

Afterlives, Aftermaths: Levy Studies in the Twenty-First Century  
Hengameh Saroukhani, Sarah Lawson Welsh, and Michael Perfect

Andrea was never more visible than in the moment she left us.

Gary Younge, “After a Life of Striving”

## **I. Introduction: The Arrival of Levy Studies**

In his *Guardian* eulogy for the award-winning writer Andrea Levy, journalist and academic Gary Younge pays tribute to the indelible ways in which Levy transformed the cultural and aesthetic landscape of contemporary writing in Britain. Younge recounts his deeply personal relationship with Levy by recalling the nature of their connection: “We shared a sense of humour—raucous, playful and occasionally bizarre—and a politics that was rooted in anti-racism, equality and internationalism.” This worldly, insurgent, and irreverent sensibility shared between Younge and Levy frames an intimate eulogy that not only accounts for a remarkable life but also lays bare the longstanding political impetus of Levy’s work and thinking. “Fiction,” Levy once stated, “could be one of the most powerful political weapons you can have in your armory” (“Interview” 261). As Younge notes in his foreword to this special issue, Levy told him something very similar: that, through fiction, “you can take on the world” (XXX). From her novels, short stories, essays, and unpublished projects to the multitudinous and continued adaptations of her writing—in the form of audiobooks, radio performances, and productions for the stage and the screen—Levy’s aesthetic armory powerfully demonstrates the profound entanglement between politics and the imagination. Attuned to the deep-seated and interminable legacies of empire, transatlantic slavery, and migration, her creative output has always distinguished her as a writer dedicated to exploring the devastating aftermath of imperial history while attending to the ways in which art might nurture new, more equitable ways of imagining the world. In the wake of her passing, this

special issue considers Levy's legacy from the purview of the contemporary and explores the ways in which her rebellious writing remains startlingly, even disturbingly, relevant. In a political climate that has heightened the nativist impulses behind Britain's decision to leave the European Union, exposed an attendant history of antagonistic immigration policies through the catastrophe of the Windrush scandal, and intensified the continued demonization of migrants, refugees, and the "undocumented" around the world, we explore the lasting political imperative of Levy's complex aesthetic vision. To extend Younge's poignant reflection, this special issue argues that Levy's writing, published and unpublished, and in all its proliferating genres and afterlives, has not only become more visible but has never been more urgent.

The exigency of Levy's writing has made her work both unceasingly timely yet also untimely—even transcendent—in its critical engagement with the grand narratives of imperial history. As Maya Jaggi poignantly notes, those artists who appear "ahead of their time" (3) or "prescient . . . are close readers of history—history that is always at risk of distortion" (7). Drawing from Jaggi's characterization of prescient art, we suggest that the urgency of Levy's writing resides in how her viscerally affecting and boundary-crossing craft is shaped by the distinctive historicity of her work. That both her fiction and nonfiction, in print, audio, and audio-visual formats, speak to immediate social and political issues surrounding, for instance, curricular decolonization, representations of imperial nostalgia, and protest movements advocating for social justice such as Black Lives Matter, should come as no surprise. Levy's erudite rendering of the variegated histories of slavery, empire, and white supremacy—histories that are often only selectively remembered, co-opted, or in danger of censure from conservative attitudes that regard them as dangerously "woke"—forges an aesthetics that exposes the absurd logic of inequalities across the spectrums of race, class, gender, and cultural circumstance.

Levy's oeuvre continues to proliferate after her passing, particularly through adaptations of her writing alongside an archive that is housed at the British Library (BL) in London and that contains unpublished material. As such, an accelerated form of canonization is developing, which marks the way in which her creative articulation of the past distinguishes her enduring prescience. Levy's texts are becoming, in many ways, living classics. Her writing encapsulates an uncanny foresight that seems to perpetually remain of its time.

By examining the afterlives of Levy's creativity, this special issue seeks to inaugurate "Levy studies"—a field of critical inquiry that interrogates the burgeoning output of Levy's work and the expansive significance of her aesthetic and political legacy. In recognition of the important criticism that has already been produced on Levy's writing<sup>1</sup> and in keen anticipation of, and provocation toward, future work, we would like to designate the field in ways that formally acknowledge the canonical influence, breadth, and complexity of her creative output. The designation of Levy studies enables an immediate and reflexive engagement with the dynamic way in which a writer's works become regarded as classics. Levy's writing, for instance, has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and has won other prestigious accolades, including the Whitbread Prize, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, the "Best of the Best" Orange Prize (now known as the Women's Prize for Fiction), and the Walter Scott Prize. Her best-known novel, *Small Island* (2004), was part of the largest mass-reading initiative in Britain with *Small Island Read 2007*, and, according to Mark Chandler from *The Bookseller*, it became "the biggest-selling winner of the Women's Prize to date." Levy's novels have been translated into many languages and have become commonplace fixtures on academic syllabi in numerous countries. The theatrical adaption of *Small Island* has even been conceptualized as a study guide for various secondary education curricula in Britain.<sup>2</sup> Her final two novels, *Small Island* and *The*

*Long Song* (which was recently staged at the Chichester Festival Theatre in October of 2021), were additionally adapted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as period dramas for television. Levy's arresting prose and focus on black British<sup>3</sup> and Caribbean histories has also made her a social and aesthetic benchmark for a generation of emerging black British writers.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the coming-canonization of her oeuvre, whether of a specifically black British canon,<sup>5</sup> a more inclusive British literary canon, or indeed an international canon, constitutes the admittedly complicated embrace of a rebellious writer into the mainstream. Levy herself expressed pleasure at the prominence that her work ultimately achieved, and yet she was also aware of the complexity of her own canonization—of the tensions between the staunchly anti-racist, inclusionary politics of her work and the powerful cultural institutions that (in the last decade and a half of her life, at least) came to endorse, disseminate and, in the case of adaptations, transform that work. Levy studies must, we argue, both register the manifest success of her work—in terms of, for instance, readership, literary prizes, curricular inclusion, and various forms of cultural adaptation—while also paying close attention to her fierce critique, in her published work and elsewhere, of the very institutions that determine whose voices and stories are heard and whose remain discounted or overlooked.

While criticism around Levy's writing and its complicated position within specific canon formations has undoubtedly been galvanized in the wake of her passing, the work of this field, and of this special issue, is in no way hagiographic. In paying tribute to Levy's legacy, we hope to contribute to a thriving field of scholarly investigation dedicated to the rigorous reading of her oeuvre. Whether it is through Levy's exploration of refugees and asylum seekers, the exclusionary practices of the nation, forms of racial melancholia, comparative global empires, cosmopolitanism, adoption, or transatlantic slavery, our contributors interrogate what it means to

critically read, reread, adapt, and even teach Levy in ways that necessarily move beyond adulation. Some contributors place Levy's work firmly within black British and Caribbean literary canons; others position her writing within the category of world literature and specific transnational perspectives, for example, by bridging black British and black Canadian literary traditions. This is important. Levy was a local, national, and global writer whose output, as our contributors demonstrate, gestures to wider transnational affiliations. Indeed, Levy's cultural impact outside the boundaries of the nation still constitutes a relatively neglected and unmined field of critical exploration. As Younge notes in his foreword, Levy's writing was as much tethered to place—often to North London in particular—as it was “cosmopolitan” (XXX). Yet Levy's work also, Younge suggests, evokes an “abstract belonging, or struggle to belong, that went beyond place” (XXX). Our placing of this in memoriam special issue in a journal based outside of Britain is thus intentional. By situating this collection of criticism and unpublished material from her archive in a Canadian journal (one that also housed an in memoriam special issue on the Trinidadian-born writer Sam Selvon in 1996), we seek to materially concretize Levy's transnational and outer-national significance. Her work is intimately connected not only to other black and Caribbean-descended writers such as Selvon but also to other literary cultures and geographic spaces that have been irrevocably shaped by the British Empire.

The critical form of memorialization that we are undertaking in this special issue seeks, then, to re-situate and perhaps even destabilize any firm conceptualization of Levy's work and the scholarship around it. We are keen to trouble not only the national ground to which discussions of Levy frequently remain restricted but the aesthetic assumptions around her oeuvre. While the novel form and the language of realism have importantly informed Levy's art, a number of our contributors demonstrate that her craft radically breaks with these categories as

well.<sup>6</sup> By closely examining Levy's novels, short stories, nonfiction, audiobook readings, unpublished screenplay, and other material from her archive as well as stage and screen adaptations of her work, this special issue establishes Levy studies as a field whose scope is beyond the purely textual. The dynamic nature of her canonization, we argue, remains crucially multimodal, situated across a range of media, from textual to sonic to visual.

## **II. Andrea Levy: Life and Writing to Life Writing**

While Levy's oeuvre consistently crosses boundaries, resonating in local, national, and transnational ways, Levy herself always identified as having come from a thoroughly British (specifically, English) working-class background. She began writing only belatedly in her thirties and sought to bring to the fore stories of black Britain—the stories of her life—that were missing in mainstream literary cultures. Her personal connection to the now iconic Windrush generation of Caribbean migrants to Britain was an especially private one, her father having arrived on the *SS Empire Windrush* from Jamaica when it docked at Tilbury in June 1948. Her mother came to England on a Jamaica Banana Producers boat in November of the same year. Angela, the protagonist of her first, semi-autobiographical novel, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994), is also of Jamaican parentage. Like Levy's father, Angela's father came to Britain in the hope of a more promising future, and the novel traces her life, past and present, growing up on a North London council estate and facing her father's declining health. Like Faith, the protagonist of her third novel, *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), in her youth Levy knew little about her Caribbean heritage and took little interest in Caribbean history and culture. However, Levy had a startling experience when she realised, through a racism awareness training session at work, that her colleagues thought of her as black even though she had never self-identified in this way. While

this realisation caused Levy significant consternation, it also launched her on a journey of rediscovery and gave her a desire to know more about her British-Caribbean heritage. As Faith's mother explains, "Child, everyone should know where they come from" (Levy, *Fruit* 162). Indeed, much of the project of Levy's meticulously researched fiction has been to interrogate the human experience of migration to and from the Caribbean in different periods. Levy's earliest novels—*Every Light in the House Burnin'*, set in 1960s London, *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), set on a North London council estate in the 1970s, and *Fruit of the Lemon*, set in the Thatcherite Britain of the 1980s (as well as Jamaica)—document domestic experiences of black British life and the particular manifestations of racism prominent in British society in these periods (e.g., National Front attacks, skinhead violence, institutional racism at national organisations such as the BBC). These three texts are often regarded as slighter novels, in large part because they predate the tremendous acclaim heaped upon Levy's last novels. However, in their intimately realised domestic details, these early novels fictionally document the realities of black British lives in ways that are not only affirmative and valuable but also deeply complex in terms of composition and attention to historical circumstance.

In her later work, Levy refined her use of the novel form and expanded the scope of her examination of race, empire, and migration. In *Small Island*, Levy explores the ways in which Caribbean people were racially othered and made to feel unwelcome in Britain, despite the British Nationality Act of 1948 granting them the same rights of citizenship as those born within the United Kingdom. *Small Island* is Levy's groundbreaking contribution to the fictional retelling of Caribbean migration to Britain in the post-war era, a text to rival Selvon's very different but equally iconic account of this period, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). While set primarily in Britain and Jamaica—the two "small islands" to which its title gestures—Levy's

novel also features sections that are set in the United States and on the India-Burma border. Levy's last novel, the compelling neo-slave text *The Long Song* (2010), is a historiographic metafiction that playfully and self-consciously probes the ethics of narrating history from the perspective of the enslaved. The novel imaginatively re-enters the harsh world of plantation society and gives voice, agency, and humanity to those made abject by the brutal system of transatlantic slavery. Both *Small Island* and *The Long Song* interweave multiple stories and voices in ways that creatively theorize narrative instability and historical aestheticization. Levy's short stories extend this focus on imperial history, colonialism, and, particularly, the voices of those systematically marginalized. For instance, in "Uriah's War" (2014), Levy not only connects the histories of the British and Ottoman Empires but also composes a story of Caribbean troops in the First World War, a colonial experience that is often neglected from the popular imaginary. In "Loose Change" (2005), Levy shifts to the contemporary and addresses the plight of an Uzbek refugee in twenty-first-century London. In doing so, she offers a devastating critique of easy pretensions towards empathy and shows how the intersections of class, race, and national belonging can unexpectedly inhibit cross-cultural connection.

If Levy's oeuvre can be understood as one form of writing the history of the self, then her turn outward (toward other nations, cultures, lives, aesthetic forms, and mediums) can perhaps be seen as an extension of her deeply political and self-reflexive style. In her unpublished television screenplay on the life of Mary Seacole (excerpted for this first time in this special issue), Levy furthers her dedication to recovering Britain's historical relationship with the Caribbean while concomitantly engaging with black history as a lived reality through the medium of television. In her final years, Levy put considerable thought, time, and energy into a documentary series on the historical relationship between Britain and the Caribbean. However, this project was ultimately

rejected by the BBC for being “too personal,” despite the BBC’s initial insistence that Levy make it personal in order to make it viable.<sup>7</sup> The nature of this rejection speaks to the structural limitations that Levy was attempting to address in her work, especially as the politics of the personal constituted a troubling form of artistic gatekeeping. In her short dialogue piece entitled “Two,” also published here for the first time, Levy explicitly (re)turns to the self and yet also looks outwards. In the story, two otherworldly entities contemplate her life, her cancer, and her impending death with dark humour and impatience. This piece reflects not just on Levy’s own mortality but also on a more universal, human condition. There is, we suggest, a tendency in Levy’s writing to begin with the self and, from there, open probingly, expansively, generously outwards.

### **III. Afterlives and Archives**

In February 2020, a year after Levy’s death, the BL announced its formal acquisition of her “complete archive” for the sum of £140,000 (“Complete Archive of Award-Winning Novelist”). At the time of writing, this body of artefacts remains uncatalogued (the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant delays in this process). While material from the archive may be made available digitally, thus far only one researcher has studied the physical archive, and just a few documents from it have been made publicly available online (“Complete Archive of Award-Winning Novelist”). However, as the BL’s own press release states, the archive was purchased “for the nation” (“Complete Archive of Award-Winning Novelist”) and will doubtless be studied and discussed by many scholars. It is a large, rich, and diverse collection of artefacts spanning decades of Levy’s work. It contains, for instance, early notes towards Levy’s novels and other published work; manuscripts and typescripts of those works, including early drafts, fair copies,

and annotated proofs; draft speeches, essays, and other non-fiction; numerous diaries; documents relating to research that Levy carried out for her novels and other projects; documents relating to various adaptations of Levy's novels; Levy's personal and professional correspondence; and work towards numerous projects that did not come to light during Levy's lifetime. This extraordinary body of material will clearly be a central focus of Levy studies.

Levy was not accustomed to thinking of the body of material that has been acquired by the BL as an archive and had to be "convinced" of its status as such by others. As her widower, Bill Mayblin, put it: "Late in her life it came as a surprise to Andrea that her carefully saved boxes of notes, letters and early drafts could become something as posh-sounding as an archive. But once convinced of it there was only one place she ever wanted that archive to go, and that was to the British Library" ("Complete Archive of Award-Winning Novelist"). It seems that Levy was conscious, and perhaps suspicious, of the somewhat lofty connotations of the term "archive" and indeed aware that a body of material is not simply born but, rather, "become[s]" an archive—through, again, being valorized by particular cultural institutions. It is important, too, to note that Levy had a great deal of first-hand experience with archives. *Small Island* and *The Long Song* (the latter in particular) were novels for which she undertook a significant amount of archival research. The collection of artefacts acquired by the BL in 2020 testifies to how meticulous a researcher Levy was. It contains, for instance, extensive notes that she made on numerous public archives, both physical and virtual. It also contains documents that she collected as part of her private research into her own ancestry. Accordingly, it is a body of written material that teems with traces of other such bodies and that registers attempts to collect in order to interpret. In this sense, Levy's archive is haunted by other archives. Yet she was acutely aware of the limitations of archives. In regard to her research for *The Long Song*, for

instance, she spoke on numerous occasions about the lack of historical accounts of Caribbean plantation life written by the enslaved and about the resultant need to read “between the lines” of extant historical material in order to imagine the lives and voices of the human beings who were the legal property of those whose accounts are available (Levy, “Andrea Levy Interviewed by Sarah O’Reilly”). *The Long Song* constitutes, then, an attempt to address—and redress—an acute archival absence. As we suggest above, one key characteristic of Levy’s work is its determination to take issue with the absence of certain stories and voices, and a great many documents in her archive (i.e., the body of material acquired by the BL) testify to this determination. Somewhat paradoxically, what has been termed Levy’s “complete archive” bears witness to her awareness that, by definition, *no* archive can ever be fully “complete,” but that identifying and interrogating archival omissions is a productive and urgent project. It is not merely the case that artefacts relating to Levy’s work have now become archival but, moreover, that her work constitutes a fierce contestation of archival terrain. There are, we contend, enormously fruitful discussions to be had about Levy’s writing not just *in* but also *of* the archive. This special issue marks the beginning of such discussions.

#### **IV. Our Contributors**

The essays in this special issue attend to the continuing afterlives of Levy’s creative and critical works by demonstrating the archival sensibilities and historicity of her writing. Organized chronologically from Levy’s early novels to the recent theatrical adaptation of *Small Island*, and then her unpublished projects, the essays curated here persistently situate the contemporary urgency of Levy’s writing in ways that affirm what we suggest as the coming-canoncity of her work. The issue then ends with excerpts from Levy’s unpublished projects.

Fiona Tolan's article offers a sensitive reading of Levy's first two novels, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Never Far from Nowhere*. Tolan argues that rereading these texts in the context of the 2018 Windrush scandal demonstrates not only the remarkable prescience of Levy's early work but also the way in which these novels expose the problematic valuing of migrant work, labour, and belonging. Tolan demonstrates how Levy interrogates conventional notions of gender, race, class, and respectability to recuperate black, female, migrant, and working class lives as "quintessentially British" (XXX). As Tolan suggests, the "bleak pessimism" of these early novels carries over into Levy's short story "Loose Change" (XXX). Glossing the troubled encounter between an Uzbek refugee and a young, second-generation black British woman in the story, Tolan asserts that Levy's twenty-first-century writing extends her gloomy commentary from her early novels. In Levy's more recent writing, migration, especially through the category of the refugee and the undocumented, continues to test the limits of British empathy and national belonging.

Andrea Medovarski expands this reading of Levy's early work as notably pessimistic by placing *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Never Far from Nowhere* in dialogue with the Barbadian-Canadian writer Austin Clarke and his "Toronto trilogy" of novels and, thus, compellingly establishes an affiliation between the black British and black Canadian writers. By examining how Levy and Clarke reject the exclusion of black voices within Britain and Canada respectively in their early work, Medovarski highlights an often-ignored tradition of black Atlantic writing between Britain and Canada that moves away from the more familiar Caribbean and post-Windrush literary lineages of Sam Selvon, George Lamming, and Joan Riley. Reading Levy and Clarke side-by-side—across the Atlantic and within the context of geographies constituted by the British Empire—proffers a new comparative examination of the ways in

which each writer occupies distinctly “pioneering” roles in Britain and Canada respectively (XXX). For Medovarski, the disruptive early work and aesthetics of Levy and Clarke combine through an incisive cross-Atlantic “meta-critique” of Britain and Canada as “liberal democracies” that are supposedly premised on “equality, benevolence, and racial tolerance” but that, in practice, exclude and erase black migrants, citizens, and subjects (XXX).

The representation of anti-black racism in Levy’s writing shapes a specific defamiliarizing aesthetics that, as Vedrana Veličković argues, tracks the amnesiac condition of the nation and its inability to grapple with its colonial past. Veličković’s article shifts to Levy’s third novel, *Fruit of the Lemon*, to suggest that the text is representative of the kinds of anti-imperial critiques that Levy would elucidate in her later novels, *Small Island* and *The Long Song*. Eschewing a reading that focuses solely on identity and the self, Veličković instead examines the ideological implications of Levy’s aesthetic choices. For instance, she argues that Levy’s use of ellipses and multiple openings and endings in the novel captures the textual enunciation of the nation’s racial and postcolonial melancholia. Deploying the theoretical insights of Sara Ahmed, Audre Lorde, Paul Gilroy, and Anne Anlin Cheng, Veličković generatively traces how *Fruit of the Lemon* conjures a pronounced black consciousness that attempts to resist the destructive legacies of Empire embedded in Britain’s cultural and national identity. The exploration of second-generation black British life in Levy’s novel becomes, then, “much more than a personal drama for the protagonists” (XXX). These characters and their social lives are “part of a wider and disputed legacy of the British Empire that continues to disrupt . . . [the] present” (XXX).

Levy’s creative demythologization of the British Empire and the unacknowledged racialized constitution of the nation forges what Hengameh Saroukhani identifies as the radical, anti-national, and polemic tendencies in Levy’s writing. By interrogating Levy’s celebrated

novel *Small Island*, Saroukhani analyses how the overlooked polemics of Levy's prose have intensified in the aftermath of Theresa May's hostile environmental policy and the ongoing Windrush scandal. Levy's depiction of 1948 England, Saroukhani provocatively contends, unravels liberal myths of the post-war nation through a searing critique of the welfare state that links universal social welfare with an extended history of colonial management and eugenics. Levy's critique of the nation, exposed through reflexively reading her writing from our contemporary moment, remains restricted, however, to the level of content. For Saroukhani, Levy's condemning anti-national critique is tempered by the novel's cosmopolitan narrative structure, which shapes an optimistic hermeneutics of conciliation in the text. The tension between *Small Island*'s content and form constitutes the novel's conflicted cosmopolitics that, Saroukhani suggests, becomes the ground for the troubling way in which the text remains vulnerable to commemorative projects, such as *Small Island Read 2007*. For Saroukhani, the instrumentalization of the novel's uneven politics exploits Levy's complicated rendering of the period by nationalizing a fundamentally anti-national and anti-colonial text.

Elif Öztabak-Avcı's article expands on a discussion of Levy's anti-nationalism by reading her work within the framework of world literature. In her nuanced exploration of the cross-cultural encounters between servicemen during both World Wars in Levy's work, Öztabak-Avcı compares *Small Island* and the short story "Uriah's War" to demonstrate how Levy translates racist discourse and white supremacy across various imperial and colonial contexts. Levy's writing in both novel and short story form illustrates two distinctive decolonizing aesthetics that, if read comparatively, reveal a cross-generic, transnational critique of empire. Borrowing from Rebecca Walkowitz's notion of "world-themed" fiction, Öztabak-Avcı explores how Levy's work provokes comparative readings and, in the context of the World Wars, deploys

these global conflicts to trace unexpected cross-racial forms of solidarity, connection, and animosity. Reading *Small Island* alongside “Uriah’s War” not only produces a cross-genre critical praxis but also illustrates how Levy’s work intertwines histories of the Ottoman and British Empires to imagine the geographies of Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East in anti-imperial ways.

Levy’s exploration of the representational politics of Empire extends to what John McLeod characterizes as her deep-seated interest in familial ties and kinship. McLeod incisively examines Levy’s writing in the context of adoption studies to critique a longer history of biocentric models of kinship and family-making in the context of empire and colonial life. As McLeod reminds us, “[i]n the fiction of Andrea Levy, family is the modality in which empire is lived” (XXX). By close reading Levy’s representation of biogenetic relations and adoption in *Fruit of the Lemon*, *Small Island*, and *The Long Song*, McLeod argues that, despite Levy’s compelling and crucial focus on the cultural and racial politics of adoption, her writing upholds myths of adoption and the logic of biocentric belonging that end up valorising the morbid “blood cultures” of colonial modernity (XXX). Consequently, Levy’s representation of adoption elides the materiality of adoptive life and becomes primarily—and problematically—symbolic. As McLeod contends, “[t]he subjectivity of adoptees remains unrepresentable in Levy’s writing” (XXX).

*The Long Song*, in many ways, encapsulates the complicated and historically situated politics of Levy’s oeuvre and thus offers, as Sarah Lawson Welsh demonstrates, a rich resource for teachers and educators. Lawson Welsh delineates her own pedagogical practices in an article that patiently dwells on how *The Long Song*, with its focus on the history of imperial domination and enslavement, can become a vital tool in decolonizing English literary traditions and the

discipline more generally. While situated in a British academic context, Lawson Welsh enlists specific contrapuntal teaching strategies that might shape any decolonizing and anti-imperial teaching praxis. Her pedagogical approach to both *The Long Song* and its 2018 three-part BBC television adaptation argues for the need to locate Levy's work within contemporary debates concerning racial justice and what Lawson Welsh calls the necessary "dismantling of colonial monumentality" (XXX). Lawson Welsh crucially turns to the archive and deploys intertextual readings to demonstrate how *The Long Song* is not only a neo-slave narrative but also a novelistic, televisual, and archival text that draws attention to subaltern modes of expression, orality, and storytelling. Levy's engagement with the vexed politics of history-making are illuminated by teaching and reading the larger transnational, Caribbean, and black Atlantic historical archives around her stories—archives that, as Levy's writing exposes, are too often absent or erased.

The televisual adaptation of *The Long Song* testifies to the proliferation of Levy's writing across genres and through its various adaptations, from textual to visual to aural mediums. In what is perhaps the first critical analysis of Levy's work in the context of theatre and sound studies, Deirdre Osborne examines Levy's distinctive multimodality through an analysis of the acclaimed 2019 Royal National Theatre (RNT) staging of *Small Island* and the novel's audiobook (2015). For Osborne, the theatrical adaptation of *Small Island* needs to be understood through the racial and cultural politics of contemporary British theatre, which has traditionally marginalized black British voices and playwrights. While *Small Island's* first season at the RNT was, as Osborne importantly puts it, "indubitably" a "landmark" event that "bears out a celebratory intention and suggests a measure of responsiveness to longstanding criticism of the institution's lack of diversity" (XXX), the production nonetheless reveals "fault lines in the

mainstream British theatre complex which require closer examination” (XXX). The mediation of Levy’s prose through the culturally dominant structures of the RNT demonstrates the continued neglect of black cultural producers in the theatre industry and, as such, the play fundamentally dilutes Levy’s radical anti-imperial, black politics—a politics that is recuperated via the sonic sensibilities of *Small Island*’s audiobook.

If the multiple adaptations of Levy’s writing reveal the renewed cultural, aesthetic, and political life of her work, then, Michael Perfect argues, her archive and late unpublished material testify to the longstanding diversity of her artistic impulses. In 2019 Perfect was granted exclusive access to Levy’s personal archive. Since then he has continued to study it at the BL, where it has been deposited in accordance with her wishes. Drawing extensively on material from this archive, he reflects on links between Levy’s published and unpublished work and her views on ongoing and unfulfilled projects. He discusses two of these projects in particular detail: a documentary series on the entangled history between Britain and the Caribbean that, in collaboration with others, Levy developed and pitched (as above, unsuccessfully) to the BBC, and *The Adventures of Mrs Seacole*, a screenplay Levy completed in 2012 based on Mary Seacole’s autobiography. Levy’s late unpublished work, Perfect fascinatingly charts, highlights not only the continuation of her multimodal sensibility (through the genre of screenwriting and the labour of show running, for instance) but also her increasing political, and indeed critical, engagement with national institutions like the BBC and the National Theatre as cultural gatekeepers whose claims to be “chang[ing] their practices so that they become more diverse and inclusive of British minority ethnic people” continue to ring hollow (XXX). While her novels became mainstream, Levy’s critique of imperialism and the continued neglect of black British history and life remained unpalatable to the arbiters of Britain’s cultural institutions.

We conclude our special issue with something truly special: posthumous work by Levy herself. With the kind permission of Mayblin, we are delighted to make available here for the first time two excerpts from Levy's unpublished screenplay *The Adventures of Mrs Seacole*, as well as the short piece "Two." The *Seacole* excerpts have been selected by Perfect and Mayblin. They offer readers a sense of Levy's screenplay as a whole and exhibit her characteristic wit, liveliness, and humour. "Two" was discovered in Levy's archive after her death, handwritten in one of her notebooks. A poignant reflection on Levy's own terminal illness and death, it was dramatized on BBC Radio 4 in 2020 as part of a special programme on Levy. However, it has not, until now, been published in full in print. It appears here with a short introduction by Mayblin. These posthumous pieces have been edited for publication by Mayblin and Perfect, but the edits made were minimal; the work is very much Levy's, and we are conscious that it will generate enormous interest and excitement. This special issue inaugurates Levy studies by exploring the different afterlives of her urgent, innovative, multimodal work, and we are privileged to bring it to a close with previously unseen pieces of that work.

## **Acknowledgements**

The bulk of the work of this special issue took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when many were struggling with increased and complicated workloads, care duties, and uncertainty. We would therefore like to thank our contributors who brilliantly wrote and edited their articles in the midst of the pandemic and the many blind reviewers of this double issue who took the time during a difficult year to offer their feedback. Faye Halpern and Michael T. Clarke (*ARIEL*'s co-editors) and Brigitte Clarke (*ARIEL*'s administrative assistant) were additionally indispensable. We are grateful for their professionalism, support, and care in bringing together this collection. We also want to express our immense gratitude to Gary Younge, whose eloquent and moving tribute to Levy opens this special issue. Lastly, we want to thank Bill Mayblin, who became a co-editor of sorts by sharing and editing Levy's unpublished work as well as writing his own deeply insightful prefatory remarks. Indeed, we are indebted to everyone who contributed so generously in shaping this collaborative in memoriam issue dedicated to the work of one of the leading figures in contemporary literature.

## Works Cited

- Baxter, Jeannette, and David James. "Towards Serious Work." *Andrea Levy: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Baxter and James, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 1-8.
- Chandler, Mark. "Small Island Author Andrea Levy Dies, Aged 62." *The Bookseller*, 15 Feb. 2019, thebookseller.com/news/andrea-levy-bestselling-writer-small-island-dies-aged-62-953981. Accessed 30 May 2021.
- "Complete Archive of Award-Winning Novelist Andrea Levy (1956-2019) Acquired for the Nation." *British Library*, 6 Feb. 2020, bl.uk/press-releases/2020/february/andrea-levy.
- Greer, Bonnie. "Empire's Child." *The Guardian Weekend*, 31 Jan. 2004, pp. 32-39.
- Jaggi, Maya. "The Art of Prescience." *Wasafiri*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2019, pp. 3-7.
- Knepper, Wendy. "Introduction: Andrea Levy's Dislocating Narratives." *Andrea Levy*, special issue of *EnterText*, no. 9, 2012, pp. 1-13. *brunel.ac.uk*, [brunel.ac.uk/creative-writing/research/entertext/documents/entertext09/2-Introduction-FINAL.pdf](http://brunel.ac.uk/creative-writing/research/entertext/documents/entertext09/2-Introduction-FINAL.pdf).
- Levy, Andrea. "Andrea Levy Interviewed by Sarah O'Reilly." *National Life Stories: Authors' Lives*, catalogue reference C1276/59, British Library Board, 2014.
- . *Every Light in the House Burnin'*. Review, 1994.
- . *Fruit of the Lemon*. Review, 1999.
- . "An Interview with Andrea Levy." By Charles Henry Rowell, *Callaloo*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2015, pp. 259-81.
- . *The Long Song*. Headline Review, 2010.
- . "Loose Change." *Underwords: The Hidden City*, Maia, 2005, pp. 67-76.
- . *Never Far from Nowhere*. Headline, 1996.

---. *Small Island*. Headline Review, 2004.

---. "Uriah's War." *Six Stories and an Essay*, Tinder, 2014, pp. 113-27.

Preston, Alex. "Rainbow Milk by Paul Mendez review—Beautiful and Distinctive." *The Guardian*, 5 May 2020, [theguardian.com/books/2020/may/05/rainbow-milk-by-paul-mendez-review-beautiful-and-distinctive](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/05/rainbow-milk-by-paul-mendez-review-beautiful-and-distinctive). Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

Selvon, Sam. *The Lonely Londoners*. Penguin Classics, 2006.

"*Small Island*—Learning Guide." *National Theatre Collection*, [media.bloomsbury.com/rep/files/nt\\_small-island-learning-guide.pdf](https://media.bloomsbury.com/rep/files/nt_small-island-learning-guide.pdf).

*Small Island Read 2007*. *bristolreads.com*, [bristolreads.com/small\\_island\\_read/index.html](https://bristolreads.com/small_island_read/index.html). Accessed 2 May 2020.

Younge, Gary. "After a Life of Striving, Andrea Levy Got the Acclaim She Deserved." *The Guardian*, 15 Feb. 2019, [theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/15/andrea-levy-fight-recognition-truly-deserved-politics](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/15/andrea-levy-fight-recognition-truly-deserved-politics). Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> There are two key publications that have explicitly sought to assemble new approaches to Levy's work. The first, a special issue of the e-journal *EnterText* (2012), examines topics such as home, identity, slavery, Empire, and postmemory, and includes comparative readings with other black British women writers. It situates its central preoccupation with Levy's "politicized aesthetics"—that is, the way in which her writing "challenge[s] dominant accounts of history, culture and identity" (2). Guest editor Knepper frames Levy's writing within a postcolonial feminist framework that "renews realist modes of writing" and "gives voice to postcolonial subjects" (10). The second, the book *Andrea Levy: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (2014), edited by Baxter and James, brings together chapters that examine issues such as class, race, and narrative form. While Baxter and James continue to attend to the "poetics and politics of Levy's fiction" (8), the focus in this collection remains largely on form. This collection seriously addresses the aesthetic complexities within Levy's oeuvre—"her formal and rhetorical inventiveness" (8)—in ways that anticipate the multi-form transformation of her writing in the years to come.

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, the National Theatre Collection's *Small Island* online Learning Guide notes that the production is "particularly suitable for . . . English Literature students studying the original novel at GCSE or A Level. History or Politics students studying the Windrush scandal. Drama and theatre students studying the play for A Level. Production arts students with an interest in design. Further cross-curricular working at Key Stage 3 and above" ("*Small Island*—Learning Guide" 4).

<sup>3</sup> In this introduction, and in our own individual articles in this special issue, we have chosen not to capitalize the "b" in the term "black." We are conscious that in recent years a growing number of scholars, institutions, and publications (including *ARIEL*), both in North America and beyond, have moved towards capitalization when using this term. Accordingly, it is increasingly common to find scholars (and others) writing about "Black literature," "Black writers," "Writing of the Black Atlantic," and so on. However, we have chosen not to capitalize this term in our (individual and collective) work here. Our sense is that the lower case "b" has a specific and distinctive history in black British writing, and that Levy—who did not capitalize the term in her own work—belongs to this tradition. We have, however, given each of our contributors the choice over whether to capitalize the term in their own pieces.

<sup>4</sup> Levy's work has indeed become citational—what we read as a symptom of her canonicity—within contemporary literary cultures. Reviewing Paul Mendez's acclaimed debut novel *Rainbow Milk* (2020), Preston, for example, explicitly states that "Andrea Levy is a clear touchstone for Mendez." Mendez's writing and characterization, Preston suggests, offers "a warmth and humanity reminiscent of Levy at her best."

<sup>5</sup> Recent debates around black British writing and the field's distinctive visibility within and outside the nation have also been accelerated by Bernardine Evaristo's joint Booker Prize win in 2019. Her decades-long advocacy and mentoring of black British writers alongside the recent Penguin book series "Black Britain: Writing Back" (curated by Evaristo) attests to the ongoing work of concretizing and canonizing a tradition of black British writing in the mainstream.

<sup>6</sup> Our commentary and focus on Levy's output as moving beyond the novel and realism is not meant to detract from her significant contribution to the genre of the novel and the sophisticated craft of realism. Levy is well-known for her skill with the novel form. Even before the publication of Levy's last novel, *The Long Song*, Greer, gesturing toward the popularity Levy's novelistic talent garnered, had already deemed her "Britain's most prolific black woman novelist" (32).

<sup>7</sup> For further details on this documentary series, see Perfect's article in this special issue.