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**Sarah LAWSON WELSH** (York St John University): ‘Reading Against the Grain’: Teaching *The Long Song* (2010) intertextually. (9003 words)

ABSTRACT (357 words)

This article reflects on the deliberately situated and continuously evolving decolonizing strategies which I have used in teaching *The Long Song* in the decade since its first publication in 2010. In this article 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 within their teaching. Key to my pedagogical approach are the concepts of ongoing decolonizing of teaching practices, enacting critical reflexivity, and teaching students to read contrapuntally or ‘against the grain’ using a specifically Caribbean archive of historiographical intertexts to the novel, sources which Levy herself used in the writing of *The Long Song*. In writing this article I self-reflexively ‘practice what I preach’ by consciously performing the kind of pedagogical approach which I advocate for others. The article suggests teaching approaches which crucially allow for an aesthetic appreciation of *The Long Song* as a *literary* text but which also facilitate a starting point for wider political discussions regarding 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 which playfully and self-consciously probes the nature of narrative and the ways in which H/history is constructed. However, it is also important to read the novel within a specifically *Caribbean* and *Black Atlantic* context, rather than simply as a historical fiction or as an example of postmodern playfulness. I examine how looking at the novel’s important contexts and fascinating intertexts can shape an important understanding of the novel as a response to a wider archive of white colonial writers as well as other important – and less privileged – sources such as slave narratives. These, the article argues, 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 wider (crucial) question of the writing of history.

Key words: decolonizing, critical self-reflexivity, slavery, resistance, historiography, metafiction, reading against the grain

## 1. Prelude

Although Andrea Levy only started to write in her thirties, her books achieved that rare thing: critical acclaim *and* commercial success, most notably after her fourth novel *Small Island* (2004) won a slew of literary prizes including the Orange Prize, Orange ‘Best of the Best’, Whitbread and Commonwealth Prize. The novel’s continued success was boosted by *Small Island* Read (2007) and its adaptation for BBC television in 2009, as a radio play and as an award-winning stage production at the National Theatre, London in 2019. In 2018 the Man Booker-shortlisted novel, *The Long Song* (2010) was similarly adapted for BBC television, with the same screenwriter, Sarah Williams, and with Levy as special advisor. Her role in the latter brought to light “the often-overlooked multi-modal aesthetic complexity” of her work and was to be one of the last projects Levy worked on. The BBC

adaptation 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 very evident: not only do her novels and short stories now have a place on many academic curricula across the globe but they also have a huge popular following, as her books fill a permanent place on ordinary peoples' bookshelves, the favourites or recommendations of individual readers and a staple of reading groups. The testimonies of high profile figures such as black British journalist Gary Younge (2019) and actor and *Long Song* cast member Sir Lenny Henry (2019), as well as the tributes of many ordinary readers, demonstrate how Levy's writing clearly played a hugely important role in helping them learn about and make sense of the complex, brutal and often hidden nature of Britain's involvement in the slave trade and Caribbean slavery as well as connecting this history to some lasting legacies in their own lives. Arguably, it is in this final novel that Levy harnesses the power of fiction 'to go further' (Younge 2010, np), imaginatively excavating the impact of plantation slavery on a range of characters and from different perspectives on the eve of the 1833 Emancipation Act. Later on, in a twist stranger than fiction, Levy discovered that she herself, like her fictional character Miss July, was descended from a mixed-race liaison between a slave woman and a white overseer. (*Imagine* 2018)

In this respect, *The Long Song* is the natural heir to *Small Island*, taking us backwards to an earlier period in which many of the same issues and concerns examined in the earlier novel are present as well as a fictional genealogical link between the characters of Miss July and Queenie - are present. As with all her writing, Levy scrupulously researched *The Long Song*. She visited the Caribbean and read contemporary eye-witness accounts as well as 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 some of 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 which references a longer 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 herself insisted. (Hickman np) Writing from the UK, Levy's novel can be seen to be not just about 'over there' but - in some profound and often overlooked ways - about 'here' too and this can be a powerful starting point for contextualising the novel for students. As Levy always made clear: the history of her Caribbean heritage was also a *British* story, importantly not "just about race [... but] about people and history" (Hickman np). As Levy tells us: "I try to give people their humanity." (Younge 2010, np)

When this special issue was first proposed in 2019, I planned to demonstrate how *The Long Song* and its (2018) 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 well-structured classroom discussions about the novel and its adaptation could be used as an informed starting point in larger conversations which connect students to current global debates about slavery and reparations to Britain's former slave-holding colonies, discussions about rising nationalisms in Europe, border conflicts and global

migrations and, in Britain specifically, debates about 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 British *and* of Caribbean heritage were more important than ever. Then everything changed. 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 the African-American George Floyd, at the hands of white policeman in Minneapolis in May 2020, anti-racism protests, many focused around the international 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 at all). However, in our current moment, existing calls to decolonise university curricula, as well as universities themselves (a different but overlapping task), are gaining a new momentum. A visible 'dialogue with history' in the form of the questioning and dismantling of colonial monumentality: statuary and buildings which commemorate known slave traders, white supremacists and racists, also gives new visibility to these debates, whatever views individuals themselves hold. Beyond all of this, and part of the decolonising work with which everyone, not just educators and universities, have 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 Trouillot (1995) usefully calls 'strategies of erasure'. Strategies of erasure can be ideological, as for example 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, as in the celebrated Kenyan Mau Mau case brought to the British High Court in 2009-2018 or more latterly, the Windrush scandal in the UK. The received popular narrative of slavery - in the UK at least - is that that Britain did a great thing in being the first in the world to abolish chattel slavery. (See for example, Harwood 2020 np) Not only is this untrue, as slavery was overturned in the French colony of San Domingue (now Haiti) in 1804 after an uprising led by 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 firstly the trade in slaves (1807) and then the institution of slavery itself (1833). (Paton 2020 np). 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 which we are living through, the teaching of Levy's texts seems more urgent than ever before.

### 1.1 Locating the text

Firstly, it matters how we frame and locate any text in our teaching and it is important to be mindful of this. It not only colours the way in which students come to specific texts but also the ways in which they learn to privilege and value certain texts over others (canonicity). Indeed, the ways in which any given text is placed, valued and validated (or the converse) is one of the relatively invisible but powerful legitimizing strategies which we as 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 third year option *Writing the Caribbean*, a module 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 non-fictional 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 it 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 will explore) but it highlights the problematic of a reliance on a mainly white historiography of slavery (Carmichael, Edward, Lewis, Nugent, Trollope), one which dominates this early period. The novel is also informed by scholarly writing from Britain and the Caribbean, on the history of slavery (Fryer, Hall, Heuman, Higman, Walvin etc.) 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 it with a non-fictional source: Matthew 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 Levy draws upon in her novel. Students can be directed to the whole of the *Journal* (omitting the long poetry entries if desired) or instead to well-contextualised extracts from Lewis' text and asked to think about the ways in which Levy's novel imaginatively recreates a similar world on the fictional Jamaican plantation of Amity whilst addressing some of the gaps, omissions and silences of Lewis' account. Getting students to read texts by Lewis then Levy (in that order) can have a transformative effect on their understanding of both texts, as I'll show, 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 across the grain'. As Levy herself reflected of the process of "piec[ng] together largely unrecorded domestic history" (Levy 2010, 319) in researching and writing her novel:

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 well as factual records of circumstances, that were very useful if you were prepared to read between the lines. (319)

She continued:

For me, reading these British settler's 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)

### 2.3 Interrogating cultural stereotypes

In my experience, final year undergraduates have often established a typically Eurocentric, canonical approach to their literary study (with some notable exceptions), and can sometimes struggle to contemplate and 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 – if not more so – than the learning outcomes upon which a module is predicated. Establishing the initial stereotypes/ cultural assumptions which students (and teachers) may hold is very important as a first step towards interrogating them. I therefore start my teaching on the *Writing the Caribbean* module with an exercise which asks students to map and then evaluate Caribbean stereotypes in conjunction with some familiar popular texts such as the Hollywood film series *Pirates of the Caribbean*, adverts featuring Caribbean locales or associations and Caribbean cruise and tourist brochures. *The Long Song* is taught immediately after Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988) which takes up some of these issues of neo-colonialism in relation to tourist and the tourist-eye view and Matthew Lewis' *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834). At the end of the module, we return to these stereotypes and reflect on how students' knowledge may have developed or their views shifted. Students are set a small group reflective task in the form of 'Why might I have I 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 encourages students to think back through their learning and forward to the links between literary texts and cultural/ 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 which students can access alongside more formalized research) I use a curated social media page to encourage students to engage with constantly updated current issues of relevance and to use the critical skills they gain on the module to address wider issues outside of the classroom. These real-life links are central to my personal teaching philosophy and my ongoing practice.

#### 2.4 Beginnings: close reading strategies

Starting classes by looking very closely at the beginning of any novel is an activity that can work well in terms of thinking about voice, style and our expectations for the text as a whole. With *The Long Song*, this is especially useful as the novel is prefaced by a prologue and epilogue, purporting to be written by Thomas Kinsman, the printer son of Miss July. Students are encouraged to think about this as a paratext and to discuss the limits of the text proper – where does it begin? (a concern also playfully invoked by the back cover of the novel) There is an obvious nod here to some of the self-authenticating strategies of nineteenth century English novels such as the title page of *Jane Eyre* which disingenuously states that what we are reading is in fact 'an autobiography'. The question of where to start the telling of a life is also the starting point – and subject – of Laurence's 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 also be a useful comparative 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 case of *The Long Song*, what we encounter at the start is a male-authored prologue faced with resistance from a female narrator who declares herself ‘of a forthright tongue and very little ink’ (7) which sets up a tension between male and female authored narratives and printed versus oral texts. At this point, we discuss the tensions between the personal and the professional relationships of these two characters but we also think about their professed preferred modes of narrating the story (is it the *same* story?) and the advantages of each. This helps students to start to 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. As Hengameh Saroukhani notes in her contribution to this issue:” Beginnings in [Levy’s texts] are always contingent, unstable and necessarily iterative as each character’s... story narratologically restarts the novel in new ways. Levy’s representation of beginnings gestures towards a postmodern conception of history that ... presents an unsettling interpretative process for the reader...” (Saroukhani, np)

This twinned narrative is then mirrored in the multiple stories of Miss July’s birth which follow: born by a mythologically strong mother “upon a cane piece” (9) with retellings in which the new-born baby is nearly blown away by the wind or snatched by a “tiger. With...six-legs” (10) to the more prosaic but necessary realist narrative of her birthing in a slave hut. Students respond well to this exercise and can be encouraged to think not only about the larger implications of these multiple versions (As Jean Rhys had it “there is always the other side”) but also the local symbolism of squashed insects and ink, blood and Tom Dewar’s precious imported strawberry jam. In the following excerpt from a student essay these permutations are explored in detail:

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 Miss July and it is only within the frame of her narration that the white woman, Caroline Mortimer 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 also 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 the same. In this respect, Levy's novel shifts the ways in which readers respond to an archive of written materials on plantation life. The novel acts to disrupt the intertextual field and to potentially realign our reading of all of these sources, historical and fictional.

As I've already suggested, the opening provides an excellent starting point for a discussion of the continuum of oral-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 that not only is there a gendering of these binaries (why is this so, why are so many of the early accounts and even British histories authored by white males?) but that oral culture is routinely marginalised and misunderstood as an inferior rather than a different 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) 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 a simply matter of truth versus fiction or is there a sense in which storytelling can sometime be more 'truthful' than the facts? What's the relationship between storytelling, histories (plural) and History (with a capital H)? Where are black, or female or intersectional stories represented and how?

The narrative voice of Miss July is most useful here, especially in the passage in which she debunks the spurious authority of accounts by "some white lady's mind" (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 Miss July avows in Chapter 1, she is literate and has indeed read all these accounts. I facilitate an informed discussion here which allows students to think about the advantages and challenges of oral and print-based narratives and encourage them to work towards breaking down simplistic binaries and to see that the reality, especially in a historical context in which slaves were routinely forbidden to learn to read and write, is far more complex. They can then move on to evaluating the ways in which Levy skilfully reproduces some of the markers of oral discourse (repetition, retelling) in her printed text.

## 2.5 Reading *The Long Song* and Mathew Lewis's *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834)

Lewis's 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 in don't 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 slave culture continues in spite – not because – of his presence and that of the white plantocracy to which he belonged. Lewis' *Journal* is a fascinating document, historically sited as it is between acts to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807 and the abolition of slavery, in 1833. The former act meant that slave owners had now to concentrate on the health, survival and reproduction of their existing slaves rather than being able to import new ones. The period in which Lewis was writing was also one of 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 to consider 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). We also discuss how far it is important that his account was not published until sixteen years after his death, when voyaging 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 as a historical source. Students are guided to Tim Edensor's useful concept of performativity in travel writing (1998) in order to critically scaffold a consideration of Lewis' careful cultivation of different personae in his account (as aristocratic traveller, as representative of the Plantocracy, as an expatriate white Englishman/ visitor/ interloper i.e., a non-Jamaican). Students then can go on to read and discuss, in small groups, selected passages from Lewis' account of plantation life and slave culture; the aim here is to start to interrogate the biases and blind spots of Lewis' account, what is included and articulated versus that which is excluded or left unsaid. This is the starting point of practising reading 'against the grain'.

Useful passages to look at in class include:

- Lewis' arrival at Cornwall Estate on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1816 which can be compared to Caroline's arrival in chapter 4 of *The Long Song*;
- Jan 10<sup>th</sup> and the start of January 16<sup>th</sup> where he describes the Great House and the dwellings of his slaves in the most sanitized and aestheticized of terms and compares them to those in England;
- February 24<sup>th</sup> 1816 and February 14<sup>th</sup> 1817 and his discussion of slave holidays, songs and music, topics which can be compared to the function of the same in Levy's novel and the choices of soundtrack (Western choral music for Kitty's hanging, call and response at end of episode one) in the adaptation;
- January 8<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 1816 and January 29<sup>th</sup>, March 29<sup>th</sup> and April 9<sup>th</sup> 1817 and Lewis' accounts of slave fertility and the treatment of slave mothers;
- February 20<sup>th</sup> 1816 for a trial of a slave to compare to that of Kitty in Chapter 15 of *The Long Song*;
- January 30<sup>th</sup>, March 26<sup>th</sup> and March 30 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 one wants to teach just a small selection of extracts, looking at those which most clearly show slave resistance when reading between the lines is most powerful. These include accounts of the unreliable undertaking of tasks by house slaves such as the unnamed cook, Cubina who repeatedly puts the harness on incorrectly, fails to retrieve doves for supper from the dovecote and lets cats into the gallery; similarly, he writes of Nicolas the mulatto carpenter who cannot, it seems, make a sweetmeats' box to Lewis' requirements (all April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1818). Lewis comments:

Somehow 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. (April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1818).

To cite just a few examples, the entry from April 22<sup>nd</sup> 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. Here is Lewis:

[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. (April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1818)

And here is Levy on "the negro girl, Molly [who] was charged...to act as Caroline's temporary lady maid" (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 reads such behaviour as slave obtuseness and ignorance, an inability to follow simple instructions, we might read this as evidence of slave resistance to white authority on a small but daily basis. Certainly, this latter reading is hinted at repeatedly in this extract and others from Levy's novel. 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, Levy has the novel's mischievous third person narrator interject and direct us away to the kitchen and to

the other side of this particular story. And whilst Levy's 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 highly significant. Indeed, it can be argued that Levy uses them to deliberately decentre the hegemony of white accounts upon which she, in part, draws. The shift to the third person satirical observer in the passage, cited above, and the pre-eminence of Miss July's narrative voice in the novel overall is important, not just in terms of the narrative strategy of Levy's novel, but also in that it represents 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.

## 2.6 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 us to rethink categories such as gender from an intersectional perspective, 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 urges us to read anew and look at this and other relationship within the specific context of Caribbean plantation slavery. As Kimberle Crenshaw (1990) and Adia Harvey Wingfield (2009) argue, systemic racism is also gendered and the inextricable linking of 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 include the disturbing scene in Chapter 4 which John Howarth rubs his hands up and down Kitty's legs and invites his sister to "Come feel the muscles". This can be read alongside other visual and literary representations of the black female body which were part of colonial and racist discourses: the black body is over sexed, it is purely reproductive, it is not properly 'feminine' according to the white codes of plantation society and yet, paradoxically, as Miss July's sexual relationship with Goodwin makes clear, the black female body is also highly desired. Why is the light-skinned Miss Clara able to 'lord it' over other female slaves? Why does Caroline finally trump July as the 'legitimate' mother for Goodwin and July's daughter? Tracing the intersecting hierarchies of privilege and the asymmetric of power in these relationships is important here. Thinking about the damaging legacies of some of the dominant representations of black female bodies can also be highly productive. There are clearly some direct links here to critical race theory and to 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 linkage here and can be productively discussed in relation to Chapter 1 (July's conception by rape), the scene from Chapter 4 cited above, the hidden sexual assault on Miss July by a house guest at the Christmas dinner table in Chapter 8 is another and the treatment of July by Goodwin (with its marked sexual double standards); these are all parts of the novel which I encourage students to discuss in class, however difficult the material. And it is not just mother-daughter and woman-centred relationships which *The Long Song* interrogates

but a narrowly proscribed version of white colonial masculinity, most notably in the characters of John Howarth and Robert Goodwin. The former returns and shoots himself in his own bedchamber rather than be cornered by a slave uprising whilst the other is seen to slowly break down in the manner of so many white interlopers in Caribbean fiction (most famously of course the Rochester figure of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*). In contrast agency and voice is given to black male characters such as Godfrey and Elias who are anything but stereotypical representations of black masculinity.

## 1.2 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 brings her final novel powerfully alive. Although the BBC programme was aired in 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 a little further away from the house, the sugar mill and the expansive cane fields in which the field slaves work. Straightaway, the sense of two worlds are brought into stark contrast. However, instead of going straight to the field workers and the enslaved labour on which the whole plantation economy rests, the adaptation starts with an act of slave resistance. July is seen deliberately cutting the fine pearl buttons off of her mistress's dress and then taking her time to respond to Caroline's call. This is significant, for as the novel and adaptation show, most slaves were anything but compliant with their enslaved existence and resistance could and did take the form of small acts of defiance or procrastination, just as much as the bold acts of violence (burning down the cane fields, attacking the great house) with which slave resistance is often popularly imagined. When Miss July finally breathlessly reaches her, she is seen roughly pulling in her mistress's corset stays and subtly mimicking Miss Caroline's query about the dress having had buttons. This 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 the conception and birth of Miss July. The adaptation brings this metafictional frame into play in a different way by going straight from this scene with Miss 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 (where she is now located). Dresses link both scenes and the older Miss July has no need for hand-me-downs, having splendid dresses of her own. The *mise en scene* signals a certain kind of social arrival but also, crucially, legitimizes her as a writer: this, we are to infer, is her story and the two-time frames will be linked by this metafictional frame.

The adaptation then turns to dramatizing, albeit very briefly, the rape of Kitty which forms the opening of Chapter 1 of the novel, and the subsequent birth of Miss July in a slave hut, before moving on swiftly 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 of all kinds. House slaves visibly bear the marks and scars of beatings and other kinds of physical abuse. In this first episode, the brutal whipping and the bloody punishment of slaves both in the fields and in the slave village is juxtaposed with Caroline's pathetically trivial rants to her brother about her planned Christmas dinner. Such scenes are shocking but also useful in enabling us to see how thoroughly the plantation economy was based on such brutalities and a thin veil of civility maintained by the whites. It also underlines how plantation life was experienced very differently by different groups. However, as Levy herself said in interview 'Not every day was got up, got whipped' Younge 2010, np); there is also resistance, humour and most importantly perhaps, to use Levy's own term, "humanity" in this adaptation. Thus, at the much-anticipated Christmas dinner hosted by Caroline, we witness the black fiddlers playing deliberately badly as the house guests arrive; this too is a form of resistance and very funny. The adaptation also frequently cuts to Miss July's retrospective voiceover, to divert and to move our gaze to other, more hidden aspects of plantation life. Guided by the older Miss July's voiceover we are led to another, considerably more lively party held by Amity's slaves and those 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 really productive, drawing attention as it does to focalization, point of view and the effect of this adaptation of the novel's metafictional framing.

At certain points in the novel the metafictional voice mirror's Kitty's own, as for example when she peers inside the Great House window for a glimpse of her child. In this scene we view Kitty externally but we are also located close to her outsider's perspective of bereft mother and field (rather than a house) slave; we are outside the Great House with Kitty and in sympathy with her position. In the adaptation, the voiceover is sometimes employed in more contrapuntal ways, directly contradicting what another character says. Thus, at the end of episode one Robert Goodwin's pronouncement that "Slavery, that dreadful evil will finally be abolished" is met with Miss July's voiceover "Really?" and her characteristically Caribbean dismissive "Cha!" Miss July's voiceover is also the conduit of much of the historical contextualisation of 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" 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..." and it is interesting to think about how this replaces the undesignated third person narrative voice which periodically intrudes in the novel. Arguably both act to contest certain character's statements, satirising and widening our angle of view and access to this fictional world. One particular example, which remains close to the novel occurs in episode two when the voiceover declares (in reference to

Goodwin and his initial refusal to succumb to his sexual desire for July) “this is not the way white men usually behave on the Caribbean island”.

There are some clear set pieces in both the novel and adaptation which can be used for close reading in small or larger groups. Two such 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 already noted. Another is the scene immediately after the dinner in which Miss July and Nimrod find themselves alone in the Great House which is abruptly brought to an end by John Howarth’s suicide. Others include the white violence enacted on Nimrod and Kitty at the end of episode one, the sitting for the painting by Francis Beard in episode two, and the Strike in the former slave village, departure of Caroline and Robert from Amity and abduction of baby Emily in episode three.

In the following section, I focus on the portrait painting and show how students can be encouraged to read this in informed and illuminating ways by undertaking research into relevant contexts and thinking about the meaning of the wider implications of the scene. My students search images online of actual 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 specific research into the famous eighteenth-century portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle (1761-4), whose mother was an African slave from the Caribbean and her second cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray, who were brought up as near equals by Lord Mansfield at Kenwood House, England. Useful sources for this include Lawrence Scott’s 2021 novel about Dido, *Dangerous Freedom*, the 2013 film *Belle* directed by Amma Asante, as well as 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 which literally lies beneath the facade of the rich clothes and formal sitting in Levy’s novel: Miss July’s pregnancy by Goodwin. A link which has gathered a new urgency in our current moment is 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 links to slavery and colonialism. Recent research and education initiatives, such as The Colonial Countryside Project in the UK, can provide some fascinating and timely real-life links in teaching *The Long Song*.

### Conclusion: The Sense of an Ending

*The Long Song* ends, of course, with a retrospective account of Thomas’ life, including his life in London and up to and including 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 well-integrated and 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, rethinking intersectionality and asymmetries of power in this new English (but still Black Atlantic) context. This section is useful in directing us back to the transatlantic dimensions (Caribbean, Britain, America) of Levy’s novel and it resituates our discussions within more familiar contexts for UK based students. The BBC adaptation ends very differently, with much reduced account of Thomas’s life in London,

and a greater focus on his reuniting with his mother. The use of stylised copperplate captions in the adaptation concludes with “The Beginning” as the narrative comes full circle and we see the older July at her son’s house starting to write the text we have just read. Yet, the greatest difference in the two endings is that the novel gives Thomas the last word, whilst the adaptation turns to a moving ensemble piece by the acting cast, still in costume but standing silently in a cane field whilst the voiceover reflects “my story is finally done.” Like the ending of the film of *Schindler’s List*, it redirects our focus to the real-life dimensions of the story, in this case the “millions of people who once lived as slaves” (Levy 2010, 322). As Levy herself reflected of 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... our 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 voice 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 can act as 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 herself suggests) opens up new interpretations of this extraordinary novel and offers useful reading practices for other texts (not just historiographic metafiction) which engage with the entangled state of hierarchies to be found in transnational and black Atlantic histories.

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