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Voice and Noise—a Review of Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (London: Headline Review, 2010), 336 pp.

Andrea Levy's enjoyable fifth novel, *The Long Song* (2010), is a very noisy novel. The characters yell, shout, scream, screech, bellow, holler, howl, pant, argue, quarrel, sing and talk. The setting of the novel, the sugar plantation Amity in early-nineteenth-century Jamaica, is a boisterous place, and there are many voices pitched to be heard in the din and chaos of cane-cutting slaves and greedy owners. The island of Jamaica is equally chaotic in the period leading up to abolition of slavery in 1832. But there is even more noise in this novel: the narrator—the former house slave July, who is also the protagonist—lives with her son Thomas, and that household, with three young girls, is as deafening as the printing-press in England, where the son learned his trade. Controlling this commotion is our likable and no-nonsense narrator-protagonist, July. Levy has said that writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that have been left out of the telling, and in this novel, she does so with a vengeance.

The Long Song, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2010, tells the story of July, daughter of slave Kitty and a white slave driver originally from "Scotch Land." July grows up on Amity and becomes the house slave of the plantation owner's sister, the "fatty-batty white woman" Caroline Mortimer. Caroline and July's lives consequently intertwine as the story progresses in fits and starts, covering both big and small events in the history of the plantation and the island. July gives birth to Thomas, whose father is a free negro, and has the child adopted by the "good-godly" Baptist minister and his wife. He is later taken to England, where he learns the printer's trade. His story is told towards the end of the novel, but the reader already knows him: he is the editor and printer of the volume we are reading. He initially intends his mother's story as a modest pamphlet, a thin volume or chapbook, but, as he writes in the foreword to the novel we are reading, it grew.

July experiences freedom and the subsequent period of apprenticeship, and still her life is in tandem with that of her former mistress, Caroline. The relationship between these two characters is delightfully presented and the butt of many jokes. Caroline, relatively new to the Caribbean and suddenly also the new owner of the plantation after her brother dies,

wants the former slave July (whom she calls Marguerite, because it sounds better) to help with the running of the plantation: "'But me can't, missus,' July repeated, 'Me can neither read, nor write.' Her missus was nearly felled by the force of that sudden understanding. 'Oh, Marguerite, 'she said with exasperation, 'why ever not!?'" (160). They even vie for the same man—a good white man who turns bad in the Caribbean. He is almost a Kurtz figure: he journeys to the heart of darkness in the shape of a former sugar plantation where he initially wants to civilise the negroes by being good to them, but ends up virtually wanting to exterminate the brutes. But Levy's touch is, as always, light, intimate and humorous, so he never becomes the same menacing figure as Conrad's.

The novel begins in a Tristram Shandy-like way, with the conception of the narrator-protagonist and with the birth of the book we are reading. But since this frank beginning, about "the white man's limp offering" which has the same effect on Kitty as being "crushed together in a crowd," offends the refined sensibilities of editor and son, July has to start again. As a matter of fact, there are several beginnings with different versions of the birth of July to the formidable slave Kitty. These beginnings are echoed in the many different endings we are offered, before the long song comes to an end. The title is thus aptly chosen: a long song is a cyclical song that has no real ending, but that is sung over and over again, as for example "There's a hole in my bucket."

Levy has described her first three novels as her "baton race" (Younge). The notion of baton passing is a useful description too on what goes on in this novel. In the foreword Thomas writes "My mama had a story—a story that lay so fat within her breast that she felt impelled, by some force which was mightier than her own will, to relay this tale to me, her son. Her intention was that, once knowing the tale, I would then, at some other date, convey its narrative to my own daughters. And so it would go on" (1). The story is like a baton passed down from generation to generation—a never-ending long song. But it also becomes a baton in a wider sense: in the essay collection *A New World Order* (2001), Caryl Phillips discusses how John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong* explores the creation of strong familial ties fashioned around stories passed from father to son and how central this "narrative baton-passing" is to African-American identity construction. Perhaps we can even link these notions of baton passing and cyclical songs with Toni Morrison's warning in *Beloved* that "this is not a story to pass on" (Morrison 274-75), yet through that complex weave of memory and forgetting which is at the root of narratives of slavery, stories are passed on, from father to son, from mother to daughter, and, as in *The Long Song*, from mother to son, to daughters—and to readers (324).

The novel is a good example of what Linda Hutcheon calls a historiographic metafiction, interested in the telling of a story set in a turbulent past and in the unreliability of both description and depiction (Hutcheon 3). We see an example of the latter in the novel's ekphrastic treatment of the paintings of the artist Francis Bear. When Bear is seen painting a view of the plantation that deliberately does not include a negro village right in front of his eyes—it spoils the view—he is castigated: "'But you paint an untruth." But he also paints the truth in a double portrait of master, mistress and former house slave—how the eyes of the white master caress July and not the portly mistress, even though the painter has slimmed her down for the pictorial occasion. The novel constantly asks questions about truth, reliability and authenticity. Indeed it is a novel that abounds with all kinds of questions by all kinds of characters.