, but more than that I felt that the staging of key moments was lost or downplayed. These were often moments of violence or sexual motivation that are tricky to stage

but that are nevertheless key to understanding this particular (hi)story. I then saw it a week later for the press night. It was much more polished, and the audience reaction seemed enthusiastic. But my reservations remained—how is a modern audience going to really understand this toxic world of plantation slavery?—and I feared bad reviews and confused audiences. However, the reviews were good and the play had a successful run with very receptive audiences, so much so that there are now moves for a touring revival.

The fact that I was wrong on both counts is instructive, I think. My reservations were based less on the merits of the play and more on comparison with the richness and subtleties of the book: the tricky understanding of shade-ism; the peculiar sexual politics of plantation slavery; the real traumas of slavery for black people but also, in a very different way, for white people; the practicalities of sugar cane cultivation; the transition from a slave to a wage economy; the lack of civil rights and the horrific post-emancipation poverty trap for the black population. But in the end, it was not these details that really counted. It seems that what the (mainly white) British audiences in 2021 needed to know and accept was simply that Caribbean plantation slavery was evil and the British were up to their necks in it. And this is what the play did admirably. It did much more, but I suspect this is the message that many people took away from it.

Why was this simple message so needed? A decade earlier when the book first came out, Andrea was interviewed several times to promote it. On more than one occasion she was surprised by the interviewers—university-educated journalists—freely admitting that they had no idea that Britain was involved in plantation slavery (that was America, surely). This was the level of national ignorance that the book set out to challenge. The fact that it is difficult to imagine the same admission happening today is, at the very least, progress.

All this points to the long view that I mentioned earlier. All of these adaptations were flawed and subject to certain shifts of emphasis. They are, of necessity, simplifications. But as well as talking about what they left out, I think we should also acknowledge what they have added. In every visual adaptation that I have seen, and talked about here, there

have been many moments when I have been moved, intrigued, exhilarated, and engaged in a parallel but different way than I have been engaged by the books. And they have clearly reached a great many people in a similarly powerful way who would not have read the books. If there is a see-saw balance between losing some of the force and complexity of the novels' messages and gaining a larger audience, then there must be a sweet spot where the trade-off is unquestionably worth it. I do feel, and I hope that Andrea would have agreed, that all of the adaptations I have looked at here have clustered quite close to that sweet spot and have indeed contributed to a small but palpable change in Britain's perception of its history and its entanglement with racism. More adaptations of Andrea's work are currently in the pipeline, and the attitudes and ambitions of the people behind them are different again: they are more knowledgeable, they are certainly more ethnically diverse, and they are less nervous and more willing to explore the subtle underlying politics of her writing.

VIII. From Politics to Art, and Back Again

In my anecdote at the beginning of this essay, I highlighted Andrea's reluctance to talk too much about her literary technique. But I would like to explore one aspect of the art of her writing just a little. Specifically, I would like to discuss the presence—or, as I will argue, the absence—of intentional symbolism and metaphor in her work. I'll stay silent, as Andrea did, on the subject of birds but will instead explore the theme of the abandonment, loss, and adoption of infants and babies that occurs in her work, a topic that is explored so interestingly by John McLeod. McLeod sees this theme as a preoccupation of Andrea's, one that she uses in a symbolic way, and although he accepts the laudable anti-colonial purposes to which this symbolism is deployed he nevertheless sees the risk of it inadvertently upholding imperialist and racist notions of bloodlines that position human cultures as encoded in biology and ignore or downplay the actual lived experience of both infant abandonment and adoption. It's an argument which prompts me to reflect on my own thoughts on and insights into Andrea's intentions with regard to these various plot lines—and, perhaps more deeply, into her own

personal crisis of unbelonging that prompted her to start writing in the first place.

IX. Babies, Lost and Found

In the space of two novels, *Small Island* and *The Long Song*, no less than five infants and babies are separated from their birth mothers under different circumstances. So one could be forgiven for thinking of this as a preoccupation on Andrea's part. In addition, such a dramatic turn of events in each case is likely to be interpreted as having some greater symbolic meaning—one doesn't just throw in a plot line like that lightly, surely. But I am going to argue that both the preoccupation argument and the case for symbolism can be overstated in a way that can potentially detract from Andrea's important intentions. It would be wrong to claim that there is absolutely no symbolism in her work. The simple fact that a reader detects symbolism in the text means that—hey presto—in some sense it is there, whether she intended it or not. But for most of these separation events I feel that portentous symbolism was not in Andrea's mind when she was writing. Rather, they were examples of events that were by no means unusual in the times and places that she was researching and writing about and the shock value for readers comes through our unfamiliarity with those times and places. Andrea was a literary realist; her one aim was to seek out the truth of a situation and tell it in a creative but essentially accessible way. As has been noted by others, her technique could be complex and sophisticated but, as she and I would discuss, symbolism was not something that interested her as a writer.

Her extensive use of first-person narration is significant here, I think. She often said to me that as soon as she learnt to abandon the third person, the "sheet of glass" between her and the story disappeared and she was able to inhabit her characters rather like a method actor. I think that much of the structure of her novels, complicated and original as they may be, flows from that simple fact of being totally inside the heads and cultures of her characters. If symbolism and metaphor can be detected in her novels, much like in real life it's not elaborately planned but emerges organically out of the situation and the way her characters interact with one another.

The Long Song is Andrea's last novel, but it is set the furthest back in time and so is an instructive place to start as it has implications for *Small Island*'s later setting. There are three separations in the story. July, the protagonist and storyteller, is forcibly separated from her mother, Kitty, at the age of five. As a young enslaved adult July gives birth herself, by a black father, to baby Thomas, who she abandons on the doorstep of a white preacher's house. Finally, she has a second child, Emily, by the white overseer Robert Goodwin, who is effectively stolen from her by Goodwin on his return to England.

The Long Song is set within a peculiar historical moment that we know very little about. This is why Andrea wrote it. Slavery has existed in many places throughout history and we have, perhaps, a simplistic notion of what it means. But racialised plantation slavery in the Caribbean, practiced on a massive industrial scale over many generations, was unique, and it requires some effort to understand the toxic pressures and social behaviour that it created. Perhaps the most fitting analogy here is that of livestock and animal husbandry, for that is essentially how the white planter class regarded and treated the enslaved. Just like with stock farming, breeding of the enslaved population to increase or even just to maintain the viable workforce was of great concern to the plantation owners and their administrators.[1] It was an economic imperative. This was especially true during the period in which the novel is set—after the Atlantic trade in slaves had been outlawed and it was no longer possible simply to buy fresh "supplies" from the slave ships.

The livestock here, however, were not cattle but fellow human beings, and so it is possible for us to imagine the feelings and behaviours that this cruel and unnatural system set up within the enslaved population, and the documentary record is replete with supporting evidence. Pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting amongst enslaved women was a fraught and conflicted affair. Why would you want to bring another enslaved person into the world for your oppressor's benefit, to birth a child over whom you had no parenting rights? "Stillbirths" were common and even infanticide.

But there was also a whole other racial strategy at play. Sexual predation by white men on enslaved black women was not only common but

tacitly part of the system. It created the "coloured" class, which was carefully stratified into "mulatto," "quadroon," "octaroon," etc.—a useful buffer class for the white plantocracy. But what is more difficult for contemporary readers to understand is that for an enslaved woman, bearing a coloured child, with the slight possibility of kindly patronage from the white father and the prospect of eventually "breeding to white," could become a survival strategy, one that was unpredictable but nevertheless worth taking—or even encouraging. Consequently shade- ism took deep root in the Caribbean, as is explored through the character of Clara in the novel. *The Long Song*, as Sarah Lawson Welsh notes, is "scrupulously researched," (195) and as an observer of that research I can vouch for the care that was taken, and for the impact and the toll it took on Andrea. So these separation incidents, if I can call them that, are less contrived plot twists for symbolic effect but rather an accurate fictionalisation of what actually went on time and time again. That the character of July, a sly and opportunistic survivor, could abandon her black child Thomas and yet cherish her quadroon daughter Emily is no contradiction. Andrea is simply telling us what life was like and how people coped and behaved given their extreme and bizarre circumstances. Similarly, the old July's eventual reunion with her adult son Thomas is not really the Dickensian happy family ending that some critics take it for and some adaptations portray. Blood is not necessarily thicker than water in July's world. She is cantankerous, at odds with her newfound family, and always tetchy with her son. But, ever the survivor, she knows when she is on to a good thing.

In *Small Island*, set over a century later, we hear the story of the illegitimate birth, the mixed parentage, and the adoption of Hortense, one of the central Jamaican characters. This is all told to us by the prim character of Hortense herself without any sense of shame or even unusualness, and once again it is meant not as a dramatic plot point but as a relatively matter-of-fact aspect of Caribbean life at that time—a clear legacy, in fact, of the racial and sexual politics of the society we encounter in *The Long Song*.

There is also another more significant separation at the end of the book. Baby Michael, the love child of white English Queenie Bligh and

black Jamaican Michael Roberts, is given by Queenie to Hortense and Gilbert to be brought up in a black family. This is a shocking and unexpected event and happens in the very last pages of the book, so it seems ripe for symbolic meaning. But what does it mean? Does it symbolise the seeds of a new multicultural Britain, as some critics and adaptors have interpreted it? Or is it a pessimistic critique of the racism then and now? Is it the right or wrong thing for Queenie to do? And are Hortense and Gilbert wise or correct to accept the child? If there is any meaning or moral to be drawn here it must be drawn not from the novel but from the attitudes of post-war Britain because, as always, Andrea was basing her story on real events—in this case, the documented rise in adoptions and the institutional care of mixed-race babies resulting from wartime liaisons between white British women and black, mainly US, servicemen.

This ambiguous ending is something of a dramatic masterstroke; it keeps us thinking, talking, interpreting, and re-interpreting an unsettling event that of course lies at the heart of what the book is about—racism. Andrea was not a writer given to symbolism, and these separation events in her novels reflect reality rather than render that reality in primarily symbolic terms. She wanted us to make up our own minds about what it all meant. The politics was always deliberately personal, as it is in life. She wanted it always to be up to the reader to connect the wider political dots.

But I think there is another important factor that is relevant to these issues of abandonment: the very personal feelings that motivated Andrea to pick up a pen and start writing in the first place, first about herself and her conflicted childhood, then her family and their history, and, finally, Britain's history in the Caribbean. This is how I remember it.

X. Feelings of Unbelonging

In 1989 Andrea was thirty-three years old. She and I had been together for almost eight years and we were living in a flat in north London that she had bought with a deposit partly funded by her father, Winston. Winston had recently died after a distressing illness and Andrea's first book *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) was still five years away.

The epiphany that she would later talk about—crossing to the "black" side of the room in a racism awareness training course—had already happened back in the early 1980s and she was still trying to process what this meant for her. But her friends and colleagues were still mainly white.[2] Her family was somewhat distant, both physically and emotionally, and in any case was part of the problem for her so was unable to be supportive in this identity crisis she was going through. She was working with me as a graphic designer but not really wanting it as a career, and she had already started a part-time writing course. She was seeing a therapist who specialised in issues to do with race. I was trying to be as supportive as I could, but in retrospect I can see that my understanding of what she was going through was limited by, well, let's be honest—my whiteness. One day she scribbled down a note to herself in an old notebook that I only came across recently, some time after she died. I transcribe it here with her original line breaks. We know exactly which day she wrote it because she dated it at the top:

5/7/89
The feelings of unbelonging are
strong
Am I black white?
Am I working class or middle?
Do I have a family or not?
Where do I fit in with my friends?
The feelings of unbelonging are
strong.
I feel the need to articulate
my life and feelings. I feel this
need very very strongly. I want
people to understand the world
through my eyes. I want it to
help others and just shed a little
light on life from my point of view.
I want to be listened to. Respected. No
I need to be listened to and respected

I need to be creative. I need to
make something of myself in 'their' eyes
as well as my own.

There's a lot to unpack in these few lines. As well as being very revealing of her state of mind, the last few lines are strikingly prophetic. At this point let me briefly digress into Andrea's own ancestry—a story that she only fully discovered towards the end of her life, but one that I think is highly relevant to understanding not only her own state of mind at this point but also her whole approach to writing fiction.

Within the last decade, newly discovered research into Jamaican plantation records allowed us to deduce that at some point in the month of December 1833, Andrea's maternal great-great-grandmother, a young enslaved "mulatto" woman called Fanny Fisher, conceived a child by a white Englishman called William Ridgard. He was the manager of a Jamaican sugar plantation called Mesopotamia where Fanny was born and was then a house slave. She was twenty-eight at the time; Ridgard was forty-six. The child, a boy named Richard Ridgard, was born to Fanny in June 1834, just one month before the final abolition of slavery. William Ridgard's last will and testament reveals that he had eight other children by another local woman called Mary Morais who effectively became his common-law wife. These children he recognised and provided for in his will, but he never acknowledged Richard as his legitimate son and most likely Richard never knew his father.

Richard, Andrea's great-grandfather, grew up with a light skin but with none of the education or advantages of the "coloured" class that would likely have been afforded to his half-siblings. He earned his living fishing in the coastal waters around Savannah la Mar in the west of the island. He married a "dark" woman (according to family anecdote) and they had four children, but the lighter appearance of him and his children continued to be a marker of identity and pride (within his family, at least). Whether it provided him any status in his community is difficult to say.

His son Philip Ridgard was Andrea's grandfather and is still remembered by some of the older members of the Ridgard diaspora. He

remained in the Savannah la Mar area, married a local woman, and earned a resourceful living as a small farmer, shopkeeper, and maker of shoes and fishing traps. His wife was a seamstress and chocolate maker. Their daughter Amy, Andrea's mother, remembers her father forbidding her from playing with black children when she was little. The notion of lighter skin and its higher status was still being passed down the family generations.

Amy and her brother were the first generation to move away from their rural background and to aspire to higher education and wider opportunities. She trained as a teacher in Kingston, where she became enamoured with her white English teachers, absorbing fully the colonised mentality of the time and becoming fixated on escaping the small island of Jamaica and going to live in Britain, the mother country. In 1948 she met and married Winston Levy, a young accountant for Tate and Lyle, and helped to finance his journey to England on the *SS Empire Windrush*. She followed him a few months later.

Winston, Andrea's father, came from a similarly colour-conscious family,[3] but the precise lineage is more difficult to pin down. It seems likely that the Levy name came from an established Jewish family from the Mandeville area of Jamaica, but Winston may be descended from an "outside child" of one of its male members, inheriting only the name. Winston seemed not to have had a close relationship with his own parents.

So Andrea grew up in London with parents who she once characterised to me as living out their lives in England in a protracted state of shock. Their shock was at being unwelcome and unvalued; at being suddenly "black" and the objects of racism; at suddenly finding themselves at the bottom of the social scale instead of halfway up. Andrea's own shock was in living with the isolation, silence, and shame that this created within her (now very nuclear) family; of experiencing the racism that surrounded her own growing up but being encouraged to keep her head down and try to pass for white. She didn't yet know the history that I have sketched in above, but she certainly felt the effects of its legacy along with the subtle but constant message of illegitimate citizenship that her own society was giving her.

Family and heritage were the very real and personal problems that drove her to write, and we can sense that from the heartfelt note she wrote to herself in 1989. As an author, she did not choose family heritage as a writerly metaphor in order to explore the politics of empire—rather, it was the other way round. The personal is always, unavoidably, political for a black Briton like Andrea, and it was through exploring her own family that she uncovered Britain's more unsavoury imperial legacy. When she puts the words "I am the bastard child of empire" (327) into the mouth of her character Faith in *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), the illegitimacy referred to is precisely that sense of unbelonging, of her very right to call herself British being challenged. Of course, the illegitimate bloodlines—the genuine "bastards," if you like—are also easy to find if one cares to look into family history, and through slavery and colonial race theory the two are clearly connected.

At Christmas 1989, the same year that she wrote her note, Andrea and I took a trip to Jamaica to stay with an aunt and cousins from her mother's side of the family who she had never met before. It was the first time either of us had been to the Caribbean, and I know that for her it was an enlightening and healing experience. It's difficult not to see the parallels with Faith. One of the interesting aspects of that visit was how we were able to learn from these newly met relatives quite openly and without embarrassment on their part about the fractured and non-conventional nature of her maternal extended family. The Caribbean term "outside child" cropped up without the sense of stigma that would be carried by the equivalent term "bastard." The family diagram that grows throughout *Fruit of the Lemon* is thus an ironic piece of mimicry, more of a family bramble bush—horizontal and chaotic—than a clear, vertical tree.

Andrea always referred to her parents as light-skinned Jamaicans. She rejected the term mixed race because in her parents' case (arguably in any case) the term was meaningless.

There was a mixture of course but that mixture was so long and complicated that to try to unravel it would be a rather pointless, not to say racist, exercise. They were what they were, and she was what she was. This is essentially the message of *Fruit of the Lemon*. If there is any

figurative meaning in Faith (or is it Andrea?) declaring herself the "bastard child of empire," then it is in the very fact that the British society that she was born into questioned her legitimacy as a member of that society in many subtle and not so subtle ways.

So does Andrea's quest for the story of her heritage (or lineage, if you like) and her discomfort with its absence in her early life amount to a preoccupation with bloodlines? I think the only way I can answer that is with reference to my own background. I am white and I am English. So were my parents. But beyond that I have very little information about my ancestry, and I'm really not all that curious. That's because I don't need to be; people have never asked me where I came from. For Andrea it was an issue that was forced upon her, and the conclusion to her quest was to celebrate not a bloodline but a gloriously mongrel history that is, nevertheless, of enormous interest and historical significance to us all.

Andrea wrote two novels before *Fruit of the Lemon*, and those thoughts she jotted down in August 1989 I think support Fiona Tolan's view that *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996) are much more than celebratory coming-of-age stories concerned with identity alone. Her sense of being an outsider, drifting, excluded, and searching for an identity that we hear in her jotted note was always coupled to a clear knowledge of why that was. It was to do with race and British history and, as her later novels make clear, the roots of that are long and deep, and identity politics alone were never going to be enough to explore it. She once put it to me that "identity" was a good place to start but a bad place to finish. And it's tempting to identify a tipping point in her writing, midway through her third novel, *Fruit of the Lemon*, when she began to engage with broader political and historical themes—an end of the start, and a beginning of the finish. But those themes were always there if one chooses to look, even in the earliest work. In *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, for example, the white childhood friends and playmates of Angela Jacobs and her brother have an argument in the course of a game of rounders and suddenly turn on her:

> 'Take her back to the jungle,' Kathleen said as she put her hand over her mouth and laughed.

> 'Yeah, take her back to the jungle. You come from the jungle – all wogs come from the jungle.'
>
> 'You're not English—my dad said,' Steven joined in. 'He said you come over with the other coons. You wanna go back—back to where you came from—Blackie.' (Levy 57)

XI. Conclusion

I have tried to look at two aspects of Andrea's work here. First, her political message and the way that her warm, inclusive style of writing often belies the sense of anger and injustice that motivate it. Andrea's novels all have political intent, but those messages are so artfully interwoven into her writing that they never seem heavy-handed or overtly pedagogical. Her novels are accessible and enjoyable to read, but that means that they can sometimes become glossed as the acceptable face of black Britain's cry of outrage; occasionally, their adaptation to stage and screen can reflect this. But the novels are enormously rich and, dare I say it, profound works that are capable of being read and reread for changing times. In the long run I believe the popularity of her novels will encourage an ongoing analysis, leading to an appreciation of exactly how trenchant her critique of British society is.

And second, I touched on her technique of writing fiction, which I feel is less stylised than some commentators think. If people do read symbolism into her texts, then this is something that arises organically, and perhaps accidentally, out of her research and her essentially realistic style of writing rather than being elaborately planned as such. I maintain that both her political message and her style of writing are very closely linked to her own particular family ancestry, and I have tried to explain something of that ancestry, how it affected her, and how from a political point of view it should affect us all.

Andrea was a very down-to-earth person with no pretensions. At art college she studied textile design, and in one sense she was the product (like myself) of that old-style British art college system, creative but proudly un-academic. She had a sharp and sophisticated sense of humour, and her cultural hinterland was basically English working class with successive layers of upward mobility balanced slightly uneasily on

top. She liked rom-coms and soap operas, Tamla Motown music and visiting stately homes. And she was quite simply the most naturally insightful person that I have ever known.

When she started to write she had two aims. One was to tell her story (with all its angst and seriousness), and the other was to entertain. She wanted people to enjoy reading her work. She wanted to make people laugh and feel stimulated, interested, and nourished as well as feel anger or shame. This balancing act between the polemicist and the entertainer may have contributed to her success, but it also allows leverage that can tip how she is read towards the entertainment side. I think she was well aware of that but would have had it no other way. In the long run, people enjoying her work is what will make it last. And if it lasts it will be reread and mined afresh for all its meanings. That's the great thing about novels. As she put it, "There will always be the book."

Notes

1 Andrea's own great-great-grandfather was a white plantation attorney in Jamaica whose letters to the plantation owner back in England still exist and are kept at Oxford's Bodleian Library. In one, he describes how he sent an enslaved woman called Dido to the workhouse (where she would have been shackled to a treadmill) as "punishment" for the stillbirth of her twin babies.

2 Years later, Andrea told me of the time in 1981 when she felt a burning urge to be part of the Black People's Day of Action march through London in protest at the indifference of the authorities to the New Cross arson attack that killed thirteen black youngsters. She didn't want to be with her white friends (who, although sympathetic, would probably have been unaware of the march) but had no black friends to go with. She went on her own, waited by the roadside and just slipped into a gap as the march passed by. The way she related the story made it clear it was a lonely and painful moment in her time of crisis.

3 Andrea's mother, Amy, once confided to her that Winston's parents employed a private researcher into Amy's racial background before they agreed to the marriage. It is not possible to verify this, of course, but it would not have been an unusual thing for that particular class of Jamaican society to do at that time.

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