

Unveiling Transnational Narratives: Language, Identity, and Space in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

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Set in the aftermath of World War II, Andrea Levy's Small Island follows the lives of four characters – Queenie, a white British woman; her husband Bernard, a soldier returning from the war; Gilbert, a Jamaican immigrant who served in the Royal Air Force; and Hortense, his ambitious yet disillusioned wife – against the backdrop of a transforming London that is gradually shedding its status as the stronghold of Britishness and becoming a fluid, transnational space in which identities are formed and reshaped through interaction with the metropolitan environment. Drawing on postcolonial studies of identity and space by Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Yi-Fu Tuan, and John Clement Ball, this contribution aims to investigate the dynamics of this process – where language becomes a genuine instrument of power – and to demonstrate that, amid the rich diversity of metropolitan life depicted by Levy, space and the individual co-constitute one another as transnational entities whose survival depends on transcending the “us” versus “them” dichotomy and recognising a pervasive, necessary hybridity.

Keywords

Transnational; identity; postcolonial; language; space; cultural dislocation; migration

Defining Transnational London: Theoretical Foundations of Identity, Language, and Space

Set in the aftermath of World War II, Andrea Levy's *Small Island* follows the lives of four characters – Queenie, a white British woman; her husband Bernard, a soldier returning from the war; Gilbert, a Jamaican immigrant who served in the Royal Air Force; and Hortense, his ambitious but disillusioned

wife – as they unfold against the backdrop of a transforming London. Engulfed by a wave of migration in the 1950s, London increasingly loses its status as the stronghold of Britishness and comes to resemble a fluid, transnational space in which identities are formed and reshaped through their interaction with the metropolitan environment, an authentic catalyst for negotiating cultural differences. Far from serving as a silent, inert backdrop, London becomes a protagonist at the very moment its identity intertwines with that of the complex, heterogeneous population that inhabits it. This interaction sets into motion a process of identity construction grounded in reciprocal influences and mutual transformations, at the end of which monolithic identities collapse and give way to multiple, hybrid identities, nourished by constant and inexhaustible linguistic, cultural, and spatial negotiations. Indeed, the interwoven narratives of Queenie and Bernard – embodying the English perspective – and of Hortense and Gilbert – Caribbean immigrants – lead the reader into a labyrinth of racial prejudices, expectations and disillusionments, belonging and non-belonging. The reader is stripped of the once-granite convictions of a singular reality and becomes aware of the pervasive rise of a transnational space inhabited by syncretic identities.

Drawing on postcolonial studies of identity and spatial theories by Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Yi-Fu Tuan, and John Clement Ball, the aim of this paper is to investigate the dynamics of the aforementioned process and demonstrate that, within the exuberant metropolitan humanity depicted by Levy, space and the individual form and transform each other reciprocally as transnational entities, whose very survival depends on transcending the “us versus them” dichotomy and acknowledging a hybridity that is both pervasive and indispensable.

The starting point of this analysis, therefore, can only be the definition of the concept of the transnational, which inevitably requires a concise digression on essential postcolonial and postmodern theories concerning the interaction between language, space, and identity. First and foremost, Levy’s London is enveloped by a kind of transformism that renders it a transforming and translating space even before it becomes truly transnational; for this reason, it can be likened to Homi Bhabha’s “Third Space” (36), which it both replicates and amplifies in its hybridity and its firm conviction that what emerges is “an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (38). In Levy’s London, indeed, characters come to self-awareness in two complementary ways: on the one hand, through the appropriation –

undoubtedly linguistic in part, though not exclusively – of urban space and its consequent transformation from mere “space” into a lived “place”, and on the other hand, through the acceptance of a hybrid, multifaceted existential condition grounded precisely in the articulation of difference. The city is invariably the mirror of its inhabitants (Proietti, Puglisi 2002), not a mere assemblage of buildings but a living organism that reveals humanity and identity through each of its parts. As an image of civilisation, the city is continuously subject to the changes that characterise individuals’ existences, and it constantly functions as a site of encounters, exchanges, transits, and settlements, shaping and reshaping identities in the process.

Ideally, a city is a space in which diverse cultures and traditions meet, coexist, and mutually transform one another in the construction of a polis. From every vantage point, the city enacts a process of both individual and collective transformation: something that becomes particularly evident in postcolonial literature, to which Levy belongs, and in which the city, as noted above, asserts itself as a transnational, transforming, and translating space.

The prefix *trans-*, meaning both “across” and “changed”, defines the fluid and permeable nature of the city, where people and events continuously traverse and reshape one another, just as in Levy’s London, which is at once transforming, altering individuals, and transformed, being modified by them. The city is also translating – literally “carrying across” – because it enables and amplifies an ongoing process of cultural translation. This broader conception of translation extends beyond language. As Bruce Woodcock explains, thinkers such as Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha view cultural translation as a negotiation between the culture of origin and the host culture. Hall states: “The products of the new diasporas created by post-colonial migrations [...] must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them” (Hall 1992, 310). It is not a matter of assimilation but of reciprocal transformation, and this, according to Hall, underpins his view of identity as a fluid and dynamic entity: “Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. [...] Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture” (Hall 1990, 223). By deconstructing the illusion of a monolithic national identity, Hall’s perspective also enables the overcoming of the self/Other dichotomy underlying the process of othering, as aptly described by Said as “Orientalism”, namely “a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly

different, or alternative and novel, world" (12). Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Bhabha highlights the "resistance" and "untranslatability" inherent in this transformation, underscoring the hybridity and indeterminacy of identity. Diasporic individuals – like Hortense and Gilbert in *Small Island*, who experience dislocation from their homeland and relocation to a new, initially more alienating than welcoming, environment – become "works in progress" that change and are changed by their new context. As Woodcock notes: "A 'translating' culture, then, is both passive and active [...] both translated and translating, changing the 'host' culture irredeemably" (59).

This reciprocity is central to the transnational city. John Clement Ball argues that defining cities through binaries such as local/global obscures their true complexity:

Postcolonial migrants cannot see London as simply local or national; to do so would be to deny its historical and present-day overseas linkages, to suppress the ways its buildings and people constantly transport one elsewhere. [...] To see the city that way would be to deny the urban landscape's power to evoke its own history and its links both to British national and (post) colonial identities. (31)

He rejects the equation "global = transnational". For Ball, postcolonial London is transnational "because of the unique ways it confounds global-local binaries and accommodates new forms and narratives of relational identity, and also because of its inclusion of people from many nations and diasporas" (31). London includes people from many diasporas and allows them to negotiate among cultures: they are physically in London but mentally connected to extra-English identities. Ball's perspective draws on various theories – among them Doreen Massey's view that places are defined through external relations, and Michael Peter Smith's concept of cities as transnational networks – and, in particular, on Stuart Hall's assertion that Britain is "irrevocably transnational, irrevocably open at the end, porous and unable to close its borders and its mind" (Hall 1999, 43–44). Ball concludes:

Transnational London becomes a potential replacement for attenuated, compromised, conflicted, undesirable, or unreachable spaces of national belonging. It becomes a locus for the construction of emergent sensibilities that are both transnational (in the spatial sense of inhabiting multiple

geographic scales) and postcolonial (in the temporal sense of wrestling with the influence imperial history exerts on present-day life). (32)

This dual nature echoes Yi-Fu Tuan's idea: "'Space' is more abstract than 'place'. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (43). In postcolonial literature, the city becomes place in two ways: through the lived experience of the immigrant character and through inherited cultural images. As Ball states:

Paradoxically, a Commonwealth migrant arriving in London for the first time can be expected to encounter the city as both space and place. It will be a space insofar as it is unfamiliar and not yet marked by personal experience of its streets and buildings. Over time, the city (or at least parts of it) will gradually come into focus as a timeladen, meaningful 'place' of deep acquaintance. In another sense, the new arrival comes to a city that is too much a place: layered with received values, meanings, and images that have accumulated on 'London' over centuries of imperial, cultural, and literary history. (32–33)

This tension – between space and place, imagined and real – drives the transformation of identity in the postcolonial city, so that individuals and characters learn to "inhabit a postcolonial, transnational, and real London rather than an imagined one" (Ball 33), an unstable yet potentially generative urban space, in line with Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" (12), just as happens to Levy's characters, in whose stories the author also pours her own personal experiences. Levy's personal experience – as a second-generation Jamaican British – deeply informs her work, and in particular the novel *Small Island*, which goes far beyond a historical account of the Windrush generation. Levy's Britishness, shaped by her parents' migration, informs her examination of identity, citizenship, and memory through an insider–outsider lens. In her 2000 *Guardian* essay on Windrush, she lays bare the paradoxes of British identity.

Identity! Sometimes it makes my head hurt, sometimes my heart. So, what am I? Where do I fit into Britain, 2000 and beyond? [...] Any history book will show that England has never been an exclusive club, but rather a hybrid nation. The effects of the British Empire were personal as well as

political. And as the sun has finally set on the Empire, we are now having to face up to all of these realities. (Levy, “This is my England”)

It is in this context – where identity, as Hall asserts, is “constructed within representation” (Hall 1999, 40) – that the role of language, consecrated by Linda Hutcheon’s postmodernist poetics, becomes especially significant. As Hutcheon asserts in *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, “the idea that language has the power to constitute, and not only to describe, that which it represents” (192) is particularly illuminating in Levy’s exploration of linguistic hierarchies. In *Small Island*, the premise that language does not merely represent reality but, in fact, constructs it (Hutcheon) is borne out by the linguistic choices of the characters – most notably Hortense and Gilbert – which function as acts of self-definition and resistance. Hortense’s meticulously cultivated British English is intended to assert her rightful place within the bourgeois social fabric of London, yet she ultimately discovers that this very linguistic refinement becomes a basis for her exclusion rather than her inclusion. Conversely, Gilbert’s Jamaican patois, suffused with hybridised forms, embodies the conviction that through the mingling and fusion of diverse elements one not only uncovers a means of interpreting reality but also ensures its very survival. By the novel’s conclusion, in fact, the London that Hortense and Gilbert are poised to inhabit has become a hybrid space destined to be populated by identities equally of mixed origin.

From English Dreams to Hybrid Realities: Language, Space, and Belonging in *Small Island*

Crucial is the examination of language, which, within Levy’s narrative, assumes a role far beyond that of a mere medium of communication; it is revealed as a powerful instrument in the continuous formation and contestation of identity. In *Small Island*, language is a powerful tool that each character uses – though in different ways – to show who they are and to keep reshaping what makes them feel included or excluded in the city. For Hortense, for whom belonging entails mastery of flawless English, her encounter with Queenie proves profoundly unsettling. Confident in her linguistic abilities – skills underpinned by an exemplary academic education that attests to her worth – Hortense finds Queenie’s doubt regarding her command of English not only unacceptable but also incomprehensible. Hortense’s response to Queenie’s insinuations is

that of one who feels unjustly judged, and she therefore goes to great lengths to demonstrate the full extent of her knowledge. Thus, Hortense's almost compulsive repetition of phrases such as "an educated woman such as I" (187) becomes not merely an outward display of erudition but also a claim to the right to belong to that English world which, as embodied by Queenie, seems intent on denying her inclusion. Hortense's obstinacy, however, is destined to collide with her inability to comprehend Queenie's colloquialisms. Hortense, in fact, does not grasp commonplace expressions – such as "Cat got your tongue" (188) or "perishing" (189) – and this incapacity marks a decisive moment in her journey. It compels her to acknowledge the unbridgeable chasm between the life she imagined she would lead in London and the reality she encounters. Hortense's academic knowledge of English and of English culture requires infusion with lived experience in order to be transmuted into genuine belonging. If, then, Hortense's linguistic "purism" ultimately proves disappointing because it fails to capture and represent the multifaceted nature of reality, Gilbert's patois – despite its communicative limitations when faced with English interlocutors – possesses a hybridity that enables him to convey the multicultural essence of the metropolitan space and to imbue it with the emotional intensity necessary to dissuade Bernard from his entrenched racial prejudices. For Gilbert, language transcends mere communication; it is an affirmation of his Caribbean roots and a subtle yet potent act of resistance against the pressures of full assimilation into an English society that often fails to recognise his identity, as evidenced by those dialogues in which he is compelled to spatially locate Jamaica and assert his rightful belonging to British culture through statement such as: "No, Jamaica is not in England but it is part of the British Empire" or "Jamaica is a colony. Britain is our Mother Country. We are British but we live in Jamaica" (130).

In this sense, Levy's exploration of language in *Small Island* serves as a powerful commentary on the nature of cultural assimilation and the ways in which linguistic and cultural differences continue to mark individuals as outsiders, even in a society that may outwardly appear inclusive. The English language, for Hortense, becomes a double-edged sword: it both represents her aspiration to belong and exposes the barriers that prevent her from achieving that belonging. Therefore, on the one hand Hortense's struggle to understand the nuances of language mirrors her broader struggle with identity and her place within a society that, despite her best efforts, continues to view her as different. On the other hand, Gilbert's patois becomes both a boundary and a bridge, a demarcation that distinguishes him from the dominant culture

while simultaneously maintaining an intrinsic connection to his heritage amid the postwar London milieu. Language, then, becomes a key mechanism in this ongoing negotiation of selfhood, belonging, and cultural identity.

The language that unites and divides recalls the initial dualism of Levy's London – both inclusive and exclusive – yet above all serves as a projection of dreams that shatter against the spectre of disillusionment, marginalisation, and racism. *Small Island* indeed depicts, through multiple perspectives, the devastating effects of racism on both those who suffer from it and those who perpetuate it. Queenie and Bernard, although both white, reveal conscious and unconscious prejudices, whereas Gilbert and Hortense face disparate forms of discrimination, finding in their mutual support a lifeline. Gilbert – son of a light-skinned Jewish father and a Black mother – perceives race as a complex factor subordinated to character and social position; Hortense, whose fair complexion inherited from her father grants her privileged recognition in Jamaica, finds that in England this advantage dissolves into the uniform category of “nonwhite”. Queenie proclaims herself antiracist but remains steeped in paternalism, while Bernard embodies a blind hatred of any form of difference, unable to acknowledge the value of others. At the novel's climax, Gilbert's plea for racial forgiveness proves futile, and Bernard's hostility turns against him, leaving Gilbert alone with his shame, even as Gilbert and Hortense welcome Queenie's child into their new multicultural family.

When Hortense leaves Jamaica for England, she carries with her high expectations about what this new land will offer her:

In the breath it took to exhale that one little word, England became my destiny. A dining-table in a dining room set with four chairs. A starched tablecloth embroidered with bows. Armchairs in the sitting room placed around a small wood fire. The house is modest – nothing fancy, no show – the kitchen small but with everything I need to prepare meals. We eat rice and peas on Sunday with chicken and corn, but in my English kitchen roast meat with two vegetables and even fish and chips bubble on the stove. My husband fixes the window that sticks and the creaky board on the veranda. I sip hot tea by an open window and look on my neighbours in the adjacent and opposite dwelling. I walk to the shop where I am greeted with manners, ‘Good day’, politeness, ‘A fine day today’, and refinement, ‘I trust you are well?’ A red bus, a cold morning and daffodils blooming with all the colours of the rainbow. (83)

Levy vividly conveys Hortense's "English dream", experienced not so much as a geographic relocation but as an entry into a domestic and urban universe ideally governed by kindness, propriety, and hospitality. In Hortense's imagination, England is marked by a succession of modest quotidian gestures – from a meticulously set table to an embroidered tablecloth, from armchairs positioned beside the hearth to pots simmering on the stove – which, in their simplicity, conjure an image of a warm and comfortable locale where the ordinary is transfigured into the extraordinary. Likewise, the urban landscape – made tangible through the passing of a red bus on a cold morning and the blooming of vibrant daffodils – is populated by neighbours who exchange polite greetings – "Good day", "A fine day today", "I trust you are well?" – embodying a social fabric woven from refined civility. In this vision, Hortense's dream is rooted in a collective imaginary of the domestic and public spaces as sites of mutual respect and hospitality, idylls in which even minor home repairs – the stuck window, the creaking table – take on meanings of shared care and participation. The narrative, therefore, does not merely celebrate a geographical setting, but a model of life where gentleness is inscribed into the architecture of homes and the gestures of everyday life, offering Hortense the promise of belonging and dignity within a community governed by subtle conventions of decorum.

However, from the moment of her arrival, the London that Hortense had imagined – vibrant, radiant, and full of promise – reveals itself as shabby and decaying: a space mistakenly presumed familiar but in reality utterly alien and unwelcoming. The same disappointing reality applies to the London home she had envisioned so fondly. Awaiting her is Gilbert – the fellow Jamaican whom she had agreed to marry in exchange for the money needed to buy his passage to England – and the apartment he has rented from Queenie turns out to be nothing more than a dilapidated, cramped room: "All I saw were dark brown walls. A broken chair that rested one uneven leg on the Holy Bible. A window with a torn curtain and Gilbert's suit – the double-breasted one – hanging from a rail on the wall" (16). When Hortense is horrified to see rats in the house, Gilbert tries to reassure her, insisting that every home in London is infested, and that these are merely mice, not rats: "'You bring me to a house with rats?' 'No, they are mice. And every house in London has mice. They bombed out too, you know'" (100).

Gilbert's clumsy attempt to conceal the house's neglect behind a euphemism – "mice" rather than "rats" – does not prevent Hortense from becoming aware

of the dramatic gap between the London of her dreams and the London she actually experiences. Indeed, the entire house is perceived as majestically decaying, while she still imagines its glorious past: “The house, I could see, was shabby. Mark you, shabby in a grand sort of a way. I was sure this house could once have been home to a doctor or a lawyer or perhaps a friend of a friend of the King” (9). The house in which Hortense finds herself living upon her arrival in London becomes, metonymically, the whole of England: a country that she perceives as possessing an ancient, if somewhat outdated, magnificence. Hortense imagines she knows all of England, not merely its language, and she feels in some way connected to it, emphasising a physical bond between the land and her own body – “my feet had set down on the soil of England” (10) – a bond destined to evolve but never to be broken, even in the face of the repeated episodes of racism that both she and Gilbert must confront within the domestic and urban spheres: “We were nearly at Nevers Street – about to pass round the corner. Mrs Bligh, after regaining some composure she had lost to the ruffians, was instructing me on what she assured me was good manners. I, as a visitor to this country, should step off the pavement into the road if an English person wishes to pass and there is not sufficient room on the pavement for us both” (276).

Queenie’s notion of good manners is thoroughly distorted and intrinsically infused with racism: her insistence that Hortense give way to an English citizen, despite the absence of any real logistical necessity, is not a neutral act of courtesy but rather an act of ethnic hierarchisation grounded in a racist premise. Rather than fostering coexistence, it reinforces the divide between the dominant and the dominated, transforming the metropolitan public space into one of exclusion. However, the house is not the only place imbued with strong symbolic and metonymic value. In Levy’s London, another equally significant space is the dock: a site of arrivals and departures, encounters, intersections, an authentic celebration of humanity and multiculturalism. The dock emerges as a liminal space where migratory, commercial, and cultural flows intertwine: here, diverse identities – passengers, sailors, migrants – intersect and produce symbolic and material hybridisations. Within this basin of daily osmosis, the dock transcends national boundaries to become a true “transnational space” (Ball), a palimpsest where signs of multiple origins coexist, intermingle, and constantly redefine identities and hierarchies:

But it did not matter – he was not there. There was no one who would have fitted his description. The only jumping and waving that was done was by

the Jamaicans arriving and leaving the ship. Women who shivered in their church best clothes – their cotton dresses with floppy bows and lace; their hats and white gloves looking gaudy against the grey of the night. Men in suits and bow-ties and smart hats. They jumped and waved. Jumped and waved at the people come to meet them. Black men in dark, scruffy coats with hand-knitted scarves. Hunched over in the cold. Squinting and straining to see a bag or hair or shoes or a voice or a face that they knew. Who looked feared – their eyes opening a little too wide – as they perused the luggage that had been brought across the ocean and now had to be carried through the streets of London. Greeting excited relatives with the same words: ‘You bring some guava, some rum – you have a little yam in that bag?’. (11)

The dock, the quintessential threshold space, marks the crucial passage between the known world and the unknown, between the hopes nurtured during the journey and the abrupt encounter with London’s reality. It is from this physical and symbolic frontier that the experience of the young Caribbean immigrants, as depicted by Levy through Gilbert’s perspective, begins with an intense emotional charge:

You see, most of the boys were looking upwards. Their feet might have been stepping on London soil for the first time – their shaking sea legs wobbling them on the steadfast land – but it was wonder that lifted their eyes. They finally arrive in London Town. And, let me tell you, the Mother Country – this thought-I-knew-you place – was bewildering these Jamaican boys. See them pointing at the train that rumbles across a bridge. They looked shocked when billowing black smoke puffed its way round the white washing hung on drying lines – the sheets, the pants, the babies’ bonnets. Come, they had never seen houses so tall, all the same. And what is that? A chimney? They have fire in their house in England? No! And why everything look so dowdy? Even the sunshine can find no colour but grey. Staring on people who were staring on them. Man, the women look so glum. Traffic turning their head this way and that. Steady there, boy – watch out. Look, you see a white man driving a bus? And over there, can you believe what the eye is telling? A white man sweeping the road. (175)

Levy vividly conveys the poetic intensity of the astonishment and wonder that permeate the young Caribbean immigrants upon their arrival in London, a city

long imagined as a symbol of progress and belonging, but which soon reveals itself as alien and disappointing. The so-called “Motherland”, internalised as a familiar place through colonial narratives, instead unveils itself as a cold, grey, and profoundly alienating space. The youths’ upward gaze is animated by a sense of discovery that quickly gives way to bewilderment: the tall, uniform houses, the black smoke staining the laundry hung out to dry, and even a sun incapable of illuminating anything beyond the prevailing greyness together construct an urban landscape discordant with the idealised image of the metropolis. London thus emerges as a quotidian dystopia, where every detail serves to dismantle the illusion of a homecoming, and the encounter with otherness – embodied by the expressionless faces, mechanical gestures, and the mutual surprise between observer and observed – becomes an occasion for profound disillusionment, of which even Gilbert becomes a victim. Shortly after watching the young immigrants at the pier, Gilbert mistakes a cluster of flies resting on dog excrement in the street for a precious brooch. But as soon as the flies take flight, the illusion collapses: what appeared to be a portentous sign of good fortune turns into yet another confirmation of urban decay and postcolonial disorientation: “That jewel was no more than a cluster of flies caught by the light, the radiant iridescent green the movement of their squabbling backs” (175). This episode, narrated in almost lyrical tones, also serves as a powerful metaphor for the disenchantment shared by the newcomers: their utopia of “returning home” proves instead to be a harsh dystopia of smoke, greyness, and trampled hopes, highlighting the trauma of cultural uprooting and the fracture between identity and place at the heart of the postcolonial migratory experience.

The initial disillusionment experienced by Hortense and Gilbert upon their arrival in London triggers a process of transformation in their relationship to the city and, more importantly, to life itself. Gilbert is the first to be swept up by this change: though fully aware of the limitations imposed by racism, he proves flexible and able to adapt to a harsh and exclusionary reality. He gradually draws Hortense into a reciprocal process of growth, one grounded in the negotiation between their original identities and the new, local context: a process that ultimately culminates in the triumph of spatial and cultural hybridity. When Gilbert first finds himself alone in London, spending two entire months in a cramped room shared with other Caribbean immigrants, he immediately realises that such an arrangement can only be temporary, and that he must soon find another place to begin truly living: “These two damp cramped rooms that the friend of Winston’s brother had let us use were

temporary. One night, maybe two. More private than the shelter. Better than the hostel. Two months I was there! Two months, and this intimate hospitality had begun to violate my hope. I needed somewhere so I could start to live" (177). The "somewhere" Gilbert longs for eventually becomes Queenie's house. Initially conceived as a space reserved exclusively for white tenants and governed by strict British standards of conduct, Queenie's house gradually transforms into a hybrid space through the presence of Gilbert, Hortense, and other Caribbean migrants. It becomes a site of encounter and cultural hybridity, where traditional furnishings – oriental rugs, English porcelain – coexist with Caribbean elements – polychrome prints, ritual statues – and where even food becomes a vehicle of blending and fusion. Within this context, Queenie experiences an internal tension between her initial adherence to English middle-class norms – which had led her to preserve the spatial and cultural boundaries of her home, especially given her husband Bernard's irredeemable racism – and her growing empathy for the guests, who, despite living first in a cramped room in the London suburbs and later in a modest flat, manage to weave emotional bonds so deep that these once-hostile spaces are transformed into a genuine "family home". Within the domestic sphere, the relationship between Gilbert and Hortense also undergoes a significant transformation: what began as a marriage of convenience evolves into a bond of mutual understanding and support. Gilbert, in particular, ceases to be a mere nominal husband and becomes a guide for Hortense: he teaches her what he knows and, above all, helps her see the necessity of negotiating between her Jamaican heritage and British culture, which – contrary to what she had believed – is far from perfect. As Gilbert puts it, "not everything the English do is good" (269).

In parallel, the urban space of London is configured both as a mechanism of exclusion – as seen in the peripheral council estates, the dock, the crowded and inaccessible city centre, the markets, and the streets where curfews and white gangs dictate night routes to be avoided – and as a network of alliances. Through word of mouth and mutual solidarity among migrants, Gilbert and Hortense map out a true "affective geography" of the city, identifying safe spaces such as cafés, churches, and associations, steering clear of hostile areas, or simply rediscovering an unexpected humanity and courtesy in an anonymous English stranger. This happens to Gilbert when, on his way home, he is stopped by a middle-aged English woman who wants to return a glove she believes he has dropped: "But her smile was wholehearted. 'You dropped this, I think', she said. It was a black glove" (268). In that simple gesture of

kindness, Gilbert rediscovers the value of a shared humanity, grounded in empathy and devoid of barriers. Such an urban experience transcends local boundaries, configuring the metropolis as a transnational liminal space in which Jamaican culture blends with English culture through simple daily gestures and practices of conviviality. In the domestic sphere, Hortense's cooking – which merges Caribbean recipes with English culinary methods – takes on a symbolic value, representing a hybridisation capable of producing a “warm home” within a cold and competitive metropolitan context. At the same time, the gradual opening of the household to the wider community – as evidenced by the black neighbour who knocks on the door (240) and the meals hosted for English residents (266) – illustrates how domesticity becomes a tool of cultural mediation: the private space ceases to be a cage and is transformed into a micro-environment of cultural resistance, where Caribbean, British, and gendered identities meet and negotiate new meanings.

From Alien Space to Transnational Home: Hybridity and Reconciliation in the Conclusion of *Small Island*

The gradual transformation of space – both domestic and urban – into a familiar place (Yi-Fu Tuan) finds its ultimate affirmation in two significant and concluding moments of the novel. As far as the metropolitan space is concerned, it eventually reveals its porosity – its capacity to welcome rather than exclude – by dismantling spatial barriers and constraints. In fact, Hortense and Gilbert eventually move to Finsbury Park in North London, into a house that Gilbert perceives as a palace and that, for Hortense, represents the opportunity to claim a new place: one that is distanced from Queenie's house and the Earl's Court neighbourhood.

It was a fine house. I could tell as soon as I turned the key and pushed open the door. What a size! Four floors of solid substantial rooms. Ceilings so high my voice echoed in them. The garden stretched far enough for the end to be caught in mist. The flat at the bottom of the house had two bedrooms, a kitchen already with a sink and stove and a bathroom of its own. The sitting room had windows so tall they reached from floor to ceiling. Man, after that one room in Earls Court, I saw before me a palace. (414)

It is in this neighbourhood and in their new home that Hortense and Gilbert

agree to raise Queenie's illegitimate son, born of her extramarital liaison with Michael Roberts, a man of colour. The child, ideally, represents both a space of reconciliation and of hybridity: he embodies the legacy of worlds that appear distant yet, in fact, reinforce unsuspected bonds of kinship – Michael is eventually revealed to be the son of Hortense's cousin – thereby redrawing a family nucleus, or rather an entire humanity, that eludes rigid national geographies. Thus, while the house in North London consolidates as a physical site of intercultural coexistence, the child is elevated to the status of a symbol of conciliation capable of transcending identity barriers: an ideal bridge uniting dispersed histories and affections, offering the inhabitants of that dwelling an opportunity to mend the fissures wrought by marginalisation, silence, and unfulfilled aspirations. Poignant and enlightening at once will be Gilbert's attempt to save Bernard from self-destruction, as he is incapable of renouncing racism and embracing the equality of all men and the extraordinary potential of a humanity suffused with diversity:

'You know what your trouble is, man?' he said. 'Your white skin. You think it makes you better than me. You think it give you the right to lord it over a black man. But you know what it make you? You wan' know what your white skin make you, man? It make you white. That is all, man. White. No better, no worse than me – just white.' Mr Bligh moved his eye to gaze on the ceiling. 'Listen to me, man, we both just finish fighting a war – a bloody war – for the better world we wan' see. And on the same side – you and me. We both look on other men to see enemy. You and me, fighting for empire, fighting for peace. But still, after all that we suffer together, you wan' tell me I am worthless and you are not. Am I to be the servant and you are the master for all time? No. Stop this, man. Stop it now. We can work together, Mr Bligh. You no see? We must. Or else you just gonna fight me till the end?'. (434)

Gilbert's words do not persuade Bernard, who remains merely stunned by them; yet they sweep through the domestic space, flooding it with a respectful silence and ultimately transforming it into a place of hybridity and mutual acceptance. Hortense is simply enraptured, and in a private moment of reflection, she thinks: "Gilbert Joseph, my husband, was a man of class, a man of character, a man of intelligence. Noble in a way that would some day make him a legend" (435).

In conclusion, everyone, with the exception of Bernard, will find a way to

reconcile with themselves and to project themselves toward the future, with the awareness that their identities – like the places they will inhabit, however distant from what they had imagined – derive their very *raison d'être* from hybridity. The experience of Hortense and Gilbert demonstrates how London, initially perceived as an indiscriminately hostile space, gradually transforms into a place of identity negotiation and a genuine transnational crossroads. The final scene, in which Queenie – a bourgeois white woman – kneels before them in the hope of entrusting her black child to them, constitutes the symbolic act par excellence of this capacity to rebuild belonging on the basis of shared humanity:

I never dreamed England would be like this. Come, in what crazed reverie would a white Englishwoman be kneeling before me yearning for me to take her black child? There was no dream I could conceive so fanciful. Yet there was Mrs Bligh kneeling before Gilbert and I, her pretty blue eyes dissolving beneath a wash of tears, while glaring on we two Jamaicans, waiting anxious to see if we would lift our thumb or drop it. Could we take her newly-born son and call him our own? (433)

That moment becomes the ultimate evidence of a space that is no longer neutral but is capable of recognising and celebrating universal values of compassion and mutual respect, transcending racial and cultural barriers. The city, although marked by colonial and racial tensions, has become the stage for a radical openness: a place where shared humanity becomes strength, resistance, and the rewriting of the self.

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