



2018-06-01

# "Laughter Is Part of My War Effort": The Harmonizing and Humanizing Influences of Laughter in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

Jacob Holt Shumway  
*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Shumway, Jacob Holt, "'Laughter Is Part of My War Effort': The Harmonizing and Humanizing Influences of Laughter in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*" (2018). *All Theses and Dissertations*. 7435.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/7435>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

“Laughter Is Part of My War Effort”: The Harmonizing and Humanizing  
Influences of Laughter in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

Jacob Holt Shumway

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Aaron Christopher Eastley, Chair  
Peter Daniel Leman  
Brian R. Roberts

Department of English  
Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2018 Jacob Holt Shumway

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

“Laughter Is Part of My War Effort”: The Harmonizing and Humanizing Influences of Laughter in Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*

Jacob Holt Shumway  
Department of English, BYU  
Master of Arts

Most critical analyses of humor in postcolonial literary settings have focused on its power to critique and subvert dominant hegemonic systems in ways that tend to divide participants according to predictable dichotomies. Yet humor theorists have long recognized laughter’s equivalent potential as a bonding mechanism. An examination of the rhetorical functions of humor in Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* reveals the extent to which these affiliative forms of humor can be successfully deployed across cultural divides within a migrant context, as well as the risks and limitations inherent to such an approach. Ultimately, the novel’s gentle, inviting, and accessible humor provides the basis for a convincing, character-driven appeal to reduce racial prejudice.

Keywords: humor studies, Caribbean, migrant British literatures, Andrea Levy

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Dr. Eastley for his exceptionally good-humored assistance (pun intended) at every stage of the drafting process. I am also grateful for the invaluable insights offered by Dr. Roberts, who alerted me to certain subtleties of context and interpretation, and by Dr. Leman, who productively pushed me to clarify key ideas.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Cooperation and Consternation: The Rhetorics of Humor .....	3
Ingratiation and Identification: Gilbert as the Lovable Fool .....	6
No Laughing Matter: The Risks and Shortcomings of Affiliative Humor .....	13
Metatextual Implications for the Laughing Reader .....	18
Conclusion: Situating Levy's Humor .....	21
Works Cited .....	25

## Introduction

When asked about her sense of humor, Andrea Levy (a black British writer whose parents migrated from Jamaica to England on the *Empire Windrush* in 1948) is quick to acknowledge its dual roots: “I enjoy British humor. I have a sort of British and Caribbean humor, and so it's even drier [than regular British humor]” (“An Interview” 264). In fact, research has borne out her assertion that Caribbean humor is just as dry as stereotypically British humor: scholars have identified threads of irony and understatement going back through centuries of the Caribbean oral tradition. Historically, these often humorous modes seem to have served at least two purposes: first, they offered a method of resistance to undesirable power relations, as exemplified in the evolution of Calypso music (Stierstorfer 374). Second, they created a safe space for the oppressed to voice their critiques covertly. In postcolonial terms, “the blatant ridicule of White by Black society is hushed . . . and frustration is displayed more subtly than in open satire,” as Barbara Lalla observes of early Jamaican oral literature (417).

But this safety comes at a price, in that it limits the social repercussions of humor to a narrow community of individuals who typically share not only the cultural knowledge necessary to appreciate one another's wit but also a common outlook or worldview. Indeed, in her introduction to *Humour and Social Protest*, Marjolein 't Hart identifies “the condition of a pre-existing collective identity, or a strict setting of the jokes” as “the one condition [that] must be met before humor can be utilized in social protest” (17). It comes as little surprise, therefore, that critics like Sam Vasquez would deliberately approach Caribbean humor as a “subversive device that creates a space for questions about hegemonic relationships” (2). In her conclusion, however, Vasquez is forced to acknowledge, like Hart, that “the form has real limitations” that often trap it within “binary and dualistic relationships,” particularly when it comes to irony and

satire (154). While such humor does serve to unite oppressed individuals within discrete discourse communities, it remains unlikely to prove accessible or convincing to those in positions of power.

Less well understood is the potential for humor to effectively cross cultural boundaries, although this, too, has been postulated by some scholars: in their introduction to *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein remind us that, however well humor is suited to subversion, “laughter is not always used as a weapon; it can perform a conciliatory function, constitute an intellectual stimulus, express linguistic finesse, or imply a slightly nostalgic notion. . . . But it will always raise the complex question ‘Who laughs at whom?’” (12). In his contribution to that same volume, Ulrike Erichsen likewise theorizes that humor can “defuse cultural conflict” by drawing attention to cultural differences in a non-confrontational way, by marrying critical observations to the relief that humor provides, and by requiring listeners to engage with multiple perspectives (27-39). Still, while Erichsen amply demonstrates humor’s capacity to lessen the sting of otherwise harsh ideas, he stops short of fully exploring its potential to go beyond pacifying to actually bridge lingering postcolonial divides, such as those between erstwhile imperialists and their formerly colonized subjects.

Published in 2004, *Small Island*, Andrea Levy’s fourth and, to date, most popular novel, constitutes a compelling case in point. Comprised of four interspersed, nonlinear accounts, the novel traces the events leading up to and immediately following a Jamaican couple’s migration to England just after World War II, including their mixed reception by a native English couple. While the narration of *Small Island* is marked by a lively sense of humor, the text also explicitly examines humor as a rhetorical strategy, with Gilbert, a Jamaican man turned Royal Air Force airman, attempting to ingratiate himself to Queenie, a native Briton, with his quick wit. Early on,

Gilbert tells Queenie that “laughter is part of [his] war effort” (142). Lest Queenie somehow assume that he is simply referring to the war between the Axis and the Allies, Gilbert soon clarifies that he considers himself (along with all the other “colored servicemen”) to be fighting for the “defeat of hatred” on “another front” (147). Thus, Gilbert’s use of humor and, by extension, the humor that permeates the novel, take on a clear purpose: the reduction of racial and cultural prejudice. This essay, then, will examine these rhetorical functions of humor in *Small Island*, first between Gilbert and Queenie, and then between text and reader, showing how, in both cases, even the most seemingly superfluous jokes actually contribute to Levy’s dismantling of prejudicial attitudes, in that they invite an overwhelming and almost involuntary affection for the racial Other who proffers the joke. In conjunction with that analysis, I consider the risks inherent to such a method of pursuing transcultural appreciation, including the possibility of betrayal to existing communities as well as the potential frailty of relationships whose primary basis lies in mere entertainment. My aim is not to privilege this latter approach over harsher and more direct forms of laughter and resistance but rather to illustrate its complementary merits.

#### Cooperation and Consternation: The Rhetorics of Humor

Levy is a vocal proponent of humor’s potential to counteract harmful and simplistic views. Her comments on the role of humor in her work indicate that it is part of a broader effort to provide readers with deeply relatable characters:

Humour, as far as I’m concerned, is part of the human condition . . . [W]ith *The Long Song* — a book on slavery — you would think you wouldn’t have any room for anything that would make you smile. But . . . in all the research that I was

doing, all the time these things came up that made me laugh: the way the people were actually dealing with the situation they were in. . . . And then you start to acknowledge the real *humanity* in people. People then stop becoming just the victim of a tragedy. They become real people . . . like you and me. And that's what I always try to do — so that anybody . . . who's reading my book would have . . . complete empathy, because you understand this person, the way they think — and you can't do that if they never give you something to smile about. (“Andrea Levy in Conversation” 137)

Levy's dedication to levity arguably plays a similarly pivotal role in *Small Island*, with Levy taking pains to remind the creators of the televised BBC adaptation that the story is, in fact, a comedy of sorts (Barranger). At first glance, however, it might seem that the novel, with its wry observations on the injustices of life in England for immigrants, engages in the more divisive, edgy, or exclusionary modes of humor more typical of literature dealing with race relations. As Joan Miller Powell observes in her review, Levy's attention to the “nuances of Jamaican humour heightens the hilarious realism of the book, especially for Jamaican readers who will, no doubt, get a wicked pleasure from *Small Island*,” suggesting that cultural insiders might appreciate some jokes more readily than, and at the expense of, outsiders (203). Additionally, the relationship between Gilbert and Hortense, his Jamaican bride who marries him chiefly to secure passage to England, is marked by a kind of commiserating humor that effectively dulls the pain they feel at adjusting to life in an unfamiliar, often unwelcoming, nation—something they accomplish by turning the tables to critique the once-idealized “Mother Country”: “You should tell them that you are used to clean cupboards where you come from,” Gilbert tells Hortense as she recovers from a disastrous job interview that had concluded with her

walking inadvertently into a closet (382). These modes would seem to situate Levy's humor within a broader trend identified by Mike Chasar, who details the interwar development, catalyzed by the Harlem Renaissance, of a "black laughter" that "challenged the acoustics of white power and served as a weapon in the struggle for political and social justice," eventually connecting "Europe, Africa, and the United States in a sort of Black Atlantic of laughter" (58-60).

But for all the novel's slight subversions, it manifests an even more pronounced pattern of mild, broadly accessible humor that seems to transcend political dichotomies. As David James put it, the novel's humor not only serves to "create sites of resistance and moments of reprieve," as noted above, but also "moves towards articulating an ethics of empathy" (4). The broad contours of humor theory indicate that such an approach should be possible: according to John C. Meyer's widely cited taxonomy, humor can have any of a number of rhetorical effects, ranging from fostering a sense identification between speaker and audience to harshly correcting and even differentiating a speaker from his or her audience (318-22). Meanwhile, social scientists have found certain "affiliative" styles of humor to be more socially attractive than other "aggressive" styles (Cann and Matson 180). Furthermore, these different styles of humor have been shown to take on added significance in intercultural settings, with individuals who practice affiliative humor reporting less anxiety about communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, even as individuals prone to aggressive humor are more likely to subscribe to ethnocentric views (Miczo and Welter 71). In contrast with the humor of overt social protest, which relies on a fixed, often preexisting identity, these affiliative styles engage in the preliminary process of constructing a shared identity. Thus, while most critical analyses of humor in postcolonial and Caribbean literature have highlighted its significant capacity to

critique or invert social norms, or else to unify within a relatively closed group, the possibility for its more cooperative functions to be employed in the fraught spaces of postcolonial encounter remains an intriguing possibility.

#### Ingratiation and Identification: Gilbert as the Lovable Fool

Although Queenie and Gilbert come from different backgrounds in terms of race, class, gender, and culture, they manage to form an amiable attachment that ultimately magnifies Queenie's desire to act as an advocate for immigrants and other oppressed parties. Queenie's initial decision to welcome Gilbert into her home, however, has nothing to do with sociopolitical logic and everything to do with her enjoyment of his quick wit. When Gilbert, then stationed in England as a "driver-cum-coal-shifter" for the RAF, first shows up at her door, he does so merely to return her mute, shell-shocked father-in-law (who had unaccountably been following Gilbert) to her care (124). Immediately attracted to Queenie (Gilbert prides himself on his ability to "tak[e] in the whole spectacle of a woman without her knowing"), Gilbert sets out to make her laugh, hoping to gain entrance to her home (141). Queenie, on the other hand, shows no interest in making merry. Rather, she opens the discussion with what seems to be a humorless question: "Where d'you find him?", referring to her father-in-law; Gilbert notes that there is "no politeness, no pleasantry" (141). His first attempt to lighten the mood, however, falls woefully short, with Queenie apparently not seeing anything risible in Gilbert's quip that Arthur, her father-in-law, might have confused him with Paul Robeson, a celebrated American entertainer and civil rights activist. In fact, Arthur had actually mistaken him for Michael, another black soldier from Jamaica with whom Queenie had previously had an affair. Queenie, realizing this, is clearly embarrassed, even blushing and failing to answer when, a moment later, Gilbert asks

whom Arthur had taken him to be. Queenie's embarrassment, mixed with whatever other emotions she has at the thought of Michael, preclude her enjoyment of this first joke, demonstrating the delicate and, for Gilbert, imperceptible considerations that can interfere with his comic efforts.

Undeterred, Gilbert proceeds to crack a second joke, this time in response to Queenie's comment that Arthur "wouldn't know Paul Robeson if he fell on him" (142). Seeing his chance, Gilbert quickly responds to the effect that, had Paul Robeson fallen on Arthur, Queenie wouldn't have needed to come to the door—Gilbert "would have just posted the gentleman underneath" (142). Gilbert, who thinks that this is "a very good joke," given the relative statures of Paul Robeson and the diminutive Arthur, is perplexed to note that, once again, Queenie "appeared not to see the amusing side" (142). Here, Gilbert unknowingly touches on Queenie's complex relationship with Arthur, whom she is compelled to care for in the absence of her husband, Bernard, who was then posted in India. Indeed, Queenie's anxiety for Arthur turns out to be a recurring sore point, and one of Gilbert's later jokes that involves losing track of Arthur inevitably falls flat: "I had gone too far. Man, I was losing me touch," Gilbert mentally chides himself afterwards (145). As a calculating entertainer, he seems well aware that the subject matter of his jokes is just as important as their intrinsic cleverness; where he occasionally falls short is in anticipating which subjects are likely to leave Queenie crestfallen rather than charmed.

Gilbert's third and fourth attempts to elicit laughter from Queenie fail for similar reasons to those noted above, but he does eventually manage to gain some traction with a joke that steers entirely clear of touchy terrain. Specifically, he tells Queenie that she should consider herself lucky for receiving Arthur as a "wedding present" (her words) since Jamaican brides, by contrast, are more likely to inherit a "toothless rancorous old mother-in-law" (143). By finally

presenting a joke that is devoid of weighty emotional ramifications, at least to Queenie, in that it makes light of Gilbert's own Jamaican culture, he coaxes from her what he describes as a "honking laugh, the noise of which could make a pig sit up and look for its mummy" (143). So impressed is he at her laugh that he almost runs away, before confessing his admiration: "That's some laugh you have there," he gushes, suggesting that, as a self-aware comedian, Gilbert is highly attuned to the feedback he receives from his audience (143). Moments later, Queenie playfully reciprocates with some tongue-in-cheek commentary of her own when Gilbert inquires whether her husband would mind his entering their home: "Now you mention it, hang on a minute. I'll just go and write to him. He's in India. Should get a reply within the year. D'you mind waiting?" (143). In this manner, Queenie and Gilbert establish a first, tenuous connection predicated on the delight they experience in sharing a good laugh.

Indeed, that first conversation serves as a model for many of the jests that Queenie and Gilbert go on to exchange. Just as Gilbert belittles Jamaican mothers-in-law, he and Queenie make light of myriad cultural differences and oddities, both British and Jamaican, that naturally arise in the course of their interactions. For instance, Queenie "gigg[les] into her hand" as she observes Gilbert's debate with a waitress about what it means to say that something is "off" the menu, with Gilbert insisting that such food has gone bad, while the waitress had only intended to intimate that the supply had run out (148). Lurking in the subtext of this conversation, however, is the ugly implication that the waitress is only denying food to Gilbert because he is black; after insisting that neither "teacake," nor "toast," nor "muffin" is available, she manages to produce a single rock bun for Queenie (148). Unfazed, Gilbert capitalizes on his apparent misunderstanding with the waitress to carry on a charade, putting on airs as of a gentleman taking a "lady" out to tea (148). Upon further examination of the bun's peculiar features, Gilbert then asks Queenie

whether the rock bun is considered an “English delicacy,” much to the amusement of Queenie, who responds that she’s “daft enough” to eat it, just as she had when Gilbert had asked her the same question regarding pork pie during their first afternoon together (146-9). Their gentle mockery also extends from the culinary to the linguistic: when Gilbert asks Queenie if she would like anything to eat alongside her tea, she responds in typical British fashion: “I don’t mind if I do” (147). “Now that is one long tortuous way of saying yes,” Gilbert muses in response, before inquiring whether the British speak that way “to confuse we Jamaicans?” (147). Instead of allowing such differences to produce frustration or prejudice, however, Gilbert’s humor effectively turns them into instances of joyful recognition—recognition of a mutual otherness that, quirky or unusual as it may seem, is also worthwhile and essentially human.

Because his spoken jokes tend to present cultural differences as mere curiosities or trivialities, they remain accessible both to Queenie and to readers generally. This demonstrates Levy’s keen grasp of the key difference between divisive and unifying uses of humor, as explained by Meyer:

. . . [F]or a situation to be perceived as humorous by a perceiver, one must simultaneously have in mind two views of the situation: one in which there is a violation of some moral or natural order, and one in which all appears normal. For divisive humor, the different situation, or the violation, is the focus of the communication. With unifying humor, the normal situation is emphasized or dominant in the message. . . . Differentiation and enforcement humor show the violation, though laughable, to be an unacceptable violation that needs to be focused on, corrected, or avoided in the future. Identification and clarification humor, on the other hand, show the violation as a humorous exception to the

normal, reassuring, relaxing state that is expected and that, it is implied, will soon return undisturbed. (325)

While Meyer seems to imply that any violation or incongruity can be treated either harshly or softly, Gilbert's actions reveal subject matter—the choice of which violations to package as jokes in the first place—to be just as important as tone. His attention to Queenie's sensitivities enables the two of them to form a strong friendship that persists through Gilbert's term in the RAF until he eventually returns to England after the war and, having been turned away elsewhere, seeks help from Queenie, who offers him a place to stay (Hortense was to stay in Jamaica until Gilbert had established himself in England). What remains to be seen, however, is the extent to which Queenie's views and behaviors productively evolve as a result of her interactions with Gilbert.

A survey of Queenie's backstory provides useful context to her later development. As the daughter of a successful butcher and his homemaking wife, Queenie is endowed with a strong sense of hierarchy: her father hopes for a son instead of a daughter (197), while her mother hires a series of impoverished young ladies to care for Queenie but never bothers to learn their names, telling Queenie that “they're only miners' daughters”—a sentiment that Queenie soon adopts, characterizing herself as being “a cut above the miners' children” in school (199-200). As she approaches a marriageable age, she expresses her ambition to be courted by a hypothetical young man wearing a “collar and tie, with a freshly scrubbed neck and a wage packet about him,” a dream that is essentially realized, if somewhat ironically, in Bernard (203). Unsurprisingly, her family's sense of superiority extends to race: the novel opens with a depiction of Queenie's childhood experience at the British Empire Exhibition, where her preconception of African incivility is challenged by an encounter with a perfectly eloquent and courteous African man, a

clear foreshadowing of her later interactions with Gilbert. Although the implications of this experience are later contained by her father's assurance that the man must have been a "potentate" who had been "taught English by the missionaries" and was therefore an exception to the rule (6), Queenie's experiences continue to reveal and refine her sympathies, with Levy notably recounting the events surrounding Queenie's decision to (temporarily) become a vegetarian after viewing the contents of her father's slaughterhouse (205), along with her decision to volunteer at a rest center for those whose homes were destroyed during the bombing of London (231), an act that echoes her mother's earlier efforts to provide soup for the unemployed (203).

Still, Queenie's cosmopolitan inclinations are matched by a susceptibility to adverse social pressure. This ambivalence, including the pitting of her friendship with Gilbert against the warnings of her xenophobic neighbors, comes to a head when she makes the difficult decision to accept additional West Indian lodgers:

I was a little put out when some of Gilbert's friends, fresh off a boat, came begging. I didn't want invading. But he vouched for them. Winston was all right but that brother of his . . . Coming down to my flat with excuses so flimsy I could see daydreams in them. Nosing around. Eyeing up my legs even when I was looking straight at him. Animal, like Morris warned. (97-8)

Here, Queenie shows herself capable of falling back on stereotypes as explanatory measures when confronted with undesirable behaviors. Combating her misgivings, however, is her confidence in Gilbert, who vouches for the others. Gilbert, then, appeals to Queenie, not on the basis of political logic or an evocative depiction of victimhood, but rather as a trustworthy,

likeable person—living proof that the stereotypes in which she has been steeped all her life, while not always completely false, are certainly not always true.

That Queenie's more liberal inclinations do begin to flourish as a result of her association with Gilbert is manifest in her verbal sparring with those who espouse prejudicial views. Forced to justify herself against objections to her ever-expanding motley crew of tenants, Queenie rebuffs the complaints of her concerned neighbor, Mr. Todd, with equal wit and pleasure. She recalls her response to Todd's inquiries about her lodger Jean, whom he suspects of prostitution, with apparent glee: "I told him she was a nurse—you know, on night duty. Choked on his cup of tea before enquiring if I was very sure of that" (94). Queenie takes a kind of perverse pleasure in standing up for her downtrodden tenants, even going so far as to cite her knowledge that Bernard, her then-absent husband, "would never have let" her take them in as one of her reasons for doing so (97). Nor is her outspokenness limited to the relatively insular sphere of her neighborhood: when she goes to the cinema with Gilbert, she adamantly supports his bid to sit with her rather than with the "coloured men" in the back, telling an objecting American GI to "put a sock in it," and that she "prefer[s] them to [him] any day," suggesting that her affection for Gilbert has, in fact, begun to shape her views on race generally (154). Thus, although Gilbert rarely, if ever, explicitly broaches such topics as race, privilege, and rights with Queenie, his friendship with her does seem to subtly inform her willingness to resist. Laughter essentially serves as a shortcut to such an affable outcome. It augments and eases the so-called "muscular multiculturalism" envisioned by Johansen's reading of the text, in which "difficult, corporeal interactions" allow "inhabitants of a shared space [to] learn to live together" (383). The ability to laugh together expedites that process, helping characters to find pleasure, rather than cause for alarm, in difference.

## No Laughing Matter: The Risks and Shortcomings of Affiliative Humor

Despite Queenie's marginal progress in that important respect, however, Gilbert's low-key campaign for the "defeat of hatred" is not an unqualified success (147). His and Queenie's high point—both in terms of cooperative resistance and strength of friendship—comes early on, leaving their relationship to erode under outside pressure until, in the end, they go their separate ways, with Queenie being subsumed into the traditional value system of Bernard, who has finally returned home. In addition to the pressures exerted on Queenie by Bernard and her neighbors are the pressures exerted on Gilbert by Hortense and his fellow Jamaicans, some of whom do not hit it off with Queenie the same way that Gilbert does. Taken together, these conflicts and outcomes at once underscore the risks and limitations of a humor-centered approach to bridging cultures and suggest some possible complementary strategies.

If Queenie's earlier efforts to induct Gilbert into her social circles—including the neighborhood where she lives and the places where she eats and seeks entertainment—are met with some resistance from her native English peers, Gilbert's attempt to introduce Queenie to his Jamaican friends produces similar strain. The difference, however, lies in the outcomes of these two intercultural transactions: in the former, Queenie rises to the occasion by speaking out on Gilbert's behalf; in the latter, she becomes impatient with what she perceives as shared, culturally inflected flaws among her new West Indian lodgers, Kenneth and Winston. Indeed, their arrival marks a significant shift in the relationship between Gilbert and Queenie, according to Gilbert, who, having just described how fortunate he once felt to be able to help "that pretty blonde woman . . . laughing like a girl as we moved furniture around the house," goes on to document a growing list of grievances (184):

Meeting up with Queenie Bligh was the best luck this Jamaican man had ever had.

Then Winston and Kenneth moved in. The rent Queenie charged us made me clean my ear to ask again. . . . Winston and even Kenneth gaped dumbfounded as she assured us she had no choice but to charge that sort of money. Then with the first week's rent . . . she told me someone kept the door open too long. The next day she wanted me to know someone shut the door too loud. Something smelling up a room. Someone making too much noise. I must tell the boys to not leave on the light. Have I told the boys to keep their room clean? (184)

Queenie explains to Gilbert that she expects him to help her “keep them all under control” (184). He becomes, in a sense, her intermediary for communicating with the other, infantilized West Indians, mere “boys” who require prodding to keep their rooms clean (184). As a result, Gilbert's loyalties are torn between his fondness for Queenie and his sympathy for his fellow lodgers. Kenneth fans the flames by implicitly accusing Gilbert of betraying their trust: “Cha, me thought you say she your friend. So why the woman act like bakkra?” he asks, comparing Queenie to a slave master (184). It seems that, no matter how well Gilbert manages to present himself to Queenie as a likeable person, the inconveniences of her later encounters with Jamaicans threaten to undercut any changes in perspective gained through her association with Gilbert. As a means of enjoying difference, therefore, humor is limited to domains in which those differences do not harm or annoy, unlike the differences of outlook that lead Kenneth and Winston to adopt a lower standard of housekeeping than Queenie would prefer.

Gilbert, like Queenie, must confront uncomfortable differences and positional power relationships that cannot simply be laughed away. Throughout most of the novel, he develops his

verbal expressions of humor with great care and gentility, effectively filtering out thoughts that are most likely to offend, as demonstrated by the contrast between his typically kind speech and his more critical narration. “Politeness has always been my policy,” he explains as his general philosophy for responding to others’ poor behavior—yet some of his thoughts are hardly polite (138). For instance, after extensive reflection on the one-sided relationship between Jamaica and England, Gilbert encounters two British soldiers who, having never heard of Jamaica, embody the very ignorance he so detests, but he responds to their confusion with a calmness he does not truly feel, leading him, as a narrator, to question his own actions: “I did not yell or cry out in pain, although I should have” (129). Later, as he and Queenie attend a showing of *Gone with the Wind*, he fails to voice his thoughts about “foolish young English girls,” including Queenie, who idolize Clark Gable’s character and similar American soldiers—soldiers who, in Gilbert’s opinion, have “cattle” for their “mental equal” (151). Gilbert’s tact, then, enables him to preserve relationships, but only at the price of dulling his cultural critiques.

All that changes when Bernard, whose harsh and rigid views forestall any thought of humor, returns home from India to discover Queenie in a house full of black tenants whom he refers to as “coolies” in a revealing Freudian slip (360). As tensions mount, he moves to evict Kenneth from the room where he has been staying. In the face of this injustice, Kenneth attempts to joke around with Bernard, but his humor quickly morphs into a biting variety. Following Bernard’s first demand that he leave the house, Kenneth cheekily asks, “Why? . . . The house on fire?” (367). Bernard, in direct contrast with Queenie, then tells Kenneth “not to be funny with him” (367). This, of course, only further incites Kenneth, who shuts the door in Bernard’s face. As Bernard continues to knock and shout ever more loudly, Kenneth opens the door to deliver a most blistering joke, if it can be considered a joke at all, which he recounts to Gilbert and

Hortense as follows: “So I open the door and tell him he must go somewhere else to fornicate. Although, Gilbert, because there is a lady present I am not using the actual word I say” (367). Gilbert is thus apprised that any attempts at humor are unlikely to have the desired effect on Bernard.

In fact, a series of rising stakes and perceived offenses leads both Queenie and Gilbert to adopt more serious and straightforward methods of communication and persuasion. When Bernard turns his attention to removing Hortense and Gilbert from the premises, a shouting match quickly escalates. In a perfect storm, meanwhile, Queenie, who has managed to keep her pregnancy secret, gives birth to a child whose complexion causes Bernard’s suspicions to fall on Gilbert, though the child is, in fact, Michael’s. More fighting ensues, with Hortense also assuming the child to be Gilbert’s. As the dust settles, Gilbert and Hortense make plans to take up residence elsewhere—but just as they are preparing to leave, Queenie catches up to them on the steps. As they direct their attention to Queenie, their “giggling,” signifying their connectedness with one another, necessarily fades (425). “My presence did that to them now. There was a time when Gilbert would smile on seeing my face,” Queenie reflects, “But not any more. Our eyes had not spoken since I don’t know when” (425). Moments later, during an awkward silence, she again looks back with regret on the laughter she had once shared with Gilbert: “. . . it was too late. Gilbert and I used to laugh together, what changed all that?” (426). Though she neglects to answer that question, it is clear that recent, weighty events now cast a shadow over their relationship.

In the absence of laughter, then, Queenie switches to a more fundamental, even instinctive, means of persuasion in making the surprising case that Gilbert and Queenie ought to look after her child. Specifically, before making the request, she abruptly places Michael, her

newborn child, into Hortense's arms, knowing that, with his "adorable heart-shaped face, glinting eyes and perfect bow mouth," he could "soften" anyone (427). Even Bernard, who has every reason to despise the child, had been moved to confess, with apparent surprise, that "he was a dear little thing" (423). Queenie's appeal, then, centers on the needs and opportunities of an innocent infant, emblematic of a generation that knows nothing of its complicated history. Evidently, she retains enough admiration for Gilbert from happier, bygone days to entrust her child to him and Hortense, and she tells them as much: "Hortense, please, I trust you and Gilbert. I know you. You're good people" (430).

Even as she demonstrates her ongoing respect for Gilbert, however, she gives in to a contradictory impulse to abandon her own child on the basis of skin color, in recognition of the inevitable, and perhaps insurmountable, barriers that Bernard's prejudice and other societal pressures would pose to their parenting efforts. Accordingly, she resorts to discoursing in terms reminiscent of Bernard's philosophy, as encapsulated in his own motto from a few chapters before: "The recipe for a quiet life is to each their own" (388). "I just want him to be with people who'll understand," she pleads to Gilbert. "Can't you see? His own kind" (432). Yet, from Queenie's perspective, the argument she makes is, in fact, selflessly pragmatic rather than philosophical. After surveying the hypothetical difficulties of her raising a black child with Bernard, including the certainty that Bernard would come to think of him as a "little black bastard" following even the slightest disobedience, Queenie concludes that she doesn't have "the guts" or "the spine" for it (432). In her view, Gilbert and Hortense can give her child "a better life than [she] ever could" (432). Thus, in the end, if the connection that Gilbert and Queenie cultivate through their humor does provide a way for her to see past stereotypes to some extent, it

falls short of providing any easy answers when it comes to confronting prejudices as they are entrenched in society.

Gilbert, too, temporarily abandons his happy-go-lucky style of communication in an attempt to shake Bernard from his severely limited worldview. After Bernard voices his opinion that Michael, whom he characterizes as a “poor little half-caste child,” would be “better off begging in a gutter” than being raised by parents such as them, Gilbert gives a passionate, serious speech expounding the irrelevance of skin color as well as the irony of his having fought a war side by side with Bernard, so to speak, only to be denied equality afterwards (434). At first, Bernard seems impressed, as his mouth gapes open, but the facade quickly falls away: “I’m sorry . . . but I just can’t understand a single word you’re saying” (435). Here, Bernard’s inability to understand Gilbert through his accent mirrors his incomprehension of the concepts Gilbert has just unfolded. No approach on Gilbert’s part, whether direct or indirect, somber or silly, can facilitate the connection or impart the insight that would be necessary for Bernard to reappraise his world view.

#### Metatextual Implications for the Laughing Reader

The potential virtues and failings of humor as a rhetorical strategy are also apparent in the implied relationship between text and reader that *Small Island* assumes. Significantly, the novel’s humor is not limited to jokes that are exchanged between characters. In addition to those jokes, there is a steady stream of sparkling wit woven into the narrative itself, particularly in the sections voiced by Gilbert and Queenie; a few passages are also likely to amuse readers despite (or perhaps because of) their not being funny to the characters themselves, such as the first encounter between Gilbert and Hortense upon her arrival in England, which is a masterful battle-

of-the-sexes slapstick comedy, with Gilbert spilling the contents of his chamber pot in his haste to appease Hortense as she inspects his quarters with a white-gloved hand (26). Here and elsewhere, the question of “who laughs at whom?” raised by Reichl and Stein gains significance as Levy variously guides readers to laugh with or at certain characters and situations, effectively establishing humor as a recurrent means of relating to and interpreting the text.

Conversely, the absences and failures of humor take on particular significance; Bernard’s passages are particularly lifeless. As a character, Bernard typically finds little reason to laugh, even among those whom he would count as equals: at one point during his stay in India, one of his fellow soldiers shares a joke but fails to elicit anything more than a simple, “I see,” followed by “A joke, yes, I see,” from Bernard (295). On another occasion, that same soldier sings a song that “got everyone laughing” (299). Bernard’s immediate reaction, however, is to wonder if Maxi, the singer, was taking the matter at hand (the dubious prospect of starting a rabbit farm upon returning to England) quite “seriously enough” (299). On those rare occasions when Bernard does exhibit genuine amusement, it typically stems from and feeds on his prejudices: “Made me smile to think of that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country,” he muses during his time in Calcutta (308).

Hortense, for her part, shows similar unwillingness to laugh in the sections she narrates, though some of her passages may appear mildly amusing for the contrast between her high cultural aspirations and her unwitting failure to meet the linguistic standards of the culture she idolizes, all of which is complicated by her realization that many of the British do not speak so-called proper English, as Cynthia James observes:

The parody of Hortense lies in the laughable way in which her secure notions of cultured language are undermined. It lies in her pride that she can speak English

with the best, and ‘better’ English than most English persons. . . . West Indians coming in the Windrush era are shocked to find that among the white people that they so adulated, there are high and low speakers and people who do high and low jobs (53-4).

Thus, although the tangled ironies of this situation might not produce any visceral chuckles, they do approximate another of Reichl and Stein’s functions of laughter as a “intellectual stimulus” to the extent that they reveal and question the significance of language as a perceived marker of cultural superiority.

In terms of pure enjoyment, however, readers are likely to breathe a sigh of relief at each transition from Bernard and Hortense’s narratives to those of Gilbert and Queenie, whose sections often come across as effortlessly and elementally humorous, as when Gilbert reacts to Queenie’s unexpectedly giving birth: “I knew [she] had put on a bit of weight but what an astonishment to find it was the type you could dress in a bonnet” (402). What reviewer Laura Albritton calls Queenie’s “earthy humor” is perhaps less witty than Gilbert’s but no less engaging (236), as when she describes Bernard’s embarrassment upon first speaking with her as though she had just “bellowed at him from the stars” (208); kissing Bernard, meanwhile, is repeatedly compared to “kissing a chicken’s beak” (211). The general effect of humor in both Queenie and Gilbert’s narratives, then, is to enrich readers’ perceptions of them as characters, implicitly validating their attitudes and behaviors; not to say that either character is without flaws, but, when compared with Bernard and Hortense, their respective partners, they do seem to enjoy an added measure of grace and dignity. Much as Queenie is drawn in by Gilbert’s humor, readers are wooed by characters such as these.

By centering her rhetorical appeals on the characters involved, rather than on discrete points of political philosophy or on vivid emotional scenes, Levy extends to readers the implicit choice of joining either Queenie and Gilbert's in-crowd, where jokes are manufactured and enjoyed, or Bernard and Hortense's out-crowd of self-imposed misery, where reside those whose sense of self-importance makes them the unintended punchlines of their own life experiences. Membership in these liminal groups is not determined by any traditional marker of identity; rather, it is a result of willingness to laugh, to adapt, to listen, to understand, to befriend, and to investigate the other without fear or prejudice.

The dissolution of Queenie and Gilbert's in-crowd at the end of the novel may, in my opinion, be taken more as an acknowledgement of hard times to come than of the absolute futility of such groups. Additionally, the inclusion at the end of Gilbert and Queenie's more somber, direct final appeals highlights the ways in which both strategies can combine to good effect; the contrast between the two makes each seem fresher by juxtaposition, and those who remain oblivious to one may be touched by the other.

#### Conclusion: Situating Levy's Humor

Levy's ability to delicately balance gentle humor with more weighty appeals sets her apart from many of her predecessors and peers, whose takes on the migrant experience often fall into more predictable dichotomies. V. S. Naipaul, for instance, arguably sought to distance himself from his fellow Trinidadians and elevate himself in the eyes of a British audience by mocking his native speech patterns, effectively "marginalizing Trinidadians through a marginalization of one of their most distinctive characteristics: their language," as Aaron Eastley puts it (42). Sam Selvon, too, seems to inflate stereotypes with his depictions of culturally

inflected “eccentricities” in such novels as *The Lonely Londoners*, although some have read a degree of redemption into his depictions:

The laughter that erupts out of Tanty Bessy’s lively otherness is, in turn, directed away from its initial source and out toward Harris and his endeavours to efface any perceived markers of ethnic and cultural differences that would prevent him from fitting into British society. . . . Bergson’s notion of the corrective function of laughter is thus . . . deflected in Selvon’s novel onto those who fail to recognize that conforming to the hegemonic norms and expectations in the centre is, at times, synonymous with perpetuating the stereotypical images born out of the context of slavery in the Caribbean. (Okawa 16)

Even if we accept Okawa’s somewhat ennobling reading of the stereotypical behaviors depicted in *The Lonely Londoners* (and it is hard to deny the possibility of Orientalist readings, particularly among casual readers), the novel’s laughter still generates a dichotomy in which some characters mean spiritedly laugh at others’ mischief and misfortune. This marks another point of departure for Levy, who acknowledges the possibility of rogue and scoundrel immigrants but gives them very little screen time. Significantly, she casts Kenneth, who seems to be a swindler and an opportunist, as a twin brother to Winston, the more trustworthy and productive of the two, suggesting that, while some immigrants may indeed lack scruples, it is impossible to tell the difference between those that do and those that do not, at least outwardly, and the mere possibility of disappointment should not keep us from giving each person a reasonable chance at success. Her point is particularly potent with regard to soldiers, like Gilbert, who had put their lives on the line to support England’s geopolitical efforts only to be denied basic rights in the aftermath of the war. By contrast, Selvon’s work resonates more closely with

the following lines from a short poem about Jamaican immigrants published in the satirical *Punch* magazine in 1954, just six years after the *Empire Windrush* had deposited a first wave of West Indian immigrants in London:

Come over yah, man, come on over!

Come a London an' live in clover.

.....

Make no difference if you white or black,

You British subject, dey can't turn you back.

You British subject—dat claim can't fail,

Though one chance in ten you a-been in gaol.

All poor Jamaican got to emigrate

An' come over yah to de Welfare State.

.....

English people is lovin' an' givin'—

English people owes you a livin'.

This poem aptly suggests and, in some ways, embodies the plethora of pitfalls and dichotomies that can plague humorous communications across cultures, including conflicting interpretations and motivations regarding such fundamental issues as productivity, entitlement, and equality, not to mention the potential for offensive misrepresentation: however keen his ear for dialect may have been, this poem's author, Peter Suffolk, was not Jamaican. Like so much humor before and since, this poem proves divisive because it is so intimately concerned with the objectionable violation of England's code of conduct by outsiders (as well, in a passage not quoted here, with the violation of the Jamaican immigrants' high hopes by prejudiced Britons).

What Levy's humor affords her work, then, is the seeming ability to sidestep these pitfalls and to tackle difficult, even controversial issues, without raising any reasonable reader's hackles. Humor becomes her Trojan horse in the war against hatred. It is at once a barometer of virtue and a method for exploring, appreciating, and, occasionally, mocking difference. If, along the way, readers are swept up by the novel's charms, by the end, they, like Queenie, are faced with a difficult choice. Indeed, Queenie in this instance might represent an all too often silent majority who oppose discriminatory thinking but are cowed into submission by louder, angrier, more powerful persons or systems. For those, like Bernard, who are convinced that there is "nothing funny about a Jap," or any other kind of Other, laughter alone will not suffice to change views (362). But by drawing attention to the very insufficiency of laughter, Levy effectively articulates the urgency with which a variety of complementary measures must be adopted.

## Works Cited

- Barranger, Nicola. "Andrea Levy: Addressing the Question of Slavery." *newbooks*,  
[www.newbooksmag.com/left-menu/author-coverage/andrea-levy-the-big-interview.php](http://www.newbooksmag.com/left-menu/author-coverage/andrea-levy-the-big-interview.php).
- Cann, Arnie and Chelsea Matson. "Sense of Humor and Social Desirability: Understanding How Humor Styles Are Perceived." *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 66, Aug. 2014, pp. 176-80. *Science Direct*, doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.03.029.
- Chasar, Mike. "The Sounds of Black Laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes." *American Literature*, vol. 80, no. 1, Mar. 2008, pp. 57-81.
- Eastley, Aaron. "Joking with the Center: Naipaul's Ambiguous Treatment of Trinidadian English in *The Mystic Masseur*." *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, vol. 9, 1999, pp. 25-45.
- Erichsen, Ulrike. "Smiling in the Face of Adversity: How to Use Humour to Defuse Cultural Conflict." *Cheeky Fictions and the Postcolonial*, edited by Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, Rodopi, 2005, pp. 27-41.
- James, Cynthia. "'You'll Soon Get Used to Our Language': Language, Parody and West Indian Identity in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*." *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 45-64. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/23019917](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23019917).
- James, David. "The Immediacy of *Small Island*." *Andrea Levy: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Jeannette Baxter and David James, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, pp. 53-64.
- Lalla, Barbara. "Black Laughter: Foundations of Irony in the Earliest Jamaican Literature." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 414-425. *JSTOR*,  
[www.jstor.org/stable/2784519](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784519).

- Levy, Andrea. "An Interview with Andrea Levy." Interview by Charles Henry Rowell. *Callaloo*, vol. 38 no. 2, 2015, pp. 258-281. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/cal.2015.0044.
- . "Andrea Levy in Conversation with Susan Alice Fischer." *Andrea Levy: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Jeannette Baxter and David James, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, pp. 121-138.
- . *Small Island*. 2004. Picador, 2010.
- Meyer, John C. "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication." *Communication Theory*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2000, pp. 310-331. *Wiley Online Library*, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2000.tb00194.x
- Miczo, Nathan and Rebecca E. Welter. "Aggressive and Affiliative Humor: Relationships to Aspects of Intercultural Communication." *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, vol. 35, no. 1, Mar. 2006, pp. 61-77. *Taylor & Francis Online*, doi.org/10.1080/17475740600739305.
- Okawa, Rachele. "Humour in Exile: The Subversive Effects of Laughter in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and Gisèle Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2011, pp. 16-27. *Taylor & Francis Online*, doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2011.633012.
- Powell, Joan Miller. Review of *Small Island*, by Andrea Levy. *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol. 13, no. 1/2, 2005, pp. 201-204. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23019761.
- Reichl, Susanne and Mark Stein. Introduction. *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, by Reichl and Stein, Rodopi, 2005, pp. 1-23.
- Stierstorfer, Klaus. "Laughing Caribbean: Humour in Caribbean Literature and Culture." *Anglistik & Englischunterricht*, vol. 67, 2007, pp. 315-337.

Suffolk, Peter. "Poor Jamaican." *Punch*, 10 Nov. 1954, p. 603. *Punch Historical Archive*.

't Hart, Marjolein. "Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction." *International Review of Social History*, vol. 52, 2007, pp. 1-20. *ProQuest*, doi:10.1017/S0020859007003094.

Vazquez, Sam. *Humor in the Caribbean Literary Canon*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.