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Reading against the Grain: Teaching *The Long Song* Intertextually

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Abstract: This article reflects on the deliberately situated and continuously evolving decolonizing strategies I have used to teach Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* in the decade since its first publication in 2010. I suggest some of the ways in which teachers and educators can include both Levy's novel and the 2018 three-part BBC television adaptation in their teaching. Key to my pedagogical approach is enacting critical reflexivity and teaching students to read contrapuntally or "against the grain" using a Caribbean archive of historiographical intertexts to the novel, sources which Levy herself used while writing *The Long Song*. The article suggests teaching approaches that not only allow for an aesthetic appreciation of *The Long Song* as a literary text but also facilitate wider political discussions of race, difference, and "history" and a critically informed response to wider transnational contexts—such as Britain's often occluded colonial and black Atlantic history or Canada's reassessment of its history of "polite racism." On one level, Levy's final novel can be read as a compelling neo-slave narrative, a historiographic metafiction that playfully and self-consciously probes the nature of narrative and how H/history is constructed. However, it is also important to read the novel within a Caribbean and black Atlantic context, rather than simply as historical fiction or as an example of postmodern playfulness. I examine how looking at the novel's contexts and intertexts can shape an understanding of the novel as a response to a wider archive of white colonial writers as well as other important—though less privileged—sources, such as slave narratives. These, I argue, are key to a wider understanding of the novel and its focus on the nature of textuality, the different valencies of oral and written storytelling, and the crucial question of how history is written.

Keywords: decolonizing pedagogies, teaching critical self-reflexivity, slavery, resistance, historiography, metafiction

I. Prelude

Although Andrea Levy only started to write in her thirties, her books achieved that rare combination of critical acclaim and commercial success, most notably after her fourth novel, *Small Island* (2004), won a slew of literary prizes, including the Orange Prize for Fiction, the "Best of the Best" Orange Prize, the Whitbread Book of the Year, and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. The novel's continued success was boosted by the mass-reading initiative in Britain called *Small Island Read* (2007) and the book's adaptation into a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television program in 2009 (available worldwide through Box of Broadcasts and YouTube), a radio play, and an award-winning stage production at the National Theatre in London in 2019. In 2018 Levy's Man Booker-shortlisted novel, *The Long Song* (2010), was similarly adapted for BBC television by the same screenwriter, Sarah Williams, with Levy as special advisor. Her role in the latter brought to light the often-neglected multi-modal aspects of her work and was one of the last projects Levy worked on. The BBC adaptation of *The Long Song* is thus a kind of legacy in itself. Like its predecessor, *The Long Song* garnered praise from an unusually wide readership, one which crossed literary, popular, and academic lines. Two years after her death, Levy's legacy is still evident: not only do her novels and short stories appear in academic curricula across the globe but they also have a huge popular following. The testimonies of high profile figures such as black British journalist Gary Younge and actor (and *Long Song* cast member) Sir Lenny Henry, as well as the tributes of many ordinary readers, demonstrate how Levy's writing played an important role in helping them make sense of the complex, brutal, and often hidden nature of Britain's involvement in the slave trade and Caribbean slavery and connect this history to some lasting legacies in their own lives. Arguably, it is in her final novel that Levy harnesses the power of fiction "to go further" (Levy, "'I started'"), imaginatively excavating the impact of plantation slavery

on a range of characters and from different perspectives on the eve of the 1833 Emancipation Act. After writing the novel, in a twist stranger than fiction, Levy discovered that she, like her fictional character Miss July, was descended from a mixed-race liaison between a slave woman and a white overseer ("Andrea Levy: Her Island Story").

The Long Song is the natural heir to *Small Island*: it takes readers backwards to an earlier period but presents the same issues and concerns and creates a fictional genealogical link between Miss July (in *The Long Song*) and Queenie (in *Small Island*). As with all her writing, Levy scrupulously researched *The Long Song*. She visited the Caribbean and read contemporary eyewitness accounts and historical studies of slavery in the British Caribbean colonies from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some of these sources are cited as "further reading" at the end of some editions of the novel. This article will suggest how these key intertexts can be used in the classroom alongside other reading activities. That such "further reading" includes histories of both Britain and the Caribbean reminds us that, like *Small Island* before it, *The Long Song* is a thoroughly black Atlantic text that references a long history of Atlantic journeying and connections linking Europe, Africa, and the New World. Despite being set largely in Jamaica, *The Long Song* is also fundamentally a British story, as Levy insisted ("Andrea Levy: Under the Skin of History"). The novel is not just about Jamaica or "over there" but—in profound and often overlooked ways—about the United Kingdom or "here," too, and this can be a powerful starting point for contextualising *The Long Song* for students. Levy always made clear that the history of her Caribbean heritage is also a British story, not "just about race . . . [but] about people and history" ("Andrea Levy: Under the Skin of History").

When this special issue was first proposed in 2019, I planned to demonstrate how *The Long Song* and its BBC adaptation can be used, alongside other resources, to introduce university students to some key issues in relation to Britain's colonial past, its role in initiating and sustaining (not just abolishing) the slave trade and Caribbean slavery, and the visible and less visible legacies of these histories. In particular, I wanted to show how structured classroom discussions about the novel and its

adaptation could be used as an informed starting point for larger conversations that might connect students to current global debates about slavery and reparations to Britain's former slave-holding colonies, rising nationalisms in Europe, border conflicts and global migrations, and, in Britain specifically, Brexit and the British government's sustained mistreatment of longstanding Caribbean settlers in the UK, popularly known as the Windrush scandal. In such contexts, I planned to argue, reading and teaching Levy's nuanced and inclusive explorations of what it is to be both British and of Caribbean heritage were more important than ever.

Then everything changed. We experienced not only a global pandemic—which forced many of us to reassess our lives and ways of being in the world—but arguably something even more important. Just over two years after Levy's death, we are living through unprecedented times. In the wake of the killing of African-American George Floyd at the hands of a white policeman in Minneapolis in May 2020, anti-racism protests—many organized around the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement—have quickly spread around the globe. In the UK, challenges to systemic racism in many of our major institutions have been a long time coming (if they are coming at all). However, in our current moment, existing calls to decolonise university curricula and universities themselves (a different but overlapping task) are gaining new momentum. A visible dialogue with history is taking place in the form of questioning and dismantling colonial monumentality; a focus on statuary and buildings that commemorate known slave traders, white supremacists, and racists makes visible these debates.

Beyond this—and as part of the decolonising work everyone, not just educators and universities, has an ethical responsibility to engage with—are wider calls to radically rethink Britain's problematic relationship with its past and its deliberate silencing or obfuscating of certain historical narratives, what Michel-Rolph Trouillot usefully calls "strategies of erasure" (73–74). Strategies of erasure can be ideological, as in the implementation of a barely inclusive school curriculum, or physical, as in the deliberate destruction and/or revisionist overwriting of colonial records held by successive British governments in the mid-twentieth

century, such as the celebrated Kenyan Mau Mau case brought to the British High Court in 2009–18, or more latterly, the Windrush scandal. The received popular narrative of slavery—in the UK at least—is that Britain did a great thing in being the first in the world to abolish chattel slavery (see, for example, Tom Harwood's tweet from 2020 [@tomhfh]). Not only is this untrue, as slavery was overturned in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) in 1804 after an uprising led by the former slave Toussaint L'Ouverture, but it effectively erases Britain's major role in the Atlantic slave trade in the first place and the considerable resistance in Britain to abolishing the trade in slaves (1807) and then the institution of slavery (1833) (Paton). These are some timely examples of strategies of erasure. In such a moment of extraordinarily heightened awareness of the complex imbrications of race, history, and politics that we are living through, the teaching of Levy's texts seems more urgent than ever before.

II. Locating the Text

Firstly, how educators frame and locate any text in our teaching matters, and it is important to be mindful of this. It not only colours how students approach specific texts but also how they learn to privilege and value certain texts over others (canonicity). Indeed, the way any given text is placed, valued, and validated is a relatively invisible but powerful legitimizing strategy that educators enact. Although *The Long Song* is taught across a range of courses, there is significant value in teaching it as a specifically Caribbean text. For the past decade, *The Long Song* has formed an integral part of my final-year undergraduate course "Writing the Caribbean," which introduces students to different kinds of writing from and about the Caribbean, ranging from maps from different periods, tourist brochures, and other cultural constructions of the Caribbean (such as those found in music, film, and advertising) to nonfictional writing, slave owners' accounts, neo-slave narratives, spoken and written poetry, and different kinds of prose fiction. I first read *The Long Song* shortly after its publication, and it quickly became apparent that the novel was a good fit for the aims and scope of my module. Not only does the novel raise a range of issues regarding gender, genre, voice,

and metafictional strategies (as I discuss below), but it highlights the problems with relying on the mainly white historiography of slavery that dominates this early period (such as texts by A. C. Carmichael, Bryan Edwards, Matthew Lewis, Maria Nugent, and Anthony Trollope). The novel is informed by scholarly writing from Britain and the Caribbean on the history of slavery (by Peter Fryer, Catherine Hall, Gad Heuman, B. W. Higman, James Walvin, and others) and can be read as a powerful fictional response to the silencing of subaltern voices and diverse histories in a Caribbean and wider black Atlantic context.

In this article, I focus on how pairing the novel with a non-fictional source, Lewis' *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834), the written account of an English plantation owner who visited the two Jamaican sugar plantations he had inherited in the early nineteenth century, can be highly productive. This is also one of the sources the novel draws upon. Educators can direct students to the whole of the *Journal* (omitting the long poetry entries if desired) or instead to well-contextualised extracts from Lewis' text and ask them to think about how Levy's novel imaginatively recreates a similar world on the fictional Jamaican plantation of Amity while addressing some of the gaps, omissions, and silences of Lewis' account. Getting students to read texts by Lewis and Levy (in that order) can have a transformative effect on their understanding of both texts and enables them to make meaningful connections across different genres of writing as well as gain valuable skills in questioning white accounts of the Caribbean and in reading against the grain. As Levy draws attention to the process of "piec[ing] together largely unrecorded domestic history" (*The Long Song* 319) while researching and writing her novel, she explains: "Though there are very few black people's accounts, there are many narratives from the time written by white people from different viewpoints concerning how life was lived by blacks, as a well as factual records of circumstances, that were very useful if you were prepared to read between the lines" (319). She continues:

> For me, reading these British settlers' accounts was a bit like gazing at an optical illusion—at first, I see a candlestick, but

> suddenly it turns into two faces in profile. By reading between the lines of these narratives, and by tapping into our common human ways[,] . . . I found it was possible to imagine a vivid picture. . . . When I have no documentation to actually support me, [I] rely on an understanding of human nature, how a person will *feel* about something. . . . Slowly I began to realise that I was not in fact writing a novel about slavery . . . but . . . about a person's life and the times they lived through. (320–21; emphasis in original)

III. Interrogating Cultural Stereotypes

In my thirty years of experience in a UK university, I have observed that final-year undergraduate students have often (with some notable exceptions) established a typically Eurocentric, canonical approach to their literary study and can sometimes struggle to think critically within wider transnational and global contexts. I work with students to show how awareness of the cultural assumptions and biases that we all variously hold, often unconsciously, is as crucial as the learning outcomes upon which a module is predicated, if not more so. Recognizing the initial stereotypes and cultural assumptions that students (and teachers) may hold is an important first step towards interrogating them. I therefore start teaching the "Writing the Caribbean" module with an exercise that asks students to map and evaluate Caribbean stereotypes in conjunction with some familiar popular texts such as the Hollywood film series *Pirates of the Caribbean*, advertisements featuring Caribbean locales or associations, and Caribbean cruise and tourist brochures. I teach *The Long Song* immediately after Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988), which takes up neocolonialism in relation to tourism and the tourist-eye view, and Lewis' *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*. At the end of the module, we return to the stereotypes we outlined at the beginning of the course and reflect on how students' knowledge may have developed or their views shifted. I give students a small-group reflective task with the following questions: "Why might I have asked you to think about this stereotype or dominant cultural construction of the

Caribbean (e.g., the Caribbean as 'Paradise')? How has it changed after studying text x/issue y/problem z?" This exercise encourages students to think back through their learning and discover links between literary texts and cultural and historical contexts. One student, commenting on her experience of taking the module in 2019, reflected thus:

> A very thought-provoking module. The issues and ideas raised have been very important and inspiring to me. I have learnt so much about the Caribbean and Caribbean Literature and only want to find out more after taking this module. I will never be able to listen or talk of the Caribbean in the same way again, and for very good reason. The module has felt like a celebration of the Caribbean but also a process of unlearning what I thought I knew.

To encourage a continuation of the learning process outside of the classroom (and within channels students can access, alongside more formalized research), I set up a curated social media page with updated and relevant current issues. This allows students to use the critical skills they gain in the course to address wider problems outside the context of their university education. These real-life links are central to my personal teaching philosophy and ongoing practice.

IV. Beginnings: Close Reading Strategies

Starting classes by looking closely at the beginning of any novel is an activity that can help readers think about voice, style, and their expectations for the text as a whole. With *The Long Song*, this is especially useful as the novel is framed by a prologue and epilogue purportedly written by Thomas Kinsman, July's printer son. I encourage students to think about these sections as paratexts and to discuss the limits of the text proper: Where does it begin? The novel obviously nods to some of the self-authenticating strategies of nineteenth-century English novels, such as the title page of *Jane Eyre* (1847), which disingenuously states that the book is "an autobiography." The question of where to begin telling a life story is also the starting point—and subject—of Laurence Sterne's

monumental eighteenth-century novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759). Indeed, comparing the opening of Sterne's playfully experimental novel and that of *The Long Song* can be a useful exercise, provided care is taken not to shore up the Eurocentric assumption that the English text is the critical gold standard from which discussion proceeds; though some similarities can be mapped across both (use of humour, playfulness, metafictional strategies), these are very different texts and writers.

In *The Long Song*, readers encounter a male-authored prologue faced with resistance from a female narrator who declares herself "of a forthright tongue and very little ink" (Levy, *The Long Song* 7), which sets up a tension between male- and female-authored narratives and printed versus oral texts. At this point, the students and I discuss the tensions between the personal and professional relationships of these two characters while also reflecting on their professed preferred modes of narrating the story (is it the *same* story?) and the advantages of each. This helps students think about orality and print culture as part of a wider tension in Caribbean and black Atlantic texts. The prologue is followed by at least two "commencements of [the] tale" (7): one a rape, which is "finished almost as soon as it began" (7), the other Thomas' preferred more "delicate" opening, in which he omits the explicit account of July's conception by rape (7).

This twinned narrative is mirrored in the multiple stories of July's birth. She was born to a mythologically strong mother "upon a cane piece" (Levy, *The Long Song* 9); retellings include tales in which the newborn baby is nearly blown away by the wind or snatched by a "tiger. With . . . six-legs" (10) as well as the more prosaic but necessary realist narrative of her birthing in a slave hut. Students respond well to an exercise in which we consider the novel's multiple openings and can be encouraged to think about the larger implications of these versions—as Jean Rhys puts it, "there is always the other side" (106). These passages also invoke the local symbolism of squashed insects and ink, blood, and Tom Dewar's precious imported strawberry jam—objects that call to mind the black body, the hidden history of Caribbean slavery, and the power of textual agency via a series of linked images of fluids (from

lifeblood to luxury imported comestible). One student explored these permutations in detail in an essay:

> Levy's 'storyteller' (7), July, begins her 'indelicate [. . .] tale' (7) with a 'forthright tongue and little ink' (7). July 'confess[es]' (8) that her 'tale' (7) will not be the 'puff and twaddle' (8) found on a 'book [. . .] shelf' (8) and 'wrapped in leather and stamped in gold' (8). July is critiquing the unreliable accounts of slavery ('daft' (9) white authored 'book[s]' (8)) that invade 'white [. . .] mind[s]' (8) and . . . [which] dominate the records of slavery. July recalls her oral 'word[s]' (8) that she will now write and publish in 'ink' (7). As the narrator, July is responding to these master narratives with the retelling of 'her life upon a Jamaican sugar plantation' (8) and she is retaining her humanity and culture as a 'slave' (8). Previously forbidden to read and write, she is rewriting a truthful 'tale of [her] [. . .] making' (9) as a transgressive act of resistance and to recapture her 'version' of slavery that is erased by white discourses. Throughout the meta-fictional narrative, July's voice interrupts the 'tale' (9) as she directly corrects the misrepresented and forgotten treatment of the female slave subject. Her presence in the narrative also highlights the importance of the oral tradition within the slave community and the ritual of keeping a tale alive. July's 'version' of slavery is not reflected or remembered in the master's 'side' of British and Caribbean history. An 'insect' (9) is attracted to the 'light' (9) of July's 'lamp' (9) and its 'bloody carcass' (9) is symbolic of the unburied remnants of Caribbean history that she is compelled to rewrite. She 'wipe[s]' (9) away the inaccurate 'puff and twaddle' (8) and begins her narrative with a clean 'page' (9).

Significantly, Levy's novel starts with the orally based narrative and free indirect discourse of July, and it is only within the frame of her narration that the white woman Caroline Mortimer—the visiting sister of the plantation owner, John Howarth—exists at all in the novel. Such decentring of the dominant discourse of the white planter class constitutes

a by now familiar postmodern fictional trope of historiographic metafiction and links the novel to various subaltern or history from below movements in recent historical writing, both scholarly and creative. However, Levy's narrative strategy also importantly shifts the novel's axis away from the relative formality and abstraction of an archive of written documents on plantation life towards an adapted oral idiom and communal reading of these documents. In this respect, Levy's novel shifts how readers respond to an archive of written materials on plantation life. The novel disrupts the intertextual field and potentially realigns our reading of all of these sources, historical and fictional.

As I suggest above, the opening provides an excellent starting point for a discussion of the continuum of oral-written literary practices found in this and other texts of Caribbean heritage. A close reading of the short opening chapters can be used to demonstrate to students not only that these binaries are gendered (why is this so, and why are so many of the early accounts of slavery and even British histories authored by white men?) but that oral culture is routinely marginalised and misunderstood as an inferior way of constructing narrative. Students can look at visual and other resources on the West-African derived Caribbean trickster-figure Anancy (who is mentioned in Chapter 2 of *The Long Song*) and consider how the retelling and "tall-telling" of July's birth in the opening chapters adds to or detracts from our understanding of her life. Is it simply a matter of truth versus fiction, or is there a sense in which storytelling can sometimes be more truthful than the facts? What is the relationship between storytelling, histories (plural), and History (with a capital H)? Where are black, female, or intersectional stories represented and how?

July's narrative voice is most useful, especially in the passage in which she debunks the spurious authority of accounts by "some white lady's mind" (Levy, *The Long Song* 8) and compares the profligate use of words (characteristic of a print-based but not an oral culture) to the "droppings that fall from the backside of a mule" (7). And yet, as July avows in Chapter 1, she is literate and has indeed read all of these accounts. Using this passage, I facilitate an informed discussion that allows students to think about the advantages and challenges of oral and print-based

narratives and encourage them to break down simplistic binaries between these two types of texts and to see that the reality, especially in a historical context in which enslaved peoples were routinely forbidden to learn to read and write, is far more complex than the passage suggests. Students can then move on to evaluating how Levy skilfully reproduces some of the markers of oral discourse (repetition, retelling) in her printed text.

V. Reading *The Long Song* and Mathew Lewis' *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*

Lewis' text is fascinating in a number of ways and a useful intertext for teaching *The Long Song*. It is also freely available online in facsimile form, which makes accessing it electronically and in a classroom setting eminently possible. The following activities can be used selectively and do not necessarily have to follow my own teaching order.

Lewis' account of his two visits to his two Jamaican plantations in 1816–17 and 1817–18 were not published until 1834, sixteen years after his death. Lewis is best known as an English Gothic novelist and, in his time, a successful playwright and melodramatist. His first novel, *The Monk* (1796), published when he was just nineteen years old, propelled him into literary celebrity and earned him a certain infamy in public life. He counted amongst his literary friends Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. However, his West Indian journals show another side to him, as he recorded his experiences and thoughts concerning one of the biggest issues of the age: slavery and Caribbean plantation society. Lewis' writing in his *Journal* is fragmentary and sometimes contradictory, the only consistency being his inability—or refusal—to conclude on the matter of slavery. In addition, much of his text is given over to showcasing his own sense of his literary talent as well as his self-image as a benevolent and forward-looking plantation owner. Certainly, he appears enlightened in some aspects (if his account is to be relied upon), but overall, the text reveals a subtext in which slave resistance and a vibrant African culture continue in spite of his and the plantocracy's efforts to understand and eradicate them. Lewis' *Journal* is a fascinating document, historically situated between the act to abolish the slave trade

in the British Empire in 1807 and the act to abolish slavery in 1833. The former act meant that slave owners had to concentrate on the health, survival, and reproduction of their existing slaves rather than being able to import new ones. The period when Lewis was writing also saw rising support for the abolitionist movement in England.

Students consider some questions relating to the genre of Lewis' text (is it simply a journal? A travelogue? An adventure story? Something else?) and discuss who his main audience was (himself? Other educated readers of his class and background? Those who knew him mainly as a Gothic novelist and contemporary of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron?). In class, we also discuss whether it is important that his account was not published until sixteen years after he died on the voyage back from his second trip to Jamaica. More useful for a discussion of *The Long Song* is the question of Lewis' reliability as a narrator and historical source. I guide students to Tim Edensor's useful concept of performativity in travel writing in order to critically scaffold a consideration of Lewis' careful cultivation of different personae in his account (aristocratic traveller, representative of the Plantocracy, expatriate white Englishman/visitor/interloper, i.e., a non-Jamaican). Students go on to read and discuss, in small groups, selected passages from Lewis' account of plantation life and slave culture; the aim is to have them start to interrogate the biases and blind spots of Lewis' account—what he includes and articulates versus what he excludes. This is the starting point for a practise of reading "against the grain."

Useful passages from Lewis' *Journal* to look at in class include:

- Lewis' arrival at Cornwall Estate on 3 January 1816, which can be compared to Caroline's arrival in Chapter 4 of *The Long Song*;
- entries on 10 January and 16 January, in which he describes the Great House and the dwellings of his slaves in sanitized and aestheticized terms and compares them to those in England;
- entries on 24 February 1816 and 14 February 1817 and Lewis' discussion of slave holidays, songs, and music, which

can be compared to the holidays and music in Levy's novel and the soundtrack choices (Western choral music for Kitty's hanging, call and response at the end of Episode 1) in the BBC adaptation;

- entries on 8, 13, and 21 January 1816 and 29 January, 29 March, and 9 April 1817 and Lewis' accounts of slave fertility and the treatment of slave mothers;
- the entry on 20 February 1816 for a trial of a slave to compare to Kitty's trial in Chapter 15 of *The Long Song*; and
- entries on 30 January, 26 March, and 30 March 1817 for Lewis' discussion of slave rebellion and punishments.

In each case students are asked to think about the tension between Lewis' rhetoric and the possible reality. How reliable a source is he? What forces, interests, and allegiances does he collude with? Does he ever come down firmly on one side of the abolition debate (which he discusses towards the end of the journal)?

If an instructor wants to teach just a small selection of extracts, looking at those that most clearly show slave resistance when reading between the lines is most powerful. These include accounts of house slaves unreliably undertaking tasks, such as when Cubina repeatedly puts the harness on incorrectly, fails to retrieve doves for supper from the dovecote, and lets cats into the gallery; similarly, Lewis writes of Nicholas the "mulatto" carpenter who cannot, it seems, make a sweetmeats box to Lewis' requirements (all 22 April 1818). Lewis comments that "[s]omehow or other, they never can manage to do anything quite as it should be done. If they correct themselves in one respect today, they are sure of making a blunder in some other manner to-morrow" (22 April 1818). To cite a couple of examples, the entry from 22 April 1818, in which Lewis writes of his frustration with a black cook who is seemingly unable to follow his requests for dinner can be usefully studied alongside Levy's account of the house slave Molly in Chapter 4 of her novel. Lewis writes:

> [Slaves] never can do the same thing a second time in the same manner; and if the cook having succeeded in dressing a dish

> well is desired to dress just such another, she is certain of doing something which makes it quite different. One day I desired that there might be always a piece of salt beef at dinner, in order that I might be certain of always having enough to send to the sick in the hospital. In consequence, there was nothing at dinner but salt beef. I complained that there was not a single fresh dish, and the next day, there was nothing but fresh. Sometimes there is scarcely anything served up, and the cook seems to have forgotten the dinner altogether: she is told of it; and the next day she slaughters without mercy pigs, sheep, fowls, ducks, turkeys, and everything that she can lay her murderous hands upon, until the table absolutely groans under the load of her labours. (22 April 1818)

And here is Levy on "the negro girl, Molly, [who] was charged . . . to act as Caroline's temporary lady maid" (Levy, *The Long Song* 27): "this girl seemed to know nothing of the duties that were required of her. Why, every morning this dull-witted creature would attempt to incarcerate Caroline in her spotted linen spencer the wrong way round; no command in the English language Caroline knew could get this slave to place it about her shoulders in the right way" (27). Whereas Lewis understands such behaviour as slave obtuseness and ignorance, an inability to follow simple instructions, these passages might be read as evidence of slave resistance to white authority on a small but daily basis. Certainly, the extract from Levy's novel hints at this reading. In another passage from *The Long Song*, Molly serves at table and "slopped most of the vegetable soup over the floor" (67), another possible act of resistance, though one not without risk of punishment. Here, the novel's mischievous third-person narrator interjects and directs the reader to the kitchen and to the other side of this particular story—that of the house slaves in the Great House. And while Caroline is busy listing the endless courses and individual items required for her Christmas dinner earlier in this chapter, the third-person narrative voice interjects to remind us of the greed of the planter class and the labour and sacrifice of the slave body (individual and collective) upon which it depends

(58). Such shifts in narrative perspective are significant. Indeed, they decentre the hegemony of white historiographical accounts upon which Levy, in part, draws. The shift to the third-person satirical observer in the passage cited above and the pre-eminence of July's narrative voice in the novel overall are important, not only in terms of the narrative strategy of Levy's novel. Indeed, they also represent a shift in power in other ways, as Levy's novel imaginatively recreates the power relations between the white Creole planter class and their black house slaves in the shared but hierarchical space of the plantation house.

VI. Gender and Intersectionality

In centering history as told from the intersecting subaltern positionality of a residually oral, female slave, *The Long Song* imaginatively re-enters the harsh world of plantation society and gives voice, agency, and humanity to one of the most marginalized groups: slave women. As such, the novel invites readers to rethink categories such as gender from an intersectional perspective by re-centring different women's voices and relationships and harnessing the spoken word as a powerful riposte to written, largely white male historical accounts of slavery. The woman-centredness of Levy's novel and the centrality of mother-daughter relationships to the plot also urge readers to look at this and other relationships within the specific context of Caribbean plantation slavery. As Kimberlé Crenshaw and Adia Harvey Wingfield argue, systemic racism is gendered, and the inextricable connection between race and gender often lead to very different outcomes for men and women. Passages from *The Long Song* are especially useful in exploring the complex imbrications of race, sexuality, and gender in this and other texts. These passages include the disturbing scene in Chapter 4, in which John Howarth rubs his hands up and down Kitty's legs and invites his sister to "[c]ome and feel the muscles" (Levy, *The Long Song* 43). This can be read alongside other visual and literary representations of the black female body that were part of colonial and racist discourses: the black body is oversexed, it is purely reproductive, it is not properly feminine according to the white codes of plantation society, and yet, paradoxically, as

July's sexual relationship with Goodwin makes clear, the black female body is also highly desired. Why is Miss Clara able to lord her light skin over other female slaves? Why does Caroline finally trump July as the "legitimate" mother for Goodwin and July's daughter? It is important to trace the intersecting hierarchies of privilege and asymmetries of power in these relationships. Thinking about the damaging legacies of some of the dominant representations of black female bodies can also be productive. There are clearly direct links between these questions, critical race theory, and contemporary debates about race and gender within the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements, for example.

The routine sexual abuse of black women during and after slavery is the most obvious connection. In class, students and I look at Chapter 1 (July's conception by rape), the scene from Chapter 4 that I cite above, the hidden sexual assault on July by a house guest at the Christmas dinner table in Chapter 8, and the treatment of July by Goodwin (with its marked sexual double standards); these are all parts of the novel that I encourage students to discuss, however difficult the material. *The Long Song* interrogates not only mother-daughter and woman-centred relationships but also a narrowly proscribed version of white colonial masculinity, most notably in the characters of John Howarth and Robert Goodwin. John Howarth shoots himself in his own bedchamber rather than be cornered by a slave uprising while Robert Goodwin slowly experiences a mental breakdown in the manner of so many white interlopers in Caribbean fiction (the most famous of which is the Rochester figure in Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*). In contrast, the novel gives agency and voice to black male characters such as Godfrey and Elias, who are anything but stereotypical representations of black masculinity in that they are not represented, for example, as childlike, physically powerful, or hypersexual.

VII. Teaching the Novel with the BBC Adaptation

The well-received 2018 television adaptation of *The Long Song* was one of the last creative projects Levy worked on before she died and powerfully brings her final novel to life. Although the BBC programme was

aired in a mid-evening (but post-watershed) slot familiar to fans of BBC historical costume drama, it was anything but a formulaic adaptation.

The first episode of the BBC adaptation starts with the voice of Caroline Mortimer calling Marguerite (as she calls Miss July) and juxtaposes the main locales of the plantation house: the spacious interiors of the great house and the more communally based outbuildings and domestic spaces inhabited by the house slaves. Three more locales are yet to be introduced: that of the slave community living further away from the house, the sugar mill, and the expansive cane fields in which the field slaves work. Immediately, two worlds are brought into stark contrast. However, instead of showing the field workers and the enslaved labour on which the whole plantation economy rests, the adaptation starts with an act of slave resistance. July deliberately cuts the fine pearl buttons off her mistress' dress and then takes her time to respond to Caroline's call. As the novel and adaptation show, most slaves were anything but compliant with their enslaved existence, and resistance took the form of small acts of defiance or procrastination just as much as bold acts of violence (burning down the cane fields, attacking the great house) with which slave resistance is often popularly imagined. When July finally breathlessly reaches Caroline, she roughly pulls in her mistress' corset stays and subtly mimics Caroline's query about the dress having had buttons. This moment can be read as an act of colonial mimicry—imitative but carrying an undercurrent of subversion.

The opening of the novel is, of course, very different, with Thomas Kinsman's prologue and the first of several versions of the story of July's conception and birth. The adaptation brings this metafictional frame into play in a different way by going straight from this scene with July and the buttonless dress to the older July, sitting stiffly upright at her desk, wearing an equally constraining but clearly thoroughly respectable dress, in line with middle- and upper-class fashions of late nineteenth-century Jamaica. The use of distinct costume features in both scenes and the splendid dresses the older July wears in this scene signal a certain social and material ease she did not have as a slave. The mise-en-scène signals a certain kind of social arrival but also, crucially, legitimizes July

as a writer: this, viewers are to infer, is her story, and July's past and present will be linked by this metafictional frame.

The adaptation then turns to very briefly dramatizing the rape of Kitty, which forms the opening of Chapter 1 in the novel, and the birth of July in a slave hut before moving on to the first, terrible encounter between Kitty and her child and Caroline riding out in a carriage with her brother on the open road to Unity Penn (a similar but smaller economic unit than a plantation). Such early scenes can be taught alongside their counterparts in the novel as a way of opening up questions of voice, point of view, and narrative strategies (including the tension between written word and spoken voice) as well as difficult content: racial hierarchies in the context of colonialism and chattel slavery, violence of different kinds, and, as shown in this scene, the frequent removal of slave children from their mothers.

Indeed, the adaptation does not shy away from violence. House slaves visibly bear the marks and scars of beatings and other kinds of physical abuse. In the first episode, the adaptation juxtaposes the brutal whipping and bloody punishment of slaves both in the fields and in the slave village with Caroline's pathetically trivial rants to her brother about her planned Christmas dinner. Such scenes are shocking, but they also enable viewers to see how thoroughly the plantation economy was based on such brutalities and a thin veil of civility maintained by white people. It also underlines how plantation life was experienced very differently by different groups. However, as Levy said in interview, "Not every day was: 'Got up, got whipped thoroughly, saw someone hung from a tree'" ("'I started'"); there is also resistance, humour, and most importantly, perhaps, "humanity" (to use Levy's own term) in this adaptation. Thus, at the much-anticipated Christmas dinner hosted by Caroline, the black fiddlers deliberately play badly as the house guests arrive; this too is a form of resistance and is very funny. The adaptation also frequently cuts to July's retrospective voiceover to divert and move our gaze to other, more hidden aspects of plantation life. Guided by the older July's voiceover, the adaptation then shows a considerably more lively party held by Amity's slaves and the slaves from other plantations who are

accompanying their masters on this visit. This time, significantly, the fiddlers are in tune. Getting students to think about the role of these voiceovers can be productive, as the voiceovers draw attention to focalization, point of view, and the effect of this adaptation on the novel's metafictional framing.

At certain points in the novel the metafictional voice mirrors Kitty's, as for example when she peers inside the Great House window for a glimpse of her child. In this scene, readers view Kitty from the perspective of the omniscient narrator but are also located close to her outsider's perspective as bereft mother and field (rather than house) slave; readers are outside the Great House with Kitty and sympathetic to her position. In the adaptation, July's voiceover is sometimes employed in more contrapuntal ways, directly contradicting what another character says. Thus, at the end of Episode 1, Robert Goodwin's pronouncement that "slavery, that dreadful evil, will finally be abolished" is met with July's voiceover saying, "Really?" and her characteristically Caribbean dismissive "Cha!" July's voiceover also provides much of the historical context in the adaptation, including the backdrop of the Baptist War of the 1830s in Episode 1. In this way, history is reclaimed and relocated by the subaltern, and the "puff and twaddle of some white lady's mind" (Levy, *The Long Song* 8) is relegated in importance. The voiceover is often characterised by the age-old rhetorical device (much used by satirists) of feigning ignorance or of being unable to speak frankly—"Some say . . ."; "I cannot say . . ."; "I do not have the stomach to tell . . ."—as well as temporal markers such as "I wish I could end my story here." It is interesting to think about how this voiceover replaces the undesignated third-person narrator that periodically intrudes in the novel. Arguably both contest certain characters' statements and satirise and widen readers' and viewers' access to this fictional world. One example of a scene that remains faithful to the novel occurs in Episode 2 when the voiceover declares (in reference to Goodwin's initial refusal to succumb to his sexual desire for July), "this is not the way white men usually behave on the Caribbean island." This comment reflects the widespread rape and sexual abuse of enslaved women in the Caribbean at the hands of white men.

Some clear set pieces in both the novel and adaptation can be used for close reading exercises in small or larger groups. Two of these are the preparations for and staging of the grand Christmas dinner and the encounter between Kitty, July, John Howarth, and Caroline on the open road, as I note above. Another is the scene immediately after the dinner in which July and Nimrod find themselves alone in the Great House—a scene that ends abruptly in John Howarth's suicide. Others from the adaptation include the white violence enacted on Nimrod and Kitty at the end of Episode 1, Mr and Mrs Goodwin and Miss July's sitting for the painting by Francis Beard in Episode 2, and the strike in the former slave village, Caroline and Robert's departure from Amity, and the abduction of baby Emily in Episode 3.

In the final section of my essay, I focus on how students can be encouraged to read the portrait painting scene in informed and illuminating ways by undertaking research into relevant contexts and thinking about the scene's wider implications. My students search images online for examples of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century portraits of the English aristocracy, and we research the presence of black servants and slaves within many of these. We discuss the inclusion of black figures as indicators of social status and wealth as well as their problematically contrapuntal role in highlighting white ideals of beauty in some examples. For follow-on activities, we undertake research into the famous eighteenth-century portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle, whose mother was an African slave from the Caribbean, and her second cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray; the two were brought up as near equals by Lord Mansfield at Kenwood House, England. Useful sources for understanding their story and portrait include Lawrence Scott's 2021 novel about Dido, *Dangerous Freedom*, the 2013 film *Belle* directed by Amma Asante, and scholarly resources such as David Dabydeen's *Hogarth's Blacks* (1987). Discussing the scene from Levy's novel in this newly informed context often yields a more nuanced and illuminating reading from students as they think about gendered and racial hierarchies, portraiture and social class, and the secret that lies beneath the facade of the rich clothes and formal sitting in Levy's novel: July's pregnancy by Goodwin. Such nuanced reading practices have gathered new urgency

in our current moment, as has the role of the heritage industry and properties such as those owned by the National Trust in Britain, which have historically sought to occlude or minimise their connections to slavery and colonialism. Recent research and education initiatives, such as the Colonial Countryside project in the UK, a National Heritage-funded, child-led writing and history project that explores the links between transatlantic slavery and the East India Company in eleven of the (UK) National Trust's properties, provide fascinating and timely real-life contextual material for teaching *The Long Song*.

VIII. Conclusion: The Sense of an Ending

The Long Song ends with a retrospective account of Thomas' life, including his life in London and his search for his mother, July, who left him to be adopted by Baptist ministers as a child. This is a necessary but perhaps less successfully rendered part of the novel, which seems more reliant on its source materials than the Caribbean sections. Students debate this part of the novel and, again, research some of the sources provided by Levy, rethinking intersectionality and asymmetries of power in this new English (but still black Atlantic) context. This section directs readers back to the transatlantic dimensions (Caribbean, Britain, America) of Levy's novel and resituates our discussions within contexts that are more familiar to UK-based students. The BBC adaptation ends very differently, with a much-reduced account of Thomas' life in London and a greater focus on his reunion with his mother. The stylised copperplate captions in the adaptation conclude with "The Beginning" as the narrative comes full circle and the older July appears sitting in her son's house starting to write the story we have just seen. Yet the greatest difference between the two endings is that the novel gives Thomas the last word while the adaptation ends with a moving ensemble piece by the acting cast, still in costume but standing silently in a cane field while the voiceover reflects, "my story is finally done." Like the ending of *Schindler's List*, the ending of the BBC adaptation redirects our focus to the real-life dimensions of the story, in this case the "millions of people who once lived as slaves" (Levy, *The Long Song* 322). As Levy herself reflected on her final novel:

> Instead of a sense of horror, I have emerged from the experience of writing the book with a sense of awe for those millions of people. . . . [O]ur slave ancestors were much more than a mute and wretched mass of victims and we do them a great disservice if we think of them as such. These were people who needed strength, talent, guile and humour just to survive. But they did more than survive, they built a culture that has come all the way down through the years to us. Their lives are part of British history. If history has kept them silent then we must conjure their voices ourselves and listen to their stories. . . . *The Long Song* is my tribute to them. (322)

In this article I have shown how thinking self-reflexively about context and location are productive starting points for developing decolonizing teaching and learning practices. Enacting an informed critical reflexivity in reading *The Long Song* against the grain (as Levy suggests) opens up new interpretations of this extraordinary novel and offers useful reading practices for other texts (not only historiographic metafictions) that engage with the entangled state of hierarchies in transnational and black Atlantic histories.

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