

LEVY'S *FRUIT OF THE LEMON* (1999)  
AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>

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**RESUMO:** O sistema triangular escravagista com repercussões na sociedade contemporânea é responsável pelo esquema de exclusão globalizada não apenas nas sociedades contemporâneas, mas até nas metrópoles de outrora. A História oficial é subvertida por meio da re-narração daquilo que aconteceu aos não-europeus durante os últimos quinhentos anos, e, no romance *Fruit of the Lemon*, Andrea Levy faz uso da oratura para causar o processo de subjetificação em Faith Jackson, uma moça negra britânica cujos pais vieram da Jamaica como imigrantes na Inglaterra. A oratura implica a construção de um novo sujeito por meio da revelação sobre a luta do dia-a-dia para o trabalho, amizade, construção de comunidades, inclusão racial e os fatos difíceis da diáspora caribenha. Já que as tensões sociais transindividuais influenciam os sujeitos negros britânicos, sejam eles nativos ou imigrantes, o romance denuncia a amnésia dos imigrantes como prática e como política e rechaça o mito da sociedade multirracial britânica que aceita sem discussão e dificuldade os sujeitos ex-coloniais. Os resultados mostram que a lembrança através da oratura é um meio poderoso de subjetificação e de identidade, além de ser um antídoto contra a sociedade racializada. No romance *Fruit of the Lemon* Levy insere-se uma situação agônica na qual a autoridade do discurso hegemônico é subvertido, produzindo-se um novo discurso libertador e híbrido.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Fruit of the Lemon*; Literatura negra britânica; Oratura; Identidade; Lembrança; Subversão.

**ABSTRACT:** The slave-system, with extant repercussions on contemporary society, is accountable for the globalized exclusion scheme not only in the ex-colonies but even in the former metropolises. Official History is subverted by re-narrating what happened to non-Europeans during the last five hundred years and in *Fruit of the Lemon* black British author Andrea Levy utilizes orature to trigger the subjectification process in Faith Jackson, a British-born black female whose parents hail from Jamaica. Orature involve the construction of a new subject through revelations on the daily struggle for work, friendship, community-building, racial inclusion and the dire facts of the Caribbean diaspora. Since transindividual social tensions affect the British black subject, native or immigrant, the novel denounces the immigrants' "amnesia" as a policy and the myth of a British multicultural society accepting peacefully ex-colonial subjects. Results show that remembrance through orature is a powerful means of subjectification and identity, besides being an antidote against a racialized society. In *Fruit of the Lemon* Levy installs an agonistic stance in which the authority of hegemonic discourse is subverted and a new liberating and hybridized discourse produced.

**KEYWORDS:** *Fruit of the Lemon*; British Black Literature; Orature; Identity; remembrance; Subversion.

## I ANDREA LEVY AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

Perhaps one of the hallmarks of Caribbean fiction is the identity problem featuring the constant issue “where we came from” and the insistence on reminding Europe of her responsibility in the diaspora process. These factors have been processed by Caribbean-born authors who live in Britain or by British-born authors with roots in the Caribbean with regard to the bias and racism encountered in racialized Europe and in Britain in particular. In his essays Kittitian Caryl Phillips has constantly reported being asked where he was *really* from, emphasizing the word “really” to show the exogenic condition which Black people experience even when born in Britain (PHILLIPS, 2001). The same question has been reported by Levy in her essay “This is my England” published by *The Guardian* on the 19<sup>th</sup> February 2000. In their fiction most authors, ranging from Rhys to Levy, have put into the limelight the uncanniness of “mother” Britain in her endeavour to shun “colonials” and keep herself non-hybridized and untainted. Even though Phillips, for instance, is more optimistic than usual in the conclusion essay of *A New World Order*, it seems that his true line is rather the opposite, especially when one remembers what he said in his interview with Jaggi (in NASTA, 2004). “There’s no other society on earth that can do that to anybody – or make a nigger out of you in eight hours, before you’ve even left Terminal 3”. Levy’s latest novel, *Small Island*, has shown Britain’s unchangeability with regard to racial bias and rootlessness of the ex-colonial individual on her shores, while in Phillips’s *A Distant Shore*, the experience of the character Gabriel / Solomon is a metonymy of the personal quest for identity and the tragic environment of the “native”. The aim of this essay is therefore the “conundrum of existence” (as expressed by Phillips in *The European Tribe*) of British born and bred Faith Jackson in a “hostile” environment in her country and the encounter with subjectivity in the meanderings of “her” history in Jamaica.

Andrea Levy (b. 1956) was born in Britain to Jamaican parents who had travelled to England on the *SS Empire Windrush* in 1948. *Every Light in the House Burning* (1994) is Levy’s first novel told by Angela Jacob, a young Black British-

born woman, whose memories shift between her past childhood and the present situation at her father's deathbed. In *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), the two British-born sisters, Olive and Vivien, have Jamaican parents and maintain a tension between British identity and ethnicity throughout the novel. Olive, who is darker than Vivien, is characterized by her Caribbean ideology and British Black identity and culture, whereas the latter is always taken as white and acts as such. *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) is Levy's third novel in which the narrator Faith Jackson finds herself into a crisis due to an absence of Black identity and moves temporarily to Jamaica where she becomes aware of a great network of people and events linked to the Caribbean diaspora. Her last novel to date *Small Island* (2004) narrates the intertwining lives of the Jamaican couple Hortense and Gilbert and the white, colour-biased, British couple Queenie and Bernard. Queenie's black child, British born, is excluded from her home (metonymically from British citizenship and all that this implies) and is admitted into the Jamaican household.

## 2 MEMORY, HISTORY AND IDENTITY

The concept of memory and its historicity are crucial to the understanding of post-colonial fiction and its implications in modern times, especially as the typical idiosyncratic feature fabricated by Caryl Phillips, Andrea Levy, Mark McWatt, Pauline Melville, Wilson Harris and other Caribbean authors in their novels and short stories. Sometimes the term memory is confounded with history, culture, beliefs, ideologies, discourse, archives, and collective and individual perceptions. Memory, conceived as a "safe" for guarding secrets and the mind's ability to garner impressions of past experiences, mystifies the term. In recent years memory has been focussed upon as furnishing a group's collective identity. Yates (2001) analyzes memory in the traditional form, or rather as the phenomenon that aims at conserving a technique invented by humans long before the invention of the press. Yates, however, did not deal with orality and remembrance as

important factors of social identity and interpersonal communication in “primitive” societies. Bergson’s (1990) view that memory is different from the brain’s function foregrounded the notion of “social or collective memory” by Halbwachs (1990), which left a great impact on historiography, sociology and anthropology. Halbwachs (1990) examines the human being as a subject inserted within collective life and memory is inscribed within social frameworks and involves the reconstruction of the past from collective and social experiences. Remembrance is thus the re-making and reconstructing of past experiences by present images. The individual memory depends on his/her relationship with the reference and belonging groups, especially family, social class, school. “Remembrances remain collective and they are brought to our memory by others, even when they involve events in which only we have participated and tell us things which only we have seen. We have really never been alone” (HALBWACHS, 1990: 26). In his commentary on Halbwachs’s analysis Jedlowski (1997) describes collective memory as a function of the identity of social groups since it integrates and gives them continuity, and favours the feeling of belonging and the reconstruction of the past according to the groups’ interests. Consequently Jedlowski (1997) underscores the link between collective memory and the societies’ need to preserve their cultural heritage and transmit it to contemporary and future generations.

Needless to say, individual memory is the brain register of lived experiences which are interpreted and re-interpreted by the human subject through his/her life. Individual remembrance is, however, not equal to past events. In fact, events as narrated by individuals reflect their social and historical trajectories. Consequently, memory and remembrance is never non-hybridized. It is a symbolical construct of what happened or of what was imagined have happened. It furnishes, nevertheless, an interpretation of facts and events which many would have liked to suppress and forget.

Non-knowledge, omissions and new interpretations of past events are not casual. They are part of a continuous process of the reconstruction of memory and thus the product of an ideological stance. Diasporic people (descendents of

Negro slaves and descendants of European immigrants in the New World, for instance) have a mythical view of their origin (SAFRAN, 1991) which may be far off from the "precise facts", if the latter may be effectively constructed. Memory is a construction and a representation of the past with definite functions in the contemporary process of social and political organization as it had been in the past.

This brings us to a concept of history and attempts at deconstructing history engaged by post-modern historians who deal with history without the least possibility of ever knowing the truth. This strategy is very similar to that fabricated by colonialism to deny history to the colonized other. The history of the Caribbean peoples does not start when Columbus stepped on their shores nor does it begin when they are referenced to as nation-states. In both cases the histories of the people lie untouched under the surface of official colonial and neo-colonial history. Needless to say the historical event is not something autonomous since the agent's consciousness acts as mediator. The selection of events, their sequencing and the vantage point from which they are narrated have been proved not to be so objective and unbiased as it has usually been alleged (CRAPANZANO, 1992). Memory, considered as a meta-narrative that legitimized the scientific condition of history, has been dethroned, whereas Leibniz's postulate that "time is the order of non-contemporaneous things" proved to be an equivocation (2007). Nevertheless, it seems that one may still speak of the objectivity of the historical event. It arises from the awareness not of the event itself but of the ruptures in time (past, present and future) which places it, at the time of its occurrence, in the present, and assigns it an associative relation with absolute time. All historical facts, with or without a specific date, possess a past and a future, both of which are independent of observation.

Halbwachs (1990) states that there are as many collective notions of time in a society as there are separate groups and, thus, no unifying time may be imposed on all groups simultaneously. Linear and unifying time is in fact only the

history imagined by a small group of people whom one has chosen to privilege in one's analysis. This brings us to the notion of privilege by which history, as the history of a group of people, is merely an interpretation of the elite or of a particular historian, with little bearing on consciousness.

The vision of progress is the rational madness of history seen as sequential time, of a dominated future. Its imagery is absurd. In the history books the discoverer sets a shod foot on virgin sand, kneels, and the savage also kneels from his bushes in awe. Such images are stamped on the colonial memory, such heresy as the world's becoming holy from Crusoe's footprint or the imprint of Columbus's knee. These blasphemous images fade, because these hieroglyphs of progress are basically comic. (WALCOTT, 1995: 373).

Contrastingly to the work of nationalist historians who focus on the "objectivity" of the nation's history, post-colonial studies have concerned themselves with the way in which ordinary people at a given time made sense of the world, how they construed the world, invested it with meaning and infused it with emotion, how they lived their relation to the past, the present and the future: in short, how they constructed their history. It may be the time to accept "temporality" as the thread of history since groups and communities are made up of common folktales, habits, idiosyncrasies, common perceptions of time, even if, in the long run, there are the common efforts to oust colonial rulers or modern ideologies of the nation. A history from within would take into account the way in which time was experienced by its protagonists and stress the importance of an autonomous concept of time in the forging of a people's or community's history. The postcolonial fictional writer's task seems to be the undermining of the absolute narrative text and the conformation to the canonical historical body, since these two postulates shun various interpretations and alternative readings. Although many historians view history as a meaningful account of the past and not a positioned narrative (MARCUS, 1992), the fictional writer wants to rectify the bias of elite and neo-colonialist historiography that eulogizes the European colonizer as the maker of the Caribbean and other colonized nations. In fact,

[...] the idea of 'America' belongs to the European historical narrative, since millions of people inhabiting the 'land' were not allowed to tell their own stories; they had different narratives about the origin and process of human beings [...] But difference was disabled by the colonial matrix of power. (MIGNOLO, 2005: 46).

The fictional writer contrastingly insists on the "histories" of the simple people who react against imposed silence and find their voice. "It is obvious today, all over the globe [...], that 'memory' is what imperial/colonial domination always failed to conquer" (MIGNOLO, 2005: 128).

### 3 NARRATIVE STATUS OF *FRUIT OF THE LEMON*

*Fruit of the Lemon* is divided into four sections: a prologue of a sort, headed by a meagre genealogical tree; Part I, titled England; Part II, titled Jamaica; a very short Part III titled England, which is also a sort of Epilogue, ending with an elaborate genealogical tree, albeit full of gaps and uncertainties. Events are narrated by a female auto-diegetic narrator who in the Jamaica section eventually allows hypodiegetic narrators to tell their own story. Current essay will first analyze identity and belonging problems brought about by the suppression of history and the downplaying of memory within the private and social sphere. Conversely, identity and subjectivity are somewhat recovered when the excluded subject is grounded to folk history and to family memory brought about by orature. The hypothesis worked out in this essay is that Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* does not consist of a mere binary conflict between "race" and the right to be a British citizen (TOPLU, 2005). Going beyond the thesis forwarded by Sáez (2006), it rather investigates the hypothesis that objectification ensues by pretending that racism does not exist and that the construction of the identity of the diasporic subject is brought about by folk-fabricated history and memory.

### 4 ERASURE OF IDENTITY

Events, probably timed in the 1980s, narrated by Faith Jackson, a British born and bred young woman, of Jamaican parents, underscore the counterpoint between the erasure of



history of diasporic Negroes and memory constantly inserted within the narrative. Erasure is achieved by silence and gaps in the young woman's family history. The genealogical tree initiating the 'Prologue' indicates a mere nuclear family and represents the fact that Faith's parents try to keep low, almost non-existent, their previous "history" and that of their Jamaican family. "My mum and dad never talked about their lives before Carl and I were born. They didn't sit us in front of the fire and tell long tales of life in Jamaica – of palm trees and yams and playing by rivers. There was no 'oral tradition' in our family" (LEVY, 2004: 4). In fact, few hard facts are actually conveyed on the Jackson's or Campbell's families in their Caribbean home except the parents' personal reminiscences of strictly family matters, their wedding and their arrival and settlement in Britain. Wade and Mildred's evasive answers with regard to the Jamaican background dictated a policy for the children that skin colour was no bar, their home was Britain and the future within the metropolis unbiased and promising. The parents' statement "We finally arrive home" (LEVY, 2004: 11) demonstrates their "snugness" in the mother country to where they pretended to belong as legitimate members of the British Empire.

Contrastingly, for Faith, the colour bar early becomes a covert reminder of non-belonging, even though the first part of the novel is an endeavour to live as a "full" British citizen. The young white boys' teasing made her aware of this uncanniness: she was a "darkie" and her parents were diaspora people who had crossed the Atlantic on a "banana boat". The spectre of slavery and her links with the erstwhile economical system had been at the back of her mind from what she had gleaned from textbooks (Levy is probably referring to the widely reproduced illustration on inhuman conditions on board slave ships published in Thomas Clarkson's 1786 "Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of Human Species") and school assignments on the British Empire. However, such impersonal reminders of slave boats and immigrant ships were downplayed even by Mildred who explained to Faith that "it was a proper boat with cabins" and shunned the absurdity that diasporic Jamaicans were lumbered on the ship as any commodity. Nevertheless, the young girl's imagination focussed on and

linked together the systematically packed slave ship, the *SS Windrush* and sheep herding. Consequently, at surface level, Britain is held to be a non-racialized society and when Faith's friends refuse to accept the banana boat story, authority is evoked to stop the annoyance. However, the Empire, its othered peoples and British superiority are constantly lurking behind the giggles, sing-songs and teases. There is a similar attitude, albeit within a different context, not to face facts in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: when the dead horse was found, Antoinette ran away and did not speak of the event since, she thought, "if I told no one it might not be true (RHYS, 1968: 16). Faith's lack of family history, her suppression of memory and the make-believe that racial equality and belonging were the rule produced an unmoored person who lost her voice in the process.

The erasure / remembrance conflict engendered a mixture of silence and crying which demonstrated that the subject was failing to cope with the racial conditions present owing to the scanty history, riddled with gaps, conveyed to the subject who had to fill the questions marks and the issues involved through the imagination. Faith knew nothing about the hybridity brought about by relationships between the white master and his slaves, the myth of racial purity, the ostracism brought about by going native, the exploitation of goods and produce by white people, the existence of hard-working relatives in the Caribbean and the experience of the *SS Windrush* and its 1948 epoch-making voyage. Faith seems to be the image in an upside down mirror of the abject subject (KRISTEVA, 1985) in diasporic and postcolonial situations represented by many fictional authors as the colonizer in alien country. Being British and coloured Faith represents the abjection experienced by the de-structured "colonized subjects" which causes her a crisis of identity in urgent need of subjectification.

## 5 ERASURE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Levy represents Faith as a young woman who, "unconscious" to any racial markers, graduates in "fashion and textiles", seeks a flat away from parents' control and dedicates herself to a job in a textile home industry, as any normal British girl would have done. In the public sphere she

easily transits among white people both in the flat where she lives and in the job she secures. The contextualization with regard to racism, slavery and colonialism is cut off from the globalization environment currently experienced. It seems that the young black girl living in a wholly white society is “unaware” of the underwater currents of history affecting relationships between people. Faith, for instance, fails to perceive any link between Empire and Simon’s father’s mansion lying in a “[q]uintessentially English” village (LEVY, 2004: 115). The sheer bigness of the place, the hunting trophies, the stained-glass windows, portraits of ancestors, model ships and train engines, and frames made from ivory hint that the richness and affluence of current upper British society is the product of the material exploitation of faraway colonies and the ruthless utilization of colonized non-white peoples, extensively analyzed by Said (1993) when he deals with contrapuntal reading. The remark made by Simon to Faith that “[t]hey used to use ivory for these sort of portraits but you can’t nowadays” (LEVY, 2004: 121) is important due to the silence engaged in by the two friends. Simon’s silence is analogous to that recurring throughout the novel: there is no link between the commodities not used in the present but permitted in the past. A gap exists and is made up of a lack of sequence between the present and the memory of the past. Faith’s silence is also remarkable because her very presence is the link between Empire and current British racialized society. The unconscious, albeit systematic, shunning of colonial legacies and the make-believe of “equality” and “acceptance”, coupled to the genealogical tree, in portraits, of the English family jokingly all the way through “Ethelred the Unready” to somewhere close to Lady Di, enhances Faith’s abjection within her identity and reinforces the concealment of British racial system.

Concealment and displacement of the racial system are endemic to British society and when brought to the surface undoubtedly produce embarrassments. When Faith meets barrister Andrew Bunyan, a friend of Simon’s parents, a certain discomfiture and awkwardness hovered over the discourse from the start. Bunyan’s remark that he met a boatman (“dreadlocks [...] black [...] darker than you”, LEVY, 2004: 130) in Jamaica with the same surname (and its particular spelling) failed to

trigger either in the lawyer, or in Simon or in Simon's mother any remembrances and racial connotations. Faith interpreted the surname episode by pointing out that probably before Emancipation the barrister's English family had owned the boatman's family as slaves. The barrister's reply was:

'No! My family never had connections like that in Jamaica. My family were not in that sort of business. I have no family connections in that part of the world at all. [...] Some vicar just going around sowing his seed. Producing lots of little dark babies. That sort of thing happened all the time'. (LEVY, 2004: 131).

Bunyan's poise and self-reliance were disrupted by Faith's "accusation". His vehement disengagement from any link with the slave trade and his transferring of culpability to a wayward vicar and not to erstwhile British slavery policy and current British covert racial attitudes are remarks that try to submerge documentary evidence and run against the grain of History. The suppression of memory and the displacement of responsibilities with regard to the engagement of all important British families and all major cities in the slave trade (THOMAS, 1997) is a common strategy to conceal the racial bias. When facts are made to emerge, the reader is tickled to think on Bunyan's reaction as an exclusive white British subject: confusion impairs him to remember the exact name for dreadlocks, makes him excuse himself when comparing the boatman's skin colour to Faith's and provokes mayhem of quirky language and gestures. In an overtly manner Phillips engages in this issue in his latest novel *Foreigners* when he links the current policy with slavery and lays bare the biased racialized fabric of British society. "The mother country was welcoming her citizens at the front door, and then quickly ushering them out through the back door crying, 'No Blacks,' crying 'No Coloured', crying, 'Go back to where you came from'" (PHILLIPS, 2007: 196). On the other hand, Faith's erasure somewhat increases in the midst of a succession of events featuring arrogance and humiliation when an overt statement on memory has been engaged with.

In a racially-biased population undercurrent racial remarks fabricate ex-colonial subjects and British-born

subjects with a different skin colour as exotic commodities within a wholly white British working class. In the context of Faith's first job, it is remarked that she is "one of the lucky ones", overtly linked to her "being black" originating from "an ethnicity which shines through [...]. A sort of African or South American feel" (LEVY, 2004: 31). Faith is at odds to decide whether her employer Olivia made the choice out of meritocracy or from some feature hailing from "my slave ancestry". The text seems to show that Olivia's decision was based on the latter alternative. This may be corroborated by the employer's racialized attitudes: exploitation and appropriation of the other's creative work, no acknowledgement of Faith's labour, exclusion from breaks and an attitude that Blacks are expendable and fired at will. The episode in which Olivia is seen unveiled in all her whiteness is a metonymy that whiteness prevails over Faith's dark skin. Referring to Fanon's analysis of black psychopathology (1967), the annihilation of Faith brings about silence, a failure to process the racial political power and self-despise. Almost tragically she remarks "My working life was over at the age of twenty-one" (LEVY, 2004: 33).

Needless to say, life was not over at 21 and she immediately finds a job at the BBC Television as a costume label sticker, a job that corners the holder into invisibility. Whiteness is not mentioned but it is pervasive, privileged and universal. Faith's application for a promotion where she may be "on the studio floor – with the lights, camera, the actors" (LEVY, 2004: 70), or rather, in the limelight, and the interview that ensued are rife with the universal rule of whiteness which she is unable to grasp and consequently to be angry and grapple with the problem. "They don't have any black dressers. [...] Haven't you noticed there aren't any coloured people dressing" (LEVY, 2004: 70-71). Since Faith is not fully aware of the underlying racial bias and rules, coupled to the consequent marginalization of non-white Others, she shrugs and keeps silent. She is unable to cope with racial markers and fails to understand the racial power dynamics constantly going on and which has made the fabric of British and European society. Fanon already remarked on Negro's self-consciousness and self-censorship when he wrote

on the culturally fabricated Other, or rather on the fact that “he is made inferior” (FANON, 1967: 149). This has been the “policy” of her parents when adopting the family history erasure stance. Wade’s gesture of “the wagging finger not to go blabbing it about to my friends” (LEVY, 2004: 4) and Mildred’s term “foolishness” playing down the alleged racial bias of the job selecting committee foreseen by Fanon (1967: 150) when he deals with the encounter of the Negro and the white man “which oppresses him with the whole weight of his blackness”. “Challenging” the interlocutors on what she had heard on racial bias, the narrative actually reveals through the interviewers’ nervous vehemence and the endless repetition that “nothing like that goes on in this department” (LEVY, 2004: 109) that an exclusively white policy was the norm. Lorraine’s ironic remark on the episode is highly allusive: “I knew Lionel was a nice man really. I mean, he can be a bit fussy. But I knew he wasn’t prejudiced. He loves animals” (LEVY, 2004: 135). The masked underlying ideology has been subverted and, in this case, Faith’s silence and refusal to mention names intimates a timid recuperation of voice, even though she does not accept Negro activist Ruth’s council to denounce racism. The racial and white ideology, however, is still present all the same: even on her promotion Faith starts to perceive that an exclusion process has been triggered. Contrary to what she expects, Faith is given activities as a dresser on seemingly unimportant children’s favourite features. It is remarkable how these social interactions and interrelationships are interwoven in such a way that the culture and history are not only subdued and veiled but belied and made anachronistic.

The veils camouflaging a racialized society are pulled down when Faith experiences the violence against Yemi, the black owner, and her bookshop.

The shop had been sprayed with angry red paint. And all over it said NF, NF, NF. The red paint was over the walls – over the spines of books – arcing down the shelves and along faces on posters. Over the till and paying desk. Down around the children’s corner – over the display of alphabet bricks and across the little seats. Round the racks of greeting cards. A swirling hate of NF NF NF Fuck Off”. (LEVY, 2004: 153).

The overt racial violence seems to have inscribed itself on Faith’s body, symbolized by the paint on the telephone receiver which eventually taints her hands when she calls up

the police, and on her person when she “identifies” herself with the black owner. Moreover, a deeper revelation on British racialized society comes up, first in the public sphere, following the discourses of the police, and second in the private sphere, following Simon’s “heroism” in the act. Institutionalized racism emerges when the police “misread” the event as thug violence and even to the woman’s imprudence in keeping the shop on her own and not as a racially biased attack. In the private sphere, Simon is acclaimed as a white hero when he retells the story to his friends. The point is that Simon totally erases Yemi’s and the bookshop’s identity as black in spite of Faith’s endeavour to correct the narrative. “I interrupted the story twice. ‘She was a black woman,’ I said. Simon had just called her the woman who worked there. Twice I had to tell them that the woman that was struck on the head was black like me. And both times Simon and Mick had looked at me and nodded” (LEVY, 2004: 156). The nods from white people amount to a downplaying of the serious racial violence that Faith begins to experience as directed to her too as a black-bonding strategy. “My head was hurting like it had come out in sympathy with Yemi” (LEVY, 2004: 154).

Her erasure within the white community symbolized by her self-erasure into the darkness of her own room present itself as a factor of cultural uprooting and conscience-raising. The latest trauma she experienced makes her perceive three important points: (1) she cannot possibly deny racialism in Britain any more, as she has done so far; (2) she perceives that white is not only everywhere but it excludes blackness in such an overt and subtle manner that the inclusion process is out of the question; (3) the blind alley in which she finds herself may only be solved through a cultural and ethnical solution. Her perception of the above had been underlying facts and discourses which were constantly being submerged, downplayed, forgotten, suppressed or purposely not given sufficient importance. Gilroy (1993: 40) states that the lived crisis, derived from the memory of slavery, may not be solved by labour but by “poesis [...] in novel forms – autobiographical writing, special and uniquely creative ways

of manipulating spoken language, and, above all, the music.” It is the “folk history” transmitted through orality during her Jamaican sojourn that will subjectify Faith and make her cope with a heterogeneous and racially biased society not especially and positively responsive to difference.

## 6 REWRITING HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

The fact that Levy concentrates on second generation Caribbean immigrants in *Fruit of the Lemon* directs and focuses discussions on the meaning of Black identity and Black Britishness in a supposedly post-imperial and multi-racial society. The lack of any or scanty historical background in the memory of young people born to Caribbean parents in Britain, their expectations towards and their adjustment to Britain as their legitimate mother country and their colour-consciousness produce a shattering dichotomy between white society's racism and the Black British subject's attitude of complete integration without any regard to the underlying “dermal schema”. Faith's breakdown is the consequence of lip service to a much propagated liberalism and multiculturalism, which are far from being a reality (KUMAR, 2003), compounded by her sharing a flat with white people and keeping a distance from other Black young people. Caribbean Black identity and British identity are two conflicting stances which are in dire need of negotiation within a syncretic culture as Britain is supposed to be. “Everyone should know where they come from” (LEVY, 2004: 162), spoken by Mildred is Levy's tentative solution to come to terms with these factors.

Faith displaces herself from home (Britain) to her ancestral home (Jamaica), her “motherland”, both of which are highly problematic. In the first place, Britain is home to Faith: it is her country of birth and she belongs to British society even though she feels the strong undercurrent of exclusion and non-belonging. If this is the dilemma of white, British-born Dorothy in Phillips's *A Distant Shore* for her supposed uncanniness, the exclusion problem will be a fortiori experienced by the black baby, adopted by Hortense in Levy's



*Small Island*, in his homeland. Evidently “home” is subjected to different interpretations and is “intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances” (BRAH, 2002: 192). Whereas an Englishman during colonial times could make Jamaica his “home”, a Jamaican native (or anyone hailing from the ex-colonies) will never be at home in England as Jean Rhys and Zadie Smith have amply shown in their fiction. In the second place, the Jamaica of Faith’s parents, the place where racial hybridity and colonial exploitation were rife, is utterly inaccessible to Faith. Only the hypodiegetic narratives, mainly female, will construct the “historical background” that Faith needs to cope with her identity on her return to England.

Seven narratives, told by three characters, mainly Aunt Coral, constitute the “Jamaica” section in which the family histories of many generations emerge as a stage on which race, labour, marriages, expectations, frustrations, utopias, diasporic movements, experiences of poverty and heroism play an important role. These items of history, conveyed through orature, inform Faith’s memory and give her a foregrounding for her Black British identity. Shunning official history as a privileged interpretation of events narrated from imperial power’s vantage point (FOUCAULT, 2007) and, consequently, disengaged from social memory (as Faith experienced in her History lessons in Britain), oral history, largely used by Nigerian and Kenyan post-colonial writers, is the very alternative to European literature (ASHCROFT, 1989), through which the identity of peoples is fabricated. Whilst a history of the “chaotic” past in the people’s history roots individuals to their culture highly degraded by colonialism, the absence of “native” oral history is disastrous.

In order to ensure his salvation and to escape from the supremacy of the white man’s culture the native feels the need to turn backwards towards his unknown roots and to lose himself at whatever cost in his own barbarous people. [...] This tearing away, painful and difficult though it may be, is, however, necessary. If it is not accomplished there will be serious psycho-affective injuries and the result will be individuals without any anchor, without a horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless [...]. (FANON, 1990: 175).

Contrary to the conscious suppression of the scanty information provided by Mildred and Wade on their families in Jamaica, oral history transmitted without the pretensions of truth and hierarchization makes Faith understand and be proud of her hybridity.

Aunt Coral's life history may be characterized by two counterpoints related to labour and to racism which subvert certain tenets that diaspora people, informed by "colonizers", have with regard to their colonial ancestors. Othering, through cultural diversity (Bhabha, 1988) by the colonial systems, whether British, French or Dutch, always involved accusations of native laziness and lack of responsibility (COETZEE, 1988). Even in contemporary times the diaspora has been interpreted as a movement "for teeth and glasses" (LEVY, 2005: 93) and not because of labour shortage that imperial and colonial policy of exploitation provoked. The hypodiegetic text shows Coral and Oscar hard working at home, in school, in business and in diasporic conditions, away from their children but sending them money for their upbringing, till the father's death of lung cancer and Coral's exhaustion in old age. Coral's ending phrase: "My cup is full [...] No time to regret" (LEVY, 2004: 195) demonstrates the dignity of Jamaican families which belies accusation of parasitism and flaws in duty attributed by white people. Following Warner's Serafine in *Indigo*, hard-working Wade and Mildred demonstrated that the erstwhile (and frequently current) degradation of Caribbean Blacks was linked to essentialism and racial bias brought about by white hierarchization attitudes and not to real facts.

Hybridism, a key word in the history of the Caribbean, integrates the very social fabric of colonial society, and its vicissitudes have been discussed by post-colonial theoreticians. Exclusivist societies have always rejected the "going-native" stance in which the white colonizers lose their superior distinctiveness when contaminated by natives either through sex, religion or culture (TORGOVNIK, 1990), the prohibition of which has frequently been the basis of eugenic movements. However, the social intercourse between "coloureds" and British colonizers in the colonies and in the

“Motherland” during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century have respectively produced syncretic attitudes and reinforced exclusion policies. Such ambivalence underlies Faith’s identity crisis. It seems that Aunt Coral’s narrative shows the evolution of thought with regard to racism among Jamaicans in the recent past (“in those days”) and in the present. The text surmises that Caribbeans distinguished between the “lighter” and the “dark” skin of the population. “Oscar’s mother was not pleased when Oscar and Coral decided to get married. ‘She didn’t like me – not at first.’ Oscar had a lighter skin than Coral. ‘You see his mother thought he could do better. I was too dark.’” (LEVY, 2004: 193). A similar distinction is also made in Coral’s description of Grace, Faith’s grandmother. “Hester had a fair skin, her nose was straight and her lips were thin. Grace was dark with a broad nose and bottom lip that stuck out and made her look like she was sulking” (LEVY, 2004: 227). Due to an uncritical appropriation of the white colonizer’s ideology and tastes, the former, closer to the white colonizer’s hue and physique, was more appreciated than the latter. Coral, however, was not biased. “They had two children. Pauline was born first and had a light skin like her father. Vincent was darker. ‘But I loved him all the same. He’s my son’” (LEVY, 2004: 193). Expecting Oscar’s light-coloured relatives to behave better at the wedding, Coral is critical of their attitude. “Some of them had three helpings before others had got to their feet. Some people! And Faith, they all think they so high-class because they have light skin. Cha. Sipping their drinks with their little fingers in the air. It was comical” (LEVY, 2004: 193). The images of mimicry of the English both in skin and in table manners that Coral forwarded in her narrative triggered a deepening of cultural hybridity in the beleaguered Faith. In the context of a racially hierarchized society Faith could not cope with the covert excluding policy of the British although she tacitly believed in the racial purity of the English. Coral’s story showed her that society “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (BHABHA, 1998: 4). Contrary to what has historically been conveyed, the so-called hybrids, therefore, are not degraded people; rather they are a

metonymy of “fixed identifications” shunning and of the propensity towards openness, tolerance and diversity (SOUZA, 2004; HALL, 2003). Perhaps this is the meaning of Eunice’s openness to a black American, to the white childless couple, to a diasporic Jamaican musician, to coloured children, to several places in the U.S. and to the ups and downs of life. Centuries of hybridity has imbued the Caribbean diasporic person with the ability to “reverse the structures of domination in the colonial situation” (YOUNG, 1995: 23).

Current conscience-raising on Caribbean hybrid identity represented by Coral’s constant phrase “Things were not as they are now”, shows that while an older generation was able to hinder a marriage on social and racial grounds (“Nathaniel [who] was too rough, too poor, too dark, too ignorant”, LEVY, 2004: 229) and, consequently, demonstrate an ideologically fragmented Black population, the generation contemporary to the narrative has overcome internal racial prejudice and a Black identity bonding has emerged. Influential for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Rastafarianism, Garveyism, the Africanization of Jamaica and Black Power movements have probably eliminated the dark and lighter colour bars and imbued the people with racial pride and Black “nationalism”. Giving the past a comical status, Coral’s oral histories on her family convey to Faith the idea that there is no shame in being Black, that Black culture is a well-established dignified practice, that no inter- or intra-racial hierarchization is legitimate and that erasure of Black identity, similar to what Faith had tried to do in the mirror episode, is an anachronism.

Erasure may be described as the annihilation of the “colonial” subject’s identity through a reversed abrogation and appropriation producing a traumatized subjectivity within the context of representations of race. Hall (2003) investigates the alternatives that othered “colonial” subjects have in a white society which simultaneously posits a heterogeneous stance and cultural difference and inculcates invisibility and an exclusion policy of non-belonging in the other. The racialized subject may dilute his/her identity to the point of turning into a caricatured individual, a marionette. Erasures, albeit different, represented in Caryl Phillips’s Nash Williams and

Bert Williams, respectively in *Crossing the River* and *Dancing in the Dark* occur within a crisis of racial identity that challenges the very core of the individual. As a contrast to Coral's life teeming with dignity and self-esteem as a fully-individualized Jamaican subject, the story of Constance's erasure and its dead end determines the ambivalence of hyphenated people if they fail to face their Black identity.

The othered subject emulates the white man and “expresses his dreams of possession – all manner of possession” to obtain power (FANON, 1990: 30). Owing to her English father, Edmund, Matilda's daughter Constance had not only white skin, fair hair and blue eyes, but was bred and educated as an English girl in all the details of etiquette, language and mores, to the point of adopting supposedly English customs, like eating lemons with sugar. Contrary to the expectations of her racialized English grandparents, her white skin and her refined English manners made an excellent impression on her arrival in England. She studied English and switched to Standard English “with [its] rounded vowels” to the point of being scandalized by slang English or by her own Jamaican English. The de-identity process was triggered by her mother's insistence on her denying the Jamaican origin and mimicking the “white English colonizer”. The insistence of Constance's mother that her daughter should be called “Miss Constance” and her higher education abroad were strategies of power which produced a type of violence proper to the tension between the Caribbean cultural environment and the “white” mask she was programmed to wear. The erasure of her identity gave rise to an adult marionette. “She [Matilde] liked Constance to talk – to tell everyone in her impeccable English of life in the shires. She liked Constance to serve the tea – show everyone her faultless English manners” (LEVY, 2004: 315). The white mask produced an anti-abrogation stance by which the colonial language and mores were taken to be as standard and uncritically adopted for the appropriation of the power inherent to European and British colonial ideology.

The tragic disparity between the acquired colonial culture and her Jamaican identity began to appear when she was subalternated at her job in the firm of solicitors.

“Constance got a job – a good job – with a firm of solicitors. [...] She ran the office filing and typing documents and the two elderly lawyers promised one day she would be able to learn all about the law” (LEVY, 2004: 315). There is a comic undertone in the lawyers’ discourse featuring highly degrading effects. Or rather, there will be no possibility in attaining power due to the fact that she was Jamaican, albeit with white skin, blue eyes, fair hair and excellent British-like pronunciation. Further, as mentioned above, Jamaicans started to appreciate hybridized “African” culture, their idiosyncratic Creole language, customs and body features especially in the 1960s and 1970s. When “fair” people, with external and internal traits closer to the erstwhile colonizer, started to be marginalized, Constance entered a deep identity crisis: she did not belong. However, the construct that she built in her mind of being “British” or, at least, similar to the “British”, was not erasable. Similar to several characters in Warner’s *Indigo*, the crisis and tension of her identity became an indelible mark which, Coral perceived, could repeat itself in Faith. The recovery of identity and the facing of this very identity constitute Faith’s epiphany when she arrived in England among the firework on Guy Fawkes’ Night.

Analysis on racial problems in the diaspora shows the options that “colonial subjects” have to negotiate in the “mother country”. There is an inverted proportional effect between memory of the ancestral land and official history. Whereas the latter has been subverted by a kind of narrative not found in the textbooks, albeit full of interactivities among the people and their hybrid relationships, the former gives birth to a series of layers involving struggles, hostilities, violence, exploitation, dynamism and other factors that form the very core of “colonial” culture. Faith brings to her motherland this type of memory, up to that time unknown to her and suppressed by her parents and by circumstances, which roots her both to Britain and to Jamaica.

I am the granddaughter of Grace and William Campbell. I am the great-grandchild of Cecelia Hilton. I am descended from Katherine whose mother was a slave. I am a cousin of Afria. I am the niece of Coral Thompson and the daughter of Wade and Mildred Jackson. Let them say what they like. Because I am the bastard child of Empire and I will have my day”. (LEVY, 2004: 326-327).

This interesting statement made before her return to the former “seat of Empire” shows the creative potential of memory and folk history that constitute identity and secure mooring for the diasporic subject. Needless to say, negotiating space in a multicultural and heterogeneous country with superiority stances and racial undercurrent still at large is not an easy task. What Gilroy (1993: 35) has said on music may be applied to Black culture within a multiracial Britain. “The informal, long-term processes through which different groups have negotiated each other have intermittently created a ‘two-tone’ sensibility which celebrates its hybrid origins and has provided a significant opposition to ‘common-sense’ racialism”. Faith’s role is consequently an option between Mildred’s policy of colour-blindness (with Faith turning into another Constance/Afria) and Coral’s energizing translation of cultural differences in the milieu with an overcoming of anxieties and a restoration of identity and agency. “I was coming home. I was coming home to tell everyone ... My mum and dad came to England on a banana boat” (LEVY, 2004: 339). Hybridization and the coping with one’s identity is therefore the strengthening of existing identities by opening to new possibilities and the shunning of hybridization as a loss (LACLAU, 1996).

## 7 CONCLUSION

Even though one has to concede that Asian and Afro-Caribbean ethnicities are different, each with its own costumes, languages, collective memories, geographic origins, world vision and social organisations, and that negotiation and redefinitions of relationships are necessary in a diasporic environment, the cosmopolitan communities, Britain included, are still rife with racialized disadvantages. Levy’s novel underscores the obvious fact that England has not changed, or rather, the ideology of imperialism and colonialism, built on racial superiority, is still very much present not only in daily life but also in the context of institutions. Racialized individuals may have three options: (I) retirement into invisibility with the consequent loss of identity and culture,

as occurred to Constance in *Fruit of the Lemon*, and to Gabriel / Solomon in Phillips's *A Distant Shore*; (2) closing ranks with their kin and accept segregation, featuring scanty contacts with the white majority, as Lahiri's characters in *The Namesake*; (3) insistence on the heterogeneity of culture, proper to a multicultural society, with "the moment of difference [...] essential to defining democracy as a genuinely heterogeneous space" (HALL, 2001: 235). Levi's narrative seems to indicate that the latter option is Faith's solution. The multicoloured fireworks in the sky described in the epilogue intimate the utopia (which is synonymous to reachability and possibility) of a variegated British society. Further, Faith's statement on arrival that she will be telling everyone that her parents came to England on a banana boat and the revealingly "complete" genealogical tree bear the resources and the challenge that diasporic people have to negotiate a place in a still monolithic society which may only be achieved through memory, oral history, historical identity and openness.

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