ENTERTEXT

A Written Song: Andrea Levy's Neo-Slave Narrative

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Abstract

The essay explores the role of neo-slave narratives in creating and transforming history, inviting a contemporary audience to see the past in terms of the present. Reading The Long Song (2010) against the conventions of the neo-slave narrative foregrounds its desire to reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by (re)imagining their subjectivity. When contrasted to other neo-slave narratives, Levy's novel imagines its ideal audience as fully literate, never disavowing the literary mode, as it seeks to rediscover and rewrite a significant part of history that has been deliberately forgotten and/or denied. Rather than the conventional white frame vouching for the authenticity of the narrative, Levy has the formerly enslaved woman's son, a successful printer/publisher in 1898 Jamaica, introduce his mother's story. To highlight the extent to which slave narratives were founded upon a fundamental lack of knowledge, Levy chooses metafiction for her neo-slave narrative, a retrospective narration that foregrounds narrative itself as a process, forever incomplete, of gathering the material that both is and is not her character's experience. As readers follow July's story in its sometimes conflicting versions, we are reminded that even under the most horrible conditions, agency and strength characterise Afro-Caribbean subjectivity. Because in a way fiction that calls attention to itself in the telling is the most realist genre, The Long Song leaves us with the unflinching humanity of enslaved peoples as they have managed much more than survival: July seems almost superhuman in her optimistic unwillingness to see herself as a victim.

Foreword emphasises the urgency in the factual telling (the remembered and the known horrors of slavery), readers also come to expect artistic merit in the narrative, as he would "make her tale flow like some of the finest writing in the English language." [11]

The Long Song further emphasises the need for a type of story that would instil pride rather than shame in the younger generations. When Levy wonders why the young woman in the audience feels "any ambivalence or shame" at having slave ancestors," she introduces the possibility—though crucially framed as a question—that "a novelist [could] persuade this young woman to have pride in her slave ancestors through telling her a story." The fact that Levy phrases it as a question is important, I think, because it speaks to her own sense of discomfort with the binary. While her initial impulse seems to be simply to turn the narrative of oppression on its head, to replace a story of shame with a story of pride, that initial impulse gives way to something else—the recognition that the story cannot follow such simple teleology. Her story has to be metafictional to avoid precisely the trap of such binaries.

The Choice of Metafiction

> Do the slave narratives in fact represent a distinct literary genre? If not, why not? If so, what are its distinguishing characteristics? Are these characteristics relatively uniform throughout its history? What are the sources of variation and change? Is change great or small during that history? Are the narratives a popular or an elite literary form? Do they represent a species of autobiography? Why (and how) do they begin? Why (and how) do they come to an end? Such questions converge in the cluster of meanings implicit in the term authority: the condition of begetting, beginning, continuing, and controlling a written text. In Hegelian terms, the issues are parentage, propriety, property, and

(which doesn't mean that they didn't have it)" and to "fill in the blanks that the slave narrative left." [14]

To highlight the extent to which slave narratives were founded upon a fundamental lack of knowledge, Levy chooses metafiction for her story, a retrospective narration that foregrounds narrative itself as a process, forever incomplete, of gathering the material that both is and is not her character's experience. As readers, we follow July's tale in its sometimes conflicting versions, and are reminded that even under the most deplorable conditions, agency and strength characterise Afro-Caribbean peoples. Metafiction enables Levy to enjoy the authority of mimetic realism through a postmodern subjectivity. While self-consciousness is as old as the storytelling tradition itself, the term "metafiction" is new. William Gass defines it as "fiction which draws attention to itself as artefact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." [15] Self-consciousness has been central to African diasporic literatures if we consider Equiano's narrative as one of their first manifestations. Whether he was born in the United States or in an African village, Equiano speaks to the book, raising it to his ear to hear its answer, a moment Gates argues amounts to "a fiction about the making of fiction."[16] The trope of the Talking Book, a strangely insistent metaphor that appears in many of the eighteenth-century black texts published in English is, according to Gates, our best evidence that the earliest writers of the Anglo-African tradition were self-conscious readers of each other's texts. [17] Black Atlantic writers after Equiano have made their concern with writing central to their work, portraying the enslaved's painful journey to freedom as parallel to the journey from orality to literacy. All stories seem to connect reading and writing with freedom and equality. [18]

Gates' argument in The Signifying Monkey—that black literature has always theorised about itself—is central to my reading of The Long Song as a metafictional neo-slave narrative. Levy seems particularly interested in writing against existing literary, generic, and/or aesthetic traditions. The narrator-author inscribed within the text openly acknowledges to the reader her presence and her power of manipulation. The subject of artistic invention is a thread running through her thematically self-conscious tale that is neither parody nor an acknowledgment of literature's exhaustion, to use John Barth's term,[19] that usually characterise "white" metafiction. Instead of a site of negation, The Long Song conjures up limitless possibilities. Levy's narrative emphasises personal and collective memory and the continuous interplay of past and present as an alternative to chronological linear time. Madelyn Jablon notes that metafiction is not a refusal to confront reality but an insistence that such a confrontation must start with the redefinition of the term and renewed attention to

before the twentieth century can be accounted for by the audience for which these books were written. These writers were primarily addressing a white-middle-class audience and did not want to establish the kind of intimacy and self-disclosure that the first person point of view requires. Yarborough notes a change with the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "one of the single most important steps in the evolving conceptualization of the black self and the changing presentation of that self in narrative form."[21] He also notes that "more recent writers have seemed especially interested in dramatizing the tension between perception and reality, between the exposition of self and the masking of self,"

different versions of July's birth—"A further version had a tiger, with its long, spiky snout and six legs, sniffing at the baby July thinking her as food"—serves to prepare readers for what is to follow. She's "speaking fact, even though the contents may seem equally preposterous."[27] By resisting mimetic representation, Levy prevents us from feeling what I'm going to call conventional pity (for lack

> dirty legs across the paper and I will print its sense, clear and precise. Show me blots and smudges of ink and I will see form.[32]

Thomas Kinsman's life conforms to the rags-to-riches paradigm of the optimistic Enlightenment. By the time he was twenty-one, he was no more an apprentice, but employed by Linus Gray as a journeyman printer and, like him, of the deistic belief.[33] Gray bequeaths "all his real and personal property" to "the negro Thomas Kinsman, so that he may walk within this world as he deserves—as a gentleman."[34] Moving to Jamaica, Kinsman attends Church with the hope one of the white men there will give him work, but it is "a Jew who had never once attended [...] St. Peter's who goes to his office to require a press for the first edition of a newspaper he was to publish which was to be called The Trelawney Mercury."[35] Here we are again reminded of the author and her power in re-imagining Jamaica's past: it is an Isaac Cecil Levy who gives Thomas his first big job.

Reading The Long Song, then, does not allow us to forget that a vibrant journalistic tradition developed alongside the tradition of slave narratives and novels. Indeed, as Robert Reid-Pharr notes, "there was an impressive amount of cross-fertilization between different genres of black writing in early national and antebellum America."[36] Likewise, the earliest traditions and techniques of intellectuals and authors across the African Diaspora may not have been so much lost as ignored. We "forget" that there were pioneers of the Black Atlantic unless we read the Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment (1772-1815) edited by William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and realise what has been left out of literary history. Levy is able to reshape our understanding of the past not only by blurring generic boundaries, but by consistently calling attention to the writing itself. She also makes us question the embedded ideologies found in both the writing of history and the historical narratives that supposedly offer realistic representations of slavery.

The Rewriting of History

> "Slavery is a long day of the master over the slave and of nights turned to days. But how long can the master's daylight continue to rule our nights?"
>
> "Forget. Memory is pain trying to resurrect itself"
>
> —Fred D'Aguiar[37]

Simply by rewriting the stories of lives and events of a distant past, authors of neo-slave narratives want to explore the closely woven bilateral relations between individual history and national history, also typical of the historical novel. But contrary to the traditional historical novel, neo-slave narratives do not conform to either official historiography or bourgeois ideology. These narratives mean to be innovative as they seek to rediscover and rewrite a significant part of history that has been deliberately forgotten and/or denied. Neo-slave narratives are Sankofa texts, to extend Frances Smith Foster's conceptualisation: "Sankofa—an ancient Akan concept with direct bearing on the question of what's fiction, what's real, what's important—translates as the following

imperative: We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we can understand why and how we came to be who we are today."[38] Sankofa invites us to listen to the stories of our past, to select what is good, and to use that good for positive growth. Sankofa, Foster writes, is "the benevolent use of knowledge. For it to work right, we have to employ a hermeneutic of suspicion; or, as [her] grandmother would say, we have to 'consider the source.'"[39] Despite the pain, July must go back and remember as much as the black British need to know their history before Windrush.

Levy's narrator often interrupts her tale with her son's questions and her resulting confusion:

> 'But this is the time of the Baptist War, Mama,' he tell me. 'The night of Caroline Mortimer's unfinished dinner in your story is the time of the Christmas rebellion, when all the trouble began.' […]. I must write all I know of Sam Sharpe, the leader of this rebellion—of his character and

slave quarters to encourage black aspirations. The Baptist preachers are the ones to persuade the negroes that "they are as worthy as white man" and that the King himself has given them their freedom.[43] Walvin describes this period of transition as follows:

> What we can see, increasingly in the slave islands was a growing body of Christian slaves, no longer joined by 'raw' Africans, encouraged to think of freedom by news from Britain, but faced by a resistant plantocracy. Moreover, the planters had to work their slaves harder, often at tasks the slaves did not like, because the supply of Africans had dried up. As long as the slave trade continued, Africans could be thrown into the fields – the shock troops of the plantocratic system – to do the hard work. After 1808 many slaves who might (because of their 'Creole' status) expect better, more favored work, found themselves reassigned to manual work. Disgruntlement spread rapidly.[44]

When revolt broke out in the west of Jamaica, during Christmas 1831, it involved more than 20,000 slaves mostly from areas where the Baptists had their followers and their chapels. As leader of the first revolutionary war (as the rebellion is now called in Jamaica), Sam Sharpe was the master of his audience. According to Walvin, those who heard Sam Sharpe speak never forgot his voice or his message. A bright man, described by one who met him as the most intelligent and remarkable slave [he had] ever met with,' Sharpe preached that 'whites had no more right to hold black people in slavery than black people had to make white people slaves."[45] Black preachers seized upon the Bible, especially the Old Testament, as grist to their mill; the language, imagery and tales of

yard for the servants' gathering" as "no more clatter or unrecognizable tune—the sound of a sweet melody came whispering through the open window. For [...] it only amused them to play bad for white ears."[48] More daring, perhaps, is Nimrod's justification for stealing: "whatever is your massa's, belongs to you. When you take property from your massa, for your own use, him loses nothing. For you be his property too. All is just transferring. Everything you now hold is still your massa's property. You just get a little use of it."[49] Even John Locke would not be able to argue with the logic of such redefinition of property.[50]

Neo-slave narratives further detach themselves from historical novels in that they give more importance to re-imagining historical memory than to linear narration per se. In their effort to re-present unwritten history neo-slave narratives are part of a broader context characterised by the importance and necessity of remembering, testifying and passing on those parts of history that are so negative, horrible, and traumatic that they seem unreal. What July remembers cannot be found in history books. Not only is the novel a memoir of July's experience, but it 363.2253 T.9(5(s4(owHof hist)6((mem)perie)mhist rope)4.6(c)-e[

survive in a hostile environment. Anim-Addo's *Imoinda*

July blocked up her ears with her fists, the missus did not think to stifle Robert Goodwin's mouth when he at last discharged his final cry." [80] When departure day arrives, Molly sides with the masters and steals Emily from her mother, saying she's going to feed her, and leaves for England with them.

Here the editor of July's narrative interrupts her yet another time, challenging the happy ending she attempts to sketch, another attempt at preventing her readers from feeling sorry for her:

> Mama, this is not written in truth,' says he. [] ..
>
> 'You wish your readers to know that after Miss July's baby had been cruelly seized from her by Robert and Caroline Goodwin and taken to England, that she then went on to manage a shop within the town entirely untroubled, and there grew old making first, preserves and pickles, before becoming the mistress of a lodging house? [] ..
>
> 'Then can you perhaps tell me who was that woman—that half-starved woman with the stolen chicken under her clothes?' [81]

For it is on a day he is on jury duty that Thomas Kinsman runs into his mother, who has since then lived in his household. It is Thomas who urges July to write down her story so that her "precious words" would not be lost to all. Although her son wants to know of those years since his sister was stolen from their mother, to the moment he finds a starved July in the courtroom, she refuses to depict the troubles and the harassment from planters free negroes have had to endure. July chooses what stages of her life she wants known:

> But for me, reader, my story is finally at an end. This long song has come full up to date. It is at last complete. So let me now place that final end dot…
>
> Perhaps, I told my son, upon some other day there may come a person who would wish to tell the chronicle of those times anew. But I am an old-old woman. And, reader, I have not the ink. [82]

When reading July's allusion to the title of her narrative readers are reminded that The Narrative of the Life and Times of Frederick Douglass identifies slave singing as "testimony against slavery": "slaves sing when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of the heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears." [83]

conceptualizing writing as both a means of self-discovery and transformation—as an artefact of consciousness. She begets her narrative, to go back to my second epigraph, and the novel's afterword even prepares us for a sequel, certainly another Sankofa text:

> If any readers have information regarding Emily Goodwin—her circumstance, her whereabouts—I would be very obliged to them if they could let me know it. A letter to my print works here in Kingston, addressed to Thomas Kinsman, would always find me. []. But here I would also give one word of caution to any wishing to eagerly aid me with this request. In England the finding of negro blood within a family is not always met with rejoicing. So please, do not think to approach upon Emily Goodwin too hastily with the details of this story for its load may prove to be unsettling. [85]

For we have already been warned that "the tar brush []. is quick to lick." [86] The Long Song continues the author's project of rewriting British history to include her ancestors—to use narrative as a way to re-imagine identity. For instead of thinking of identity as an already established fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, Stuart Hall urges us to think of identity as a "production," which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.[87] Given the skewed structures of growing up in diasporic societies, of attempting whatever social rank or position in the racial colour structure, according to Hall, it

Notes

1. I'm indebted to Wendy Knepper, Rob Doggett, and Stephanie Iasiello for insightful suggestions for revising this essay. The flaws that remain are mine.
2. Andrea Levy, "The Writing of The Long Song by Andrea Levy," http://www.andrealevy.co.uk [accessed August 8, 2011].
3. Neo-slave narratives include such diverse works as Alex Haley's Roots (1976), Ishmael Reed's Flight to Canada (1976), Octavia Butler's Kindred (1979), Barbara Chase-Riboud's Sally Hemings (1979) and The President's Daughter (1994), David Bradley's The Chaneysville Incident (1981), Charles Johnson's Oxherding Tale (1982) and Middle Passage (1990), Sherley Anne Williams's Dessa Rose (1986), Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987), Caryl Phillips' Cambridge (1991), J. California Cooper's Family (1992) and In Search of Satisfaction (1994), Caryl Phillips's Crossing the River (1994), Louise Meriwether's Fragments of the Ark (1994), Fred D'Aguiar's The Longest Memory (1994), Lorene Cary's The Price of a Child (1995), Beryl Gilroy's Inkle and Yarico (1996), Edward P. Jones's The Known World (2003), Valerie Mason-John's Borrowed Body (2005), Joan Anim-Addo's Imoinda (2008), and Bernardine Evaristo's Blonde Roots (2008), to name only a few.
4. Lars Eckstein, Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006, 113.
5. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction: The Talking Book," Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772-1815. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and William L. Andrews, eds., Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998, 2.
6. Ibid., 3.
7. Toni Morrison, Beloved. New York: Penguin, 1987.
8. Andrea Levy, Reading at SUNY Geneseo on April 29th, 2011 (Milne 201 at 4 p.m).
9. Ibid.
10. Vincent Carretta, "Olaudah Equiano: African British Abolitionist and Founder of the African-American Slave Narrative," The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative. Audrey A. Fisch, ed., Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UniversityTf3rsityTf3rsitdNY GenesTD-.001 4 p.m).

46. Ibid., 277.
47. Levy, Long Song, 64.
48. Ibid., 66; 72.
49. Ibid., 87.
50. Caroline Mortimer had chosen to grant July an education in the great house, so she would know what it feels "to be a white man's child" (Levy 38). Although her father, the overseer Dewar, never truly recognizes her as his child, July feels she belongs in the great house. As Levy describes her, "July had gone from being a filthy nigger child—used only to working in the fields—into the missus's favoured lady's maid, who boasted her papa to be a white man even though it was Molly that had the higher colour" (Levy 44). July is described at sixteen as "an excitable young woman with crafty black eyes, a skinny nose, and narrow lips that often bore a smile of insolence" (Levy 45). At this point in the narrative, however, July only attracts the attention of a free black, Nimrod, who is described as "black as sin, ugly, sly, rough, rude, and no taller than a girl," and who fathers July's first child (Levy 87). As in Levy's other novels, skin colour will never guarantee either decency or evil in her characters, and readers can expect to find redeeming traits in all the human beings she creates.
51. Alex Haley, Roots: The Saga of an American Family. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976, viii.
52. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999, 149.
53. Beaulieu's argument that black women writers chose to author neo-slave narratives to reinscribe history from the point of view of the nineteenth-century enslaved mother focuses on Sherley Anne Williams' Dessa Rose (1986), Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987), J.California Cooper's Family (1991), Gayl Jones' Corregidora (1975), and Octavia Butler's Kindred (1979).
54. Beaulieu, 156.
55. Levy, Long Song, 130.
56. Ibid., 135.
57. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews. trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.
58. Eckstein, 156.
59. David Dabydeen, Slave Song. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2005, 10.
60. Joan Anim-Addo, Imoinda: or She Who Will Lose Her Name (a play for twelve voices in three acts). London: Mango Publishing, 2008, 92.
61. Dorothea Smartt, Ship Shape. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2008.
62. Levy, Long Song. 139.
63. Ibid., 143.
64. Ibid., 144.
65. Ibid., 144-45.
66. Ibid., 147.
67. Ibid., 167.
68. Ibid., 171.
69. Ibid., 217.
70. Ibid., 227-28.
71. Ibid., 222.
72. Ibid., 227.

73. Ibid., 236.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., 241.
76. Ibid., 241; 244.
77. Ibid., 263.
78. Ibid., 265.
79. Ibid., 266.
80. Ibid., 270.
81. Ibid., 281.
82. Ibid., 304-05.
83. Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1892) with an introduction by Rayford W. Long, ed., New York: Collier Books, 1962, 58.
84. Levy, Long Song, 232.
85. Ibid., 308.
86. Ibid., 186.
87. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Identity: Community, Culture, Difference. Jonathan Rutherford, ed., London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, 222.
88. Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," New Left Review 209 (January/February 1995): 7.
89. Maria Helena Lima, "Pivoting the Centre: The Fiction of Andrea Levy," Write Black: Write British: from Post Colonial to Black British Literature. Kadija Sesay ed., Hertford: Hansib Publications, 2005, 79-80.
90. Levy, "Writing of The Long Song."
91 Ibid.