

June 2007

“You'll Soon Get Used to Our Language”: Language, Parody and West Indian Identity in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

Cynthia James

anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

Recommended Citation

James, Cynthia (2007) "“You'll Soon Get Used to Our Language” : Language, Parody and West Indian Identity in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol5/iss1/3>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

Introduction

In *Acts of Identity: Creole-based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity*, R. B. Le Page and Andrée Tabouret-Keller examine "linguistic behaviour as a series of *acts of identity* in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles" (14). They also note how closely aligned claims about ethnicity are to "the linguistic question" (15). Toni Morrison and Judith Butler put related ideas about how language and identity are connected in another way. In her Nobel lecture, Morrison says, "We do language," while Butler says, "Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible" (qtd. in Butler 5). For his part, James Paul Gee observes about the relationship between language and identity that, "We use language to get recognized as taking on a certain identity or role that is to build an identity here-and-now. For example, I talk and act in one way ... [and] the next moment I speak and talk in a different way" (11). For Gee people "represent" and "enact" various Discourses (27). I would add that the close alignment of language and identity becomes very noticeable when people who do not speak the same language, metaphorically or literally, interact. Against this critical background, I argue that in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, which fictionalizes the encounter of West Indian and Britons on the arrival of West Indians in the *Windrush* era to the Mother Country, language is a battleground on which British and West Indian cultures and identities clash and make accommodations. Further, I argue that parody is the one of the ways in which the novel exposes these clashes and accommodations.

On one level, parody is an imitation of conventions, an imitation of the way in which a lofty or accepted idea works with the intention to undermine. It is a destabilizing of accepted norms by juxtaposing the "low" and "high" to comment on each other in a comical way. *Small Island* parodies the concept of Empire, that is, the way in which the Empire is scripted for the English as well as West Indians. As Mike and Trevor Phillips say in their *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-racial Britain*, "[O]n 22 June 1948 the *Windrush* sailed through a gateway of history, on the other side of which was the end of Empire and a wholesale reassessment of what it meant to be British" (6). The essential parody, the rewriting of that script, is what *Small Island* is about. It is the reenactment of the *Windrush* experience through Hortense and Gilbert Joseph, he having made a *Windrush* landing, she following six months later, when he finds lodgings and a job. It is the meeting of the high and the low in the redefinition of the British Isles, reduced to a small island with its loss of world power and post-war ruin, and engaged in a war at home, with the perceived invasion of the people of its lowly small islands arriving from the Empire's outposts. War is both motif and metaphor in the novel. The war of identities engaged in by the characters is set against the background of World War II that sets the stage for the revision of standing scripts.

This paper looks at how high and low narratives square off against each other, with the low claiming right to equal voice, and it develops this argument in three parts. First it looks at

how parody, language and identity structure the text. Second, the paper looks at the language of performed identity, that is, how the language interaction of the characters is reified in the text, how recurrent questions such as: “Do you understand English?” (471) and “Is this the way the English live?” (22), parody both in low and high English, learned, stereotypical scripts. Third, I close with a look at the uneasy co-existence of both West Indian and British identities, neither giving quarter, each saying to each: “You’ll soon get used to our language” (228).

Language, Identity and Parody as Textual Registers in *Small Island*

In *Small Island* all four main characters reveal their identities themselves, giving their birth histories up to the arrival of West Indians en masse to the Mother Country in 1948. In other words, they literally talk themselves into being giving an illusion that there is an absence of a narrative intermediary or omniscience in the text. However, at the back of *Small Island* is an acknowledgement listing an array of texts that are embedded in the novel, titles such as *The Lion Roars at Wembley* by Donald R. Knight and Alan D. Sabey, *What did you do at the War, Mum?* by Carol Cromie, Robert N. Murray’s *Lest We Forget: The Experience of World War II West Indian Ex-service Personnel*, E. Martin Noble’s *Jamaica Airman*, and Mike and Trevor Phillips’ *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-racial Britain*. Of these, *The Lion Roars at Wembley* encapsulates the structure of *Small Island*. It is the Prologue, the lens through which text unfolds. It is England, Old Blighty at its pinnacle, seen through the eyes of Queenie Bligh, the eight-year-old namesake of the Queen Victoria. On being taken up to the highest point of the black human circus displayed in tents that has given her superiority and riches, her father invites her to be monarch of all she surveys: “Father said something I will never forget. He said, ‘See here, Queenie. Look around. You’ve got the whole world at your feet, lass’”(7).

The intertextuality with George Lamming’s Black Queenie of *The Emigrants*, one of the passengers on a *Windrush* experience on her way to a compromised existence in London, is not lost upon the reader. But more than that, the Wembley Empire Exhibition is the lens through which the main male characters are seen. For, when Queenie Bligh sets eyes on Airman Michael Joseph, who is her first Black West Indian experience, and who ends up being the un-named father of her child, the impact of his presence sends her mind back to when she was first touched by a Black experience: “I was lost in Africa again at the Empire Exhibition, a little girl in a white organza frock with blood rising in my cheeks turning me red” (291).

Queenie’s Wembley experience that frames the text stands in for the Englishman’s perception of all colonials, including the West Indian. And it is their imputed language inferiority vis-à-vis the higher English language tradition that marks the difference. The highlight of the picnic is the English family’s shock that the Black man both speaks and understands English. For the typical Englishman, personified in Graham, the apprentice butcher, who accompanies Queenie’s family to the fair, the assumption about Blacks is: “She can’t understand what I’m

saying. . . . They're not civilized. They only understand drums" (5). The Black man responds to Graham's taunting of Queenie to kiss "this big nigger man," by saying, "in clear English, 'Perhaps we could shake hands instead.'" Queenie tells us that, "Graham's smile fell off his face" (6).

But *The Lion Roars at Wembley* is not the only script parodied in *Small Island*. The novel is structured in four voices, the voices of the English and the West Indian couples. To read Robert N. Murray's *Lest We Forget: The Experiences of World War II West Indian Ex-Service Personnel* is to hear the echo of the voices of Gilbert Joseph and Michael Roberts in the oral histories of the servicemen who left to fight for the Mother Country—West Indians who both during and after the war could not believe the rejection that greets them. Gilbert is shot down in France in the agricultural countryside and it is the color of his skin that saves him (493). This is also the case with one of the airmen in *Lest We Forget*. Gilbert and his West Indian RAF volunteers take evening walks in their "RAF blue through the English village of Hunmanby" during their training period (136). There they meet people who stare at them, for the first time seeing "darkies" (137). They encounter an elderly English woman who asks them to speak, and then turns to tell her disbelieving husband: "There, I told you. They speak it just like us, only funnier" (*Small Island* 138). In his oral history, *Jamaica Airman*, E. Martin Noble records his autobiography this way from the same Hunmanby Moor:

They wanted to know what part of the world I was from, and marveled at the fact that I spoke English perfectly, and without any trace of a foreign accent. The high spot of my afternoon's walk for me was a darling old couple, who humbly begged to be allowed to shake my hand for luck. (41)

Frank Holder's reminiscing about details such as boot camp meals and his comparison of American and British fare (*Lest We Forget* 47) synchronizes with Gilbert Joseph's oral history down to the much-appreciated two-egg breakfast. (*Small Island* 126).

Thus, narration in *Small Island* is structured with light humor around published autobiographical narratives, West Indian and British, which intensify their cultural confrontation. Even Hortense's trademark hat and white gloves, so out of place in a battered London, is mirrored in Mike and Trevor Philips' memories of West Indian women walking the plank into England (*Windrush* 2). Hortense is bedecked with these items of *Windrush* iconography that pay tribute to the memory and the courage of the West Indians; but these items also set her haughtiness up for light humor from the distance of Levy's second-generation perspective. Using *Windrush* 1948 as a narrative marker for the before and after identity transformation of Britain, Levy allows her characters to reveal the indigenous elements that shaped their respective world views in their own voices. Put side by side, the "Before" and "1948" chapters give a history made out of the same Mother Country experience. But this history shapes very dissimilar identities, and spawns so many mutual misconceptions, that when the English and West Indians meet, the scripts that underlie their reading of each other are humorously juxtaposed.

The texts mentioned above mainly shadow the voices of the male characters. However, there are also hidden archival texts that square off high and low traditions against each other in the representation of female characters. For instance, a haughty and learned Hortense in a parodic replay of one of the best-known West Indian slave narratives, that of *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, As Related By Herself, 1832*, or perhaps slave narratives generally, records without the help of an amanuensis:

I was born to a woman called Alberta. It was she who suckled me until I was strong enough to drink from a cow. I recall a warm smell of boiling milk. Being rocked in the sun with a gentle song and “me sprigadee” whispered until my eyes could do nothing but close. (37)

Hortense’s haughtiness superimposed on Mary Prince’s bold, but painful and humble attestation is a double-edged sword, in that Hortense’s learnedness and airs of superiority undermine the very common, but sacred origins on which they are built. To further juxtapose high and the low narratives that subtly parody each other, Queenie Bligh, the prototype of the Queen of England, echoes a parallel narrative. Queenie Bligh, the diary queen, speaks her identity from parallel rural beginnings on a farm, but hers is a far different history. Calling her own identity into being that comes to clash with that of Hortense, Queenie attests:

I, the first-born child of Wilfred and Lillie Buxton, came to be christened Victoria yet called for ever Queenie.

My mother, Lillie, was an English rose. Flaxen hair, a complexion like milk with a faint pink flush at her cheeks and a nose that tipped up at the end to present the two perfect triangles of her nostrils. (235-36)

In building these parallel subtexts, Levy builds a frame for the low and high registers in which her characters will confront each other in 1948 when they meet. Of course, there are voices of tribute to West Indian courage as much as there are voices of parody. However, the juxtaposition of voices of perceived high and low, each just as insistent on asserting its dignity and right, shapes the revision that *Small Island* engages of the *Windrush* era in quite a different way from realistic Caribbean literature texts such as *The Emigrants*, *The Lonely Londoners*, and *The Final Passage* that fictionalize the era. Having shown how the structure of the novel frames high and low registers in submerged intertextual narratives, I now turn to the characters themselves to discuss their diaglossic encounters that see them talking at cross purposes, setting their identities at loggerheads.

Language, Parody and Performed Identity in *Small Island*

In "'Global' and 'Local' Identities in the Discourses of British-Born Caribbeans," Mark Sebba and Shirley Tate point out that identities of British Caribbean people are "closely connected with the two main language varieties in their linguistic repertoire," Creole and English (76). They note the original pejorative connotations and lack of official validation associated with Creole usage as bad English, both in the Caribbean and in Britain. However, citing Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, they go on to discuss how bilingualism, code switching, and the use of a "single Creole language" (Sebba and Tate 78), Jamaican Creole (originally referred to linguistically as London Jamaican), have become features of the linguistic repertoire of Caribbean Britons. Regardless of the particular island heritage or parental origin, "shared experience of 'race' and class within the British social structure made allegiances to individual territories increasingly irrelevant from the first generation onward" (Sebba and Tate 78). Building on Tabouret-Keller (1985 & 1994), Antaki, Condor & Levine's *Social Identities & Talk* (1996) and Widdicombe's "But you don't class yourself" (1998), Sebba and Tate pursue their argument further, "seeing identities as texts of social practice ... as *performed texts which are produced in talk* and which are written in, into, and onto social reality by actors" (83). Citing Hall (1996), they see identity projection and representation as elected by the speaker in accordance with the positioning the speaker thinks appropriate to the individual situation. This means that "[m]eaning cannot simply be "read off" from a text, but *comes into being* through interactions" (Sebba and Tate 83). Moreover, Conceptualizing Black British identities as texts of social practice, subject to the continuous play of meaning, necessarily entails that identity cannot be seen as static. It is neither reflective of some unchanging, inner, essentialized self or of some ossified culture. Rather, identities must be seen to be dynamic, gendered, racialised, sexualized, 'classed' and temporo-spatial constructs (Sebba and Tate 83).

To view *Small Island* against this background contextualizes the shifting registers of its first-person narrators, whether they are the English Queenie and Bernard, or the West Indian Hortense and Gilbert. The particular manner of their speech accrues from no stereotyped static representation of what a West Indian person talks like, as opposed to what an English person talks like, but from the purposes behind their interaction, not only among themselves as characters, but also from authorial purposes inherent in their interaction with the implied reader.

Such an understanding demystifies the variety of registers from low to high, and the continuum within each, that characters traverse in the novel. For instance, all four oral histories are told in differing Standard English varieties. Further, what distinguishes the narrative voice of each character is individual tone, emanating from his or her particular experience. Therefore, Gilbert who faces prior racism as an RAF airman, is denied the right to fly, is consigned to menial tasks and made the butt of indignity because of his skin-color, confronts the reader with his aggrieved identity. His is the only section in which the character propositions the implied reader as "you" and invites the "you" to enter the text to pass judgment:

Let me ask you to imagine this. Living far from you is a beloved relation whom you have never met. Yet this relation is so dear a kin she is known as Mother. Your own mummy talks of Mother all the time.... Your daddy tells you, "Mother thinks of you as her children...." (139)

Hortense's oral history is told equally in a West Indian Standard. Hers is a naïve and simple language, bearing the clipped preciseness and superiority of the colored schoolmarm of better birth and breeding that she wishes to project. But herein lies the parody: Levy attends Hortense's English with a few deftly placed flaws that mark her British airs out for ridicule only when she is at her most British. These flaws are the quaint archaism "perchance," the use of the noun "abode" as a verb, the non-inversion of the Creole question form, and most noticeably, the constant misuse of the first-person pronoun "I". When Hortense gets to Earl's Court, for example, she inquires of Queenie: "I have not seen Gilbert ... but this is perchance where he is aboding?" (13) In introducing herself to the reader, Hortense is set up to reveal her true identity as a naïve snob. She tells us that her father is the high-ranking mulatto, Lovell Roberts and trading on this regal West Indian parentage as an "outside child," she explains: "When you are the child of someone such as he, there are things that are expected that may not be expected of someone of a more lowly persuasion. And so it was with I" (37).

Similarly, the West Indians are shocked to note that most of the English that they interface with do not speak "proper" English. In all their learning about the English, they learn the language of its monarchical might. Thus, Gilbert is surprised at the language emanating from Bernard Bligh when Bernard thinks that he, Gilbert is the Black father of Queenie's child, "He started cuss language I never realize white men knew" (486). The reader does not hear many Blighty voices other than those of Queenie and Bernard, but the reader is told that "college-educated [West Indian] Lenval wanted to know how so many white people come to speak so bad—low class and coarse as cane cutters" (140). The parody of Hortense lies in the laughable way in which her secure notions of cultured language are undermined. It lies in her pride that she can speak English with the best, and "better" English than most English persons. Among the West Indians, these are assumptions imbibed from their colonial textbooks and the British people they know in the Caribbean. West Indians coming in the *Windrush* era are shocked to find that among the White people that they so adulated, there are high and low speakers and people who do high and low jobs.

In using a variety of language registers as identity performance through first person narration in all sections of the text, Levy addresses many narratological problems at once. For one, she is able to present the *Windrush* era in naked culture clash and identity confrontation without the filter of an omniscient narrator. But more powerfully, the use of a range of language varieties facilitates the gloss of fifty years of language evolution of West Indian language in London, for a writer who has to achieve a certain vraisemblance across narrative time for a twenty-first century audience. The achievement is enhanced by the observation of Sebba, Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (*Acts of Identity* 177-80) and Sebba and Tate from their own research

and citing Gilroy (Sebba and Tate 79-80), that from their entry into British society in the mid-twentieth century, West Indians in Britain have played the range of the Creole-English continuum from Creole basilect to the British English variety in which they are conversant, depending on the needs of the interaction in which they are engaged from moment to moment. The use of a variety of language registers in the text also corroborates with Sebba and Tate's description of West Indian language production, as "originat[ing] in the 'space' between self and Other" and in the "shared, negotiated or disavowed meanings" of Black British speakers (83).

Therefore, in *Small Island* among males, for instance, Gilbert's language register and his switching from one variety to another is calculated to position him differently in his conversations with other West Indian males during a suspected conning, as different from the racialized positioning projected in his exchanges with Bernard who is British and White. Similarly, since identities projected in their talk are "dynamic, gendered, racialised, sexualized, 'classed' and tempo-spatial constructs," Hortense's choice of language is dependent on whom she addresses, and the identity she wishes to project (Sebba and Tate 83). She *does* choose from a limited repertoire within the continuum, but she uses Creole speech in appropriate context. She would not engage the basilectal registers such as Kenneth uses because, "The man is rough and uncouth. You hear his language? ... He is the sort of ruffian make ashamed to come from the same island" (446-47). However, as can be seen from her unmarked Creole verb, non-inversion of the question form, and code mixing, Hortense is quite comfortable in mesolectal West Indian Creole. The author uses this middle range, which also identifies her as superior, to identify her as false and to sabotage her pretensions with hypercorrection and over-generalization. In fact, Hortense's use of a limited repertoire is a potent instrument for appreciable parody in the novel. She chooses what she believes to be the English variety that positions her as middle class and better than Queenie Bligh whom she refers to as "only a woman whose living was obtained from the letting of rooms," while she is a teacher by profession (231).

Small Island is also a lesson in group identity and solidarity for Hortense who resists, until it is proven to her, the recognition that she is perceived as none other than the Kenneth whom she despises. Queenie Bligh recognizes no cultured airs in her speech; she sees plain ignorance. Race is identity and her identity is West Indian. Whether Hortense realizes it or not, she sounds no different to the English person, which for the West Indian connotes inferiority.

This is the essence of the parody that Hortense's language invokes. After drawing her portrait in its full language naiveté, her author eventually considers her ripe for a fall, which is also contextualized in an emphasis on language profiling. For, Hortense allows Gilbert to travel with her to her teaching appointment because she cannot find the school on her own. However, she does not want to be seen with him, because she does not want him to spoil her chances of getting the job. Again, it is her self-consciousness about language as a designator of rank that is uppermost in her mind:

Anyone hearing Gilbert Joseph speak would know without hesitation that this man was not English. No matter that he is dressed in his best suit ... he talked (and walked) in a rough Jamaican way. Whereas I, since arriving in this country, had determined to speak in an English manner. It was of no use to imitate the way of speaking of those about me, for too many people I encountered spoke as a Cockney would. All fine diction lost in a low-class slurring garble. No. To speak English properly as the high-class, I resolved to listen to the language at its finest. Everyday my wireless was tuned to the most exemplary English in the known world. The BBC. The Light Programme—Woman's Hour ... and of course the news. I listened, I repeated. And I listened once more. To prove practice makes perfect, on two occasions a shopkeeper had brought me the item requested without repetition from me. With thanks to that impeccable English evidenced on my wireless, I was understood easily. (449-50)

Yet the parody of Hortense is written with much compassion. For although the reader has been anticipating as much as Gilbert "Hortense reeling wounded after a sharp slap from the Mother Country's hand" (458), when she walks into the broom-cupboard as the closing humiliation of her teaching interview, the reader must agree that Gilbert is deserving of the love that finally comes his way. His protection of her from the moment she arrives in England achieves its highest point in his shooing away of the gaping passers-by, resolute that, "No one will watch us weep in this country" (459).

Hortense is central to the parody of *Small Island*. Although the novel is written in four voices, Hortense is the window into the text. The others voices give relief to her experience. *Small Island* is about her acceptance of her West Indian identity. It deliberately puts her center stage as a candidate for re-education about colonial race and class—a re-education that others with long experience before her from World War II, like Gilbert, have already received. Her encounter with Old Blighty is painted as a parody of the colonial rulebook, the Nesfield Grammar that she uses as her benchmark of the Queen's English. She intends to use this English for all her Discourses (44). Unfailingly, too, as in so many West Indian scripts, Wordsworth's "To the Daffodil," that emblem of a good colonial education, surfaces. In her youth in Jamaica, she tries cultivating her grandmother's tongue:

"Miss Jewel," I told her, "you should learn to speak properly as the King of England does. Not in this rough country way." ... Watching my lips like a child enthralled, moving her own to form the same shapes. Recounting every perfect word with her chin high ... But soon she was rehearsing her own version as she went about her day. "Ah walk under a cloud and den me float over de ill. An' me see Miss Hortense a look pon de daffodil dem." (43-44)

Hortense is also attentive to English pronunciation. Just off the boat, she is fascinated by an Englishwoman's pronunciation of the word "sugar": "I thought I must try saying sugar with

those vowels that make the word go on for ever. Very English, Sugaaaaar”(15). The Englishwoman moves off before Hortense gets a “chance to open any of [her] vowels” (15). On occasions when she *does* open her vowels (for example when trying to get a taxi on the docks, and later when Queenie takes her shopping), the English respond to her as if she “ha[s] been speaking in tongues” (16). She “mouth[s] ... words with the slow exaggeration [she] generally reserved for the teaching of small children” (17), and muses angrily, “Why no one in this country understand my English? At college my diction was admired by all” (331). She soon has to resort to pointing to what she wants.

As an ethno-linguistic treatise, *Small Island* achieves much of its parody in its tearing down of old myths for the West Indians as well as the British. West Indians come to England with a wealth of knowledge about the English. Gilbert can recite all “the railways, the roadways, the ports, or the docks,” the canals, the composition of the houses of parliament, the greatest laws, the finest details about the British economy of the Mother country, from an impeccable British education system back in Jamaica, in “a loud clear voice that pronounces every *p* and *q* and all the letters in between” (141). But none of this textbook knowledge qualifies him for British identity. In anger and amazement he asks: “[H]ow come England did not know me?” (141)

“You’ll Soon Get Used to Our Language”

Paul Gee defines Discourse as the “socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the ‘right’ places and the ‘right’ times with the ‘right’ objects” (26). He indicates that “[t]he key to Discourses is ‘recognition’” (27). A “socially situated identity” accrues from recognition as “the kind of person’ one is seeking to be and enact here-and-now” (Gee 22). Gee also notes that “[p]eople build identities and activities not just through language but by using language together with other ‘stuff’ that isn’t language” such as iconic, idiomatic and symbolic cultural constructs (20-1).

To view Hortense’s emphasis on linguistic performance from this perspective is to understand her untenable situation in London. In the West Indies where using what is considered high English confers a superior identity, Hortense ‘recognition’ is assured. However, in London she lacks familiarity with the cultural idiomatic load of British English and so does not belong. Therefore, when Queenie asks: “Cat got your tongue?” and Hortense responds, “Have you lost your cat?” (227), Queenie’s reply to such gaucheries is: “You’ll soon get used to our language” (228). Hortense, appalled that Queenie Bligh, a woman who is her inferior in educational status should take on such airs, informs us: “I told this Englishwoman, ‘I can speak and understand the English language very well, thank you’” (228). But in the continuing ludicrous exchange Queenie persists: “I’m sure there’s a lot I could teach you, if you wanted” (229). The tit-for-tat between the women continues.

The outcome is that Queenie Bligh takes it upon herself to provide Hortense with the basic cultural load of English that she lacks, by taking her to the shops. One notes the gendered nature of the Discourse between the two women. Queenie who has already given Hortense a lesson in how to prepare fish and chips, proceeds to give her a domestic lesson in the underlying, cultural load of British English that all women joining British society should know. Scandalized at the preposterousness of this Englishwoman, Hortense code-switches to her own Creole with its unmarked verb to emphasize the sarcasm and contempt in which she holds such first lessons in British civilization and culture—lessons she does not need because she already knows:

Then she tell me loud for all to hear, “This is bread.” ... Mrs. Bligh was a punctilious teacher. The shop with meat in the window she tell me is a butcher. The one with pretty pink cakes is the baker. And each time she tell me she want me to repeat the word. (332-33)

In rebuttal, Hortense informs Queenie Bligh, “We have these shops in Jamaica” (333), and is pleased to show off her own West Indian superiority: In Jamaica the baker would not hand the bread without a wrapping and with dirty hands; in Jamaica at the draper’s, cloth is clean and neatly stacked in rows, while in London it is dirty and spread about the floor; in Jamaica it is considered unhygienic to wash oneself in the same basin that one washes one’s vegetables. Nevertheless, Queenie Bligh presses on with her education. The most disquieting part of the English lesson for Mrs. Bligh, though, is her “darkie’s” decision to teach some racist youth, shouting “Golliwog” and “Sambo” a lesson of her own in good manners, instead of running for cover at language any Black Londoner would recognize as a warning sign of impending endangerment to her person (334).

But what is the “socially situated identity” by which West Indians are recognized and what are its pertinent Discourses? This investigation returns the paper to one of the observations with which it began—how deeply the motif of war is embedded in the language of the text. It also calls attention to Le Page and Tabouret-Keller’s observations about the formation of stereotypes. They note:

What one notices about other people, one’s percepts about them, both physically and behaviourally, are conditioned by the concepts important in one’s own culture, just as what one perceives about their language is conditioned by the models one has already built around one’s own language. (226)

And so when one tries to identify Discourses, one finds them racialized and gendered, with female Discourses marked as more sympathetic and less explosive than male Discourses. In the eyes of Bernard and his neighbors at Earl’s Court, features of male West Indian identity include: uncouth and unintelligible language, boorishness, sexual depravity, and the excitable language of the African war-dance (472). The response of the West Indian male to such a pejorative stereotype is aggressiveness toward British male and in-group solidarity. The

aggressiveness and solidarity manifest themselves in entrenched linguistic identification with Creole as a marker of resistance. Gee possibly provides an explanation:

The fact that people have differential access to different identities and activities, connected to different sorts of status and social goods, is a root source of inequality in society. Intervening in such matters can be a contribution to social justice. Since different identities and activities are enacted in and through language, the study of language is integrally connected to matters of equity and justice. (22)

Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's observations about the development and use of London Jamaican corroborate the alignment of identity, equity, social justice and language evident in the quotation above. They note that London Jamaican, the language identity associated with Black Britons, is a culture in evolution:

which has definite ethnic, 'racial' and linguistic components, focussing not around national but around a stereotypical view of 'racial' and cultural characteristics ascribed to West Indians, and stimulated by the sense of rejection often felt by Blacks in Britain. (244-245)

The oppositional stances of West Indians toward British rejection and negative stereotyping that have been cited so far are not the only West Indian identity performances conveyed in the language of *Small Island*. Among the West Indian males, for instance, varying positions on the Creole continuum are used to identify different Discourses. The basilectal Creole register that Gilbert uses with Kenneth is intended to flush him out when he pretends to be his twin brother Winston. His use of it also identifies him as conman (441). In addition to being used in these ways, basilectal Creole is used to identify the in-group and signal male-male West Indian bonding.

Between male and female, mesolectal Creole registers are used to signify love, trust, and respect. This is also the register of talk of family and home as can be seen in the exchanges between Gilbert and Hortense. For as already observed, although Hortense is bent on wearing an English identity in the use of language that undermines her with its falseness, her West Indian identity emerges naturally in her code-mixing, even from her first exchanges with Gilbert whom she accuses when he fails to appear at the quay to meet her: "Where were you? Why you no come to meet me?" (18).

Beyond the oppositional stances and the in-group use of language as identity markers, by the end of the novel, there is no doubt that the West Indians and the British will each have to learn the other's language. In this regard it is instructive to note that Bernard's war sojourn in Burma—a war in which he is not taken to the front lines, but is kept in contact with the day-to-day life of British citizens in the outpost—is a deliberate attempt to prepare him for the adjustment he must make to British society on his return. It is an attempt to prepare him for a

changed understanding of the post-World War II Britain and the British identity that he shares with others from the outposts of the Empire. Of course, Bernard did not have to go to war to find that understanding that Queenie is able to glean from volunteering for the war effort at home. Bernard *does* return from a war more aware about the concept of the British Empire, and with more backbone than his neighbors for whom Wembley is still the big picture. However, identity shifts are not easily made. One's identity is part of one's history, as the four oral histories that make up *Small Island* indicate. Therefore, although Bernard shows compassion for his wife's Black baby, he still feels:

The war was fought so people might live amongst their own kind. Quite simple. Everyone had a place. England for the English and the West Indies for these coloured people. ... I fought a war to protect home and hearth. Not about to be invaded by stealth. (469-70)

Ironically, of all the characters in the text, Bernard is given the honor of conferring the most personal of endearments and welcome to the arriving West Indians, albeit in a double-edged pun. His favorite epithet for the West Indians is "blighters," usually with the qualifiers, "hotheaded," "cheeky," and "these dark immigrants" (472). Gilbert gives him an ultimatum: "We can work together, Mr. Bligh. You no see? We must. Or else you just gonna fight me till the end?" (525).

Throughout *Small Island*, then, the question most on the lips of the British: "Do you understand English?" is more than a sarcastic rhetorical denouncement of the West Indian as Other. One of the replies echoing through the West Indians' use of the English language is *Which English?* The English language (and by corollary, the identity) of the British has, unnoticeably and for a long time, been undergoing change by newcomers and new speakers—long before the culture clash is declared on the small islands of Great Britain. One noticeable ploy throughout the novel is the interchangeable use of "English" to denote "language," and "British" to denote "nation." The African American soldiers that Gilbert meets during the War reify the linguistic and identity confusion: "I don't altogether understand what you're saying. Jamaica is in England and who is your mother?" (157) Gilbert launches into a frustrating explanation that deepens the confusion: "No, Jamaica is not in England but it is part of the British Empire" (157).

The equally parodic question on the lips of the West Indians, in the voice of Hortense, is: "Is this the way the English live?" (22). By the end of the text, however, stereotypes on both sides are being reviewed. Hortense has come to understand what Gilbert has been telling her from the very beginning, both metaphorically and literally: "There had just been a war. And, yes, this was the way the English live ..." (502). With the slap the Mother country has given her, she has come around to accept her West Indian identity as Gilbert's partner and wife: "These things can be fix up ... I can help you," she says, when she goes to view their new abode (503). Later that night the language parody is complete. Hortense who begins her English encounter with the words, "This is perchance where he is aboding?" ends by inviting Gilbert to share the bed: "You

no hear me, nah? ... I say, do you want to sleep in the bed with me? Plenty room" (505). Her code mixing signals the identity compromise for both the West Indians and the English: they'll soon have to get used to each other's language.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Gee, James Paul. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. 1999. Second Edition. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Lanning, George. *The Emigrants*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954.
- Le Page, R. B. and Tabouret-Keller, Andrée. *Acts of Identity: Creole-based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Levy, Andrea. *Small Island*. UK: Headline Book Publishing, 2004.
- Morrison, Toni. Nobel Lecture.
http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html
- Murray, Robert N. *Lest We Forget: The Experiences of World War II West Indian Ex-Service Personnel*. Nottingham: Nottingham Westindian Combined Ex-services Association, 1996.
- Noble, E. Martin. *Jamaica Airman: A Black Airman in Britain 1943 and After*. Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1984.
- Philips, Caryl. *The Final Passage*. London: Faber and Faber, 1985.
- Phillip, Michael and Phillip, Trevor. *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-racial Britain*. London: HarperCollins, 1998.
- Sebba, Mark and Tate, Shirley. "'Global' and 'Local' Identities in the Discourses of British-Born Caribbeans." *International Journal of Bilingualism*. 6.1 (2002): 75-89.
- Selvon, Samuel. *The Lonely Londoners*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1956.