Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue Moderne per la Comunicazione e la Cooperazione Internazionale
Classe LM-38

Tesi di Laurea

SUGAR SLAVES

From Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* to Andrea Stuart's *Sugar in the Blood*

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Anno Accademico 2018 / 2019

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"I do not know if coffee and sugar are essential to the happiness of Europe, but I know well that these two products have accounted for the unhappiness of two great regions of the world: America has been depopulated so as to have land on which to plant them; Africa has been depopulated so as to have the people to cultivate them."[1]

[1] Volume 1Bernardin de Saint Pierre Jacques-Henri, *Voyage to Isle de France, Isle ,Be Bourbon, The Cape of Good Hope ... With New Observations on Nature and Mankind by an Officer of the King*, Volume 1, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever we pour some sugar into our beverages we probably do not realise the history that lies behind that habitual gesture. Sugar has become so common today, that we take it for granted. Always present in our kitchens, we sometimes even abuse it. We are now slaves of its sweetness, and yet, its history is not sweet at all. This thesis is about this. It is about the millions of sugar slaves who were sacrificed to sweeten the world.

In this dissertation, I analyse two literary works: *The Lamplighter* by the Scottish author Jackie Kay and *Sugar in the Blood. A Family's History of Slavery and Empire* by the Barbadian author Andrea Stuart. Both of these works are ascribable to the literary subgenre of neo-slave narratives, contemporary works about slavery and the investigation of black subjectivity. *The Lamplighter* is fictional, but is nonetheless the product of an intense archival research. *Sugar in the Blood* is the true history of the author's family, whose past is deeply immersed in slavery.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first one aims at providing a generic historical background to slavery, an institution that has always existed, for it is as ancient as mankind. Therefore, in order to fully understand Atlantic slavery, I believe it is important to look further in the past, and see how various types of bondage have influenced and characterised different societies over the centuries.

In this short historical excursus, I go over several ancient societies that have left records of having established some form of slavery. Starting from the Sumerians in 2000 BC, passing through Babylonia and Egypt, I arrive to the better known form of bondage that was developed in the Greek and Roman societies. After spending some time describing how slavery was characterised in the classical antiquity, I move on to discuss the main forms of bondage established throughout the Middle Ages, mainly slavery and serfdom. I describe these two forms, underlining similarities and differences and I also consider the role and position of Christianity regarding bondage.

Certainly, this very brief discussion of slavery throughout history does not claim to be either thorough or complete. Much more could be said about bondage in each period considered. But the aim of this brief analysis is to show that slavery has always existed, even long before the Atlantic slave trade, which is generally what we tend to think of when we hear the term slavery. I have thus pointed out other forms of bondage and compared them to the best known Atlantic slavery, analysing differences and similarities which help to understand what will be discussed in the following chapters.

Following this survey of the various experiences of slavery through time, there is a short introduction to Atlantic slavery, which will be discussed extensively and in detail in the following chapters. The last section of the first chapter tries to give an estimate of the economic weight of the slave trade. At that time, there was no activity that was not directly or indirectly connected to the trade. The English industrialization process was accelerated thanks to an expansion of the international market, the production of new goods to be traded, the consequent creation of new industries and financial institutions, the development of the shipping industry and the adoption of new production techniques and technologies. It is extremely difficult to provide precise figures. However, it seems rather clear that the increase in wealth, the expansion of trade and industrial development have led to those extraordinary transformations that historians have called the Industrial Revolution.

In the second chapter I analyse Atlantic slavery through Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter.* Kay is a Scottish writer, born to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father, and was adopted by a Scottish couple. In her works, she explores human experiences and emotions and often deals with the issue of identity. As a black feminist activist, she works with identity and difference, in relation to gender, skin colour, origin, social status and sexual orientation.

Among her works, which are mainly poetry, she wrote a radio play, *The Lamplighter*, broadcast on BBC radio 3 on the 25th March 2007 on the occasion of the

bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. In this work, which is the product of accurate historical and archival research, we hear a chorus of female voices that evoke the experience of slavery. As the author declared, *The Lamplighter* is her contribution to bring a forgotten story to the surface. Jackie Kay urges her own people to acknowledge the slave trade as part of their past. Slavery is often reduced to a couple of paragraphs in the chapter on Atlantic voyages and discoveries. This part of history has undergone a process of statistical reductionism: we read about the 10-15 millions of Africans transported to the Americas and enslaved. But behind those numbers there are personal stories of sufferings, humiliations, deprivation and torture. With her play, Kay gives a voice to those nameless numbers and saves them from oblivion.

The Lamplighter is a small volume that tells a huge story: it goes over the experience of slavery from the capture, through the terrible Middle Passage, to the life on the plantations in the New World. This work has no a linear plot structure, it is rather fragmented: the story is split into several pieces told by different voices. This gives the idea of a shared destiny and collective and timeless story, that keeps repeating and repeating through the centuries of slavery. *The Lamplighter* is a very powerful text, not only because of its content, but also for its structure and style. It is a very original neo-slave narrative which, through a fascinating blend of play and poetry, has a strong impact on its audience. The oral nature of the play makes it even more unique and allows the listener to feel entirely involved and immersed in a story which is impossible to ever forget.

Among the various products of the slave trade, this play focuses on sugar. It is almost paradoxical that the harshest and bitterest form of slavery was in the sweetest of the crops. Jackie Kay proves so in her play, in which she shows the suffering of slaves to sweeten Europe. Slaves' work on sugar plantations is explained in detail and through this description, an oxymoron between sugar and the bitter lives of those who produced it is created. In the play, the slaves re-appropriate the products of their inhuman work and in doing so, a strong message is conveyed: not only have we

forgotten what is probably the worst crime of humanity, we also seem to ignore that the very world we live in has been built, brick after brick, by the slaves. The Industrial Revolution was indeed largely fuelled by the slave trade, whose enormous profits made possible what we called “modernity”.

The third chapter focuses on sugar, on the history of this commodity and on the second literary work that connects sugar to slavery: Andrea Stuart’s *Sugar in the Blood. A Family’s Story of Slavery and Empire.* Sugar has revolutionized taste and consumption patterns since its arrival in Europe. This product has a very long history, but before the seventeenth century it was a luxury which only the upper classes could afford. Thanks to the plantations in the New World it has become an indispensable item even in the poorest kitchens. Sugar brought about a real revolution, it shaped the colonies, it shaped the lives of millions of people, it shaped the world.

After having analysed the history of such a revolutionary commodity, I started my discussion on *Sugar in the Blood*. The author, Andrea Stuart was born in Barbados, spent her childhood in Jamaica and moved with her family to England at the age of 14. In her career as a writer, she focused on history because she believes that it is connected with the present and the future. In her last published book, *Sugar in the Blood,* she traced back her family’s ancestry of eight generations, uncovering her mixed genealogy, in which both masters and slaves are involved.

Sugar in the Blood begins in the distant seventeenth century, when Stuart’s earliest known ancestor, George Ashby, leaves England to try his fortune in Barbados. Following the author’s family tree, we meet the plantocrat Robert Cooper Ashby and learn about his liaisons with female slaves, whose offspring continued the progeny until our days. Alongside her family story, the author traces the main historical developments over four centuries, combining popular history with a family saga.

In her book, Stuart gives space both to the “white” and to the “black” sides of her family, trying to understand motifs and behaviours of both. In telling her family story, the author keeps a neutral tone, giving credit and critique where each is due.

The combination of historical records and personal reflection, the space given to white colonial history and the neutrality of the narration are the elements that make *Sugar in the Blood* a very peculiar neo-slave narrative.

With this work, Andrea Stuart, like Jackie Kay, wants to take slavery out of the oblivion it has been cast in. She accuses Britain of having conveniently forgotten its responsibility in the slave trade and points at those racist ideologies that still discriminate black people around the world. She also underlines the fundamental role of the slaves in building the world we live in and urges us to acknowledge it

SLAVERY THROUGH HISTORY

1. Slavery in antiquity

When we think of slavery we tend to picture the American South of the nineteenth century, before the Civil War. We generally tend to think of hundreds of black slaves on a plantation, picking cotton in the hot sun. This form of slavery is known as chattel slavery: one person that owns another and forces the slave to work on the owner's behalf. Chattel means property, capital, or livestock, and it has been applied to slaves as well. Atlantic slavery is better known since it is more recent, more documented and also revisited through many film adaptations that have contributed to the popularization of this tragic chapter in world history. However, different forms of slavery have existed in various societies through time. The need to resort to forced labour-power is indeed an old one, dating far back into prehistory. When practically any society we can trace reached a stage of sufficient accumulation of resources and power, so that a greater labour force was needed to carry out all the various activities, that labour force was obtained not by hiring it but by compelling it.[2]

The first written records of existence of slavery come from the ancient Sumerians, around 2000 B.C., followed by the Hammurabi Code in Babylonia, from the late 1600 B.C. The pyramids in Egypt are believed to be mainly the work of slaves and the Bible itself is full of references to slavery. And this is only if we limit our research to written documents. It is very likely, however, that slavery had existed even before that time. Around 10,000 B.C., the populations living in Mesopotamia went over a process of transformation from a hunting-and-gathering society to an agricultural and urban one and together with the domestication of wild animals for agriculture, some

[2] Finley M. I., *The Ancient Economy,* University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1973, p. 66.

men were tamed as well, and put into some form of bondage.[3] The comparison of slaves to animals might shock the modern reader, but it is this kind of ruthless dehumanization that stays at the roots of slavery. Furthermore, it is a view that in past times was not only shared by those who directly profited from bondage, but also by some very famous and cultivated personalities such as the historian Xenophon, who in the fourth century B.C. wrote: "Compare the teaching of slaves, unlike that of free workers, with the training of wild animals".[4] Aristotle himself wrote something on the matter: "Tame animals are naturally better than wild animals, yet for all tame animals there is an advantage in being under human control, as this secures their survival […] by analogy, the same must necessarily apply to mankind as a whole. Therefore, all men who differ from one another by as much as the soul differs from the body or man from a wild beast […] are slaves by nature."[5] Associating slaves with animals was thus a common practice, and has its roots in a very early period. As the ancient historian Keith Bradley observed, in ancient Greek the common term used for "slave" was "andrapodon", which literally translates "man-footed creature" and derives from a term commonly used for cattle "tetrapodon", that means "four-footed creature".[6]

In the ancient world the number of slaves never approached fifty percent of the population. Slaves worked in agriculture, in the construction of public buildings and in private households. Slavery was simply taken for granted and manumission was very rare. The killing of a slave did not account for murder and the killer often only had to pay the slave's market price to the owner. Slaves did play an important role in the sustainment and development of these early societies, but they were not central, as they were in ancient Greece and Rome, therefore they cannot be considered slave societies. The first one in this sense is probably Greece, which is generally and rightfully

[3] Davis David B., *Inhuman bondage: the rise and fall of slavery in the New World*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.
[4] Xenophon, quoted in D. B. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
[5] Aristotle, *Poilitics*, quoted in D. B. Davis, *op. cit.,* pp. 33-34.
[6] Davis, pp. 34-35.

remembered as the cradle of democracy, but which was largely dependent on slave labour.[7]

Slavery in the Greco-Roman era is quite well documented, if compared with more ancient times and, for the purposes of this work, it is worth some attention, since it can be considered the ancestor of the kind of slavery established in the Atlantic colonies a thousand years later. The Greco-Roman period lasted approximately between 1000 B.C. and 500 A.D. and at its height, the Roman Empire spread from the Sahara to Britain and from the Caucasus to the Atlantic. As all societies do, the ancient Romans and Greeks were also used to divide mankind in two categories: themselves and the others, where the others were to be considered inferior and barbarian and thus could be systematically captured and enslaved.[8] After the conquest of a new region, its population was in fact submitted and put in some form of bondage. The ancient Greece and Rome were both slave societies, however, describing their systems in general terms would be very difficult as well as formally imprecise. As these societies evolved, so did the very systems they were based on. Therefore, it is very important to remember that slavery in the antiquity took different forms, according to the specific place and time we refer to.

When talking about ancient times, trying to apply the common binary division between slaves and freemen is conceptually wrong. We should consider two extremities: on the one side we find the slave as property and nothing else, on the other side there is the completely free man. Between these two extremes there is a whole range of different situations and degrees of freedom. Privileges, rights, claims and duties were always there, just in different nuances.[9] The nature and conditions of labour in antiquity precluded the emergence of the idea of a working class and if work was to be done, better leave it to the slaves. Aristotle's view of natural slavery in the first book of the *Politics* might strike us as an extreme position, but it was widely shared

[7] Davis, pp. 27-47.
[8] Walvin James, *Slavery and the slave trade: a short illustrated history*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983.
[9] Walvin, 1983, pp. 1-12.

by the upper classes of the time. Men who engaged in the slavish conditions of employment were made inferior by their work.[10] Skill was surely honoured and admired but it should not be confused with a positive evaluation of work.

The status of the slaves was often regulated by law but in practice their condition varied substantially: some endured rather harsh conditions, others were very eminent men, some were employed in the richest households, others were owned by the very poor. The idea that only the richest could afford to buy slaves may be correct if referred to black slavery in the New World, but not in antiquity. Demosthenes writes in the fourth century B.C. that even the poorest peasant farmers with a small holding of six or seven acres might well own a servant. Even soldiers in the Roman army commonly owned a couple of slaves.[11] Slaves were largely employed as domestic servants and/or farmhand, some of them were trained by craftsmen in artisanal skills, so that their owners could retire and live upon the proceeds of their work. These slaves were either totally dependent from their owners, as would become typical in the American colonies, or were allowed to work independently: in this case the master required a fixed rent and the slaves could keep for themselves whatever they earned in addition.[12] The condition of domestic servants varied greatly and ultimately depended on their master and/or mistress. A cruel ruthless owner would have made the slave's life intolerable, but a kind one would have treated him gently and in the best case scenario, a good relationship with the owner could mean the possibility to be freed. Familiarity with black slavery might wrongly lead us to think that it is an unpaid form of work by definition, but this is not true and it certainly was not the case in classical antiquity, where a good servant could obtain not only the benevolence and favour of his master, but could also purchase his way out of servitude, although freedmen where never recognized full citizenship rights.[13]

[10] Finley, pp. 5-22.
[11] Jones Arnold H. M., "Slavery in the Ancient World" in *The Economic History Review,* New Series, Vol. 9.2 (1956): 185-199.
[12] Walvin, 1983, pp. 1-12.
[13] Walvin, 1983, pp. 1-12.

Ancient Greece was divided in *poleis*, small and partially autonomous city-states with their own inner organization. According to modern standards, these were small-scale societies and as it can be expected, slaves there mainly worked in small units. There were a few exceptions, as for example the silver mines, where thousands of slaves were at work, but the large-scale slave holdings, which characterized the American colonies centuries later, were very rare in antiquity, when the average wealthy citizen rarely owned more than a dozen slaves. The large latifundia of southern Italy were another exception: large plots of lands where slaves produced grain, wine, wool and olive oil for their masters. These large cultivations can be considered the prototype of the later New World plantations. Since reliable population statistics for the ancient world are extremely rare, it is very difficult to say how many slaves there were, even if we restrict our analysis to a specific time and place. It was estimated, on the basis of the data on population, production and consumption of goods in our possession, that slaves in fourth-century Athens could range between 20,000 and 400,000, which is too imprecise an estimate to be even taken into account.[14]

As far as rights and status are concerned, once again it is very difficult to talk in general terms. Nonetheless, I do not intend to provide a deep and complete analysis of slavery in ancient times and for the purposes of this work, it is sufficient to state a few points. Slaves were generally perceived as human, at least in the eyes of the gods, to the extent that they were involved in religious rituals and their murder was punished.[15] Therefore, the slave had some sort of double nature: he was both a person and property, and this created many ambiguities in the way they were treated. This ambiguity was further increased by the practice of freeing slaves, thus creating a category of individuals, the freedmen, who stayed somehow in between. Slaves and free peasants intermarried freely, but the status of their children followed different rules in mixed marriages, according to the law of that time. Slaves were allowed to

[14] Walvin, 1983, p. 3.
[15] Finley, pp. 62-94.

hold property and bequeath it to their children.[16] A freedman's son remained a slave if born before his manumission (unless he was also manumitted), but was completely free if born later. According to the *senatus consultum Claudianum* in A.D. 52, if a free woman lived with a slave, his owner was allowed to consider her (and the future possible offspring) his slave as well. Slaves' offspring were thus put in bondage, but this should not lead us to think that it was common practice to breed slaves: this was quite exceptional and generally related to peace periods, where war captives to be enslaved lacked.[17]

Organized slave rebellions were rather infrequent, the very concept of "class struggle" would be inappropriate when talking about ancient times: it would be more correct to talk about conflicts between groups at different positions in the social scale to obtain more rights and privileges. There is proof of a massive slave revolt in Sicily, which happened around the years 73-71 B.C., when a huge slave army was led by the famous Spartacus into revolt. In the end the Romans managed to crush the rebellion and thousands of slaves were killed.[18] But even in this case, the rebellious aimed at improving their own status, they weren't attacking slavery as institution. This is another important difference from the kind of revolts that were frequently organized in the American colonies, which aimed at overturning the order.

We do not have sufficient data from which to calculate the profitability of slavery in ancient times and there is no way to compare it to that of other types of labour. It surely was a profitable enough institution, since it lasted for so many centuries, although in different forms. As for the other often brought up issue, that slavery prevented technological progress and growth in productivity, there is evidence that proves just the opposite, since some technological progress has been made right in those places where slavery was most brutal and oppressive such as the Spanish mines.[19] The imperial expansion was accompanied by a parallel process, that made

[16] Jones, p.198.
[17] Walvin, 1983, pp. 1-12.
[18] Walvin, 1983, p. 8.
[19] Davis, pp. 42-43.

slaves the foundation of Roman agriculture. It has often been argued over the efficiency and profitability of the slave system. Before the importation of slaves, in fact, Roman agriculture was doing well with the work of the peasantry. But the constant military campaigns drained the lands of such workers, leaving no other choice than the employment of slaves. Slavery was important not only from an economic point of view but also on a social level: slaves occupied the lowest position of the social scale and in a society such as this, where status and esteem mattered greatly, the existence of slavery was not only a thought that comforted the poorest class of freemen, but also one that allowed social and hierarchical stability.[20]

In the end, slavery in antiquity somehow declined, and this needs to be briefly investigated. Again, lack of reliable data prevents us from drawing the complete picture, but a few points can be made certain: slavery was neither abolished nor did it suddenly disappear. The simplest explanation is given by the successful expansion of the Empire itself: during the conquest, more and more peoples were captured and enslaved, but once those regions became fully part of the Empire, those populations needed to be protected from enslavement. Both the end of mass captures and the longer distances the traders had to travel to find slaves made the prices of such machinery higher and higher. This explanation, although correct, is in itself not enough. The lack of peoples to capture and enslave could easily have been replaced by slave breeding, as it happened in the Atlantic colonies after the abolition of the slave trade. If slavery declined in classical antiquity, it is not only due to the drying up of the slave supply but also to a decisive structural transformation in the society. From the beginning of the monarchic government in Rome a different and more complex subdivision of roles and statuses replaced the classical distinction of freemen and slaves. There was no need to go look for slaves at the margins of the empire, when another kind of labour force, free but desperate to work, was available locally. On the lands, slaves were slowly replaced by tenants who, although formally free, were

[20] Walvin, 1983, pp. 1-10.

practically tied to the lands they worked. The decline of slavery was a long and gradual process, which started from the centre and slowly spread to the peripheries.[21]

It is sometimes argued whether Christians contributed to the decline of slavery, despite the proved fact that they never called for its abolition. Indeed, after the conversion of Constantine and the incorporation of the Church into the imperial structure, there is no trace of any kind of legislation aiming to abolish slavery. Quite the opposite: Justinian, remembered as one of the most Christian Emperors, included in his codification of the Roman law a collection of regulations about slavery and provided Christian Europe with a ready-made legal foundation for the slavery they introduced in the New World many centuries later.[22] With the advent of Christianity, slavery was given some sort of religious justification to the extent that a connection between slavery and the original sin was drawn. The Church Father St. Augustine interpreted the society's need for slaves as "a part of a universal human depravity, as the way the world is and must be accepted, as distinguished from the City of God."[23]

"For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule",[24] if words as these were pronounced by an illustrious and cultivated person such as Aristotle, we can assume for certain that the institution of slavery was largely accepted and unquestioned by the common population of the time. In my opinion, however, this should not push us to see it with a more indulgent look. Slavery thrived in the old continent for a thousand years, therefore, in terms of longevity and durability, slavery in antiquity was far worse than Atlantic slavery, which is less known because it is more distant in time and less documented, but it is important to recall it, since it has set the basis for the later and better known black slavery in the Atlantic plantations.

[21] Walvin, 1983, pp. 11-12.
[22] Walvin, 1983, p. 11.
[23] Davis, p. 44
[24] BBC Ethics, Philosophers justifying slavery, accessed on: www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/slavery/ethics/philosophers_1.shtml.

2. Slavery in the Middle Ages

Until the development of Atlantic slavery in the New World colonies, there was no other society in which slavery had the role and the significance it had had in classical antiquity. This does not mean that it disappeared completely, on the contrary: it remained rather common throughout western Europe and in Asia, but there was no slave society *tout court*, in which slavery was central from an economic and demographic point of view.[25] Slave trading would continue to exist as long as conquerors could profit from the selling of war prisoners. In the following pages, we will see the main forms of bondage that characterized the Middle Ages: serfdom in western Europe and slavery in the Islamic world, which is important for it laid the groundwork for the Atlantic slave trade.

The Germanic tribes that moved into the territories of the old Roman Empire, such as the Franks, Angles, Saxons, Bavarians, Lombards, and Burgundians, set up a kind of society that was much different from the Greek or Roman civilizations. This process took hundreds of years, but in medieval Europe, the sharp distinctions between free people and slaves that characterized ancient Greece and Rome slowly disappeared. The dominant form of slavery in western Europe in the Middle Ages was serfdom, a word that comes from Latin *servus*, slave. Serfdom was different from chattel slavery, for the captives were not considered "movable" property. As a matter of fact, serfs were bound to the land they lived and worked on for generations. The medieval system had a very fixed hierarchy: the King was on top, followed by dukes, counts, lords and serfs. Slaves did not really belong to the lords of the land, they belonged to the land itself: in case of a change of ownership, serfs would not follow the lord, they would continue to live and work on that land under the new ownership. In this sense, serfdom is very different from chattel slavery. Nevertheless, this latter did not disappear completely with the end of the Roman era. In western Europe and

[25] Walvin James*, Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Short Illustrated History*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1983.

in the Mediterranean region, a trace of it remained: chattel slaves were, in the year 1000, the 10 percent of Europe's population. The vast majority of people, around 80 Percent, were peasants. Half of them were considered "free", while the other half were serfs.[26]

Serfdom was the typical condition of the lowest class of peasants, who reversed in the most abject conditions and whose bond with their land was so tight that it resulted in some form of servitude. It is however important to draw the distinction between serfs and slaves, because the two statuses where not interchangeable. Both these servile conditions were hereditary, but while the slave was generally dehumanized and considered an object, someone's property, the serf was not perceived as such, although he often had to answer to a master, the owner of the very land they worked.[27] Serfdom, furthermore, was characterized by a limitation of one's freedom in various aspects: movement, purchasing and selling of goods and marriage. Serfs were indeed a step higher in the social scale and a freed slave often became a serf. Slaves, serfs, and free peasants lived and worked side by side and under very similar conditions. They all depended, in one way or another, from the noble class of landowners. Free peasants enjoyed more personal freedom than serfs and slaves. They were allowed to move from the land, marry, and control their possessions. Both free peasants and serfs received plots of land from their lord in exchange for part of their crops and an obligation to work. However, serfs where tied to the land and could not leave it without incurring severe punishment. Serfs could not marry without their lord's permission, and all their possessions officially belonged to their lord. The small minority of chattel slaves had no rights at all. Differently from serfs, they were the lord's property and could be sold independently of the land and punished at his will.[28]

[26] Sylvester Theodore L., *Slavery throughout History*, Thomson Gale, Farmington Hills, 1999, pp. 38-40.
[27] Walvin 1983, pp. 15-20.
[28] Sylvester, pp. 38-40.

The rise of nation-states in Europe was accompanied by a process of concentration of power which resulted in the development of a well-organized and consolidated state whose efficacy was based on control and exploitation. Serfdom increased throughout the centuries and by the twelfth century the English serf was the dominant social group, although at the lowest position of the social scale.[29]

Towards the end of the fourteenth century, serfdom started to decline. As it developed gradually, its decline was gradual as well and for the most part probably caused by the Holy Crusades and the spreading of the Black Death. Many serfs left their lands to serve in the Christian armies of Europe to conquer the lands of the Near East that were under Muslim control. Those who did not die at war, died at the hands of the Black Death. This terrible epidemic spread throughout Europe from 1347 to 1352 and its name is due to the black boils that covered the skin of the infected. This plague killed more than 20 million people in Europe, almost one-third of the population. Due to this huge death rate, the demand for labour grew rapidly and the work force became forcibly more mobile. Those peasants who were still alive tended to leave the country and move to the cities, where the first industrial developments demanded more and more workers. The land owners had thus to be competitive and started to offer better wages and conditions, to attract rural workers. This however undermined the very structure and social organization that had existed so far. By the fifteenth century, serfdom in western Europe had almost completely disappeared. [30]

And what about the Church? One might ask. In the middle ages the Christian Church had an immense power: its influence was spread as in no other times, various courts throughout Europe needed its support and swore loyalty and countless wars were fought in the name of God. As far as its position towards slavery is concerned, the Church did very little to fight against it. There is proof of some Church assemblies aimed at improving the lot of slaves but there is also proof that it held slaves as well. Pope Gregory the Great emancipated two slaves who belonged to the Roman Church

[29] Walvin 1983, pp. 16-17.
[30] Sylvester, p. 40.

and other documents prove the existence of slaves within religious environments.[31] There were some discordant voices who, inspired by the most profound religious beliefs, spoke in favour of the slaves and their denied humanity, but they were just that: discordant voices in a choir only willing to look at the economic side of the issue and that considered slavery indispensable.

As we will see, from the fifteenth century onwards, slavery would take on another meaning and a new enslavement system would develop. Slaves would go back to be considered objects, someone's property and would be taken from Africa to work on the plantations across the Atlantic to make Europe prosper. However, before moving to that, it is important to remark that the European slave trade in Africa was not something new for the continent. Arab-Muslim's enslavement of black Africans, in fact, predates that of western Europeans. Portuguese traders thus established their trade by profiting, at first, of this well-established Arab enslavement system.[32]

Arabs had dominated the trafficking in African slaves since about the eighth century. Slaves were taken from sub-Saharan East Africa and sold in the Middle East, India, and regions of Central Asia. Although these slaves were forcibly converted to Islam, enslavement had nothing to do with religion or the spreading of Islam: slaves were captured and employed for profit, just as would be the case with Europeans a few centuries later. Villages were raided and plundered, older men and women were massacred and the young and strong part of the population, children included, were then captured by the raiders. Young women were targeted because of their value as concubines or sex slaves, while the boys were castrated and made to work in wealthy Arab and Mediterranean homes. The gender ratio of slaves in the Islamic trade was two females to every male, while in the Atlantic slave trade, it was exactly the opposite. Large numbers of slaves were employed as domestic servants. Concubinage was very common among the richest classes and there was no social or moral stigma

[31] Pijper Frederik, "The Christian Church and slavery in the middle ages", *The American Historical Review*, 14.4 (1909): 675-695.
[32] Blackburn Robin, "The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery", in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 54.1 (1997): 65-102.

attached to having women as sexual objects. All this means that, historically speaking, it is possible to distinguish two Middle Passages for black African slaves: the Asian, or trans-Saharan trade in the Middle Ages and the Western, or trans-Atlantic trade in the modern period. In both cases, the African slaves had no control whatsoever over themselves and their destiny and the kind of physical, psychical, social and cultural disruptions and damages were massive and profound.[33]

3. Atlantic slavery

The "discovery" of the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and the colonization of it by European powers soon led to the reinstitution of large-scale chattel slavery. The Portuguese were the first to start the slave trade, followed by the Spaniards, the British, the French, and so on. Many colonists at first tried to enslave and exploit the work of native Indian populations in the West Indies. But these, already decimated by the colonial conquest, were soon finished off by enslavement. The British also tried to use white indentured servants coming from the poorest regions in Europe, but they were not available in the numbers needed for large-scale plantations and where soon replaced by the higher productivity and profitability of enslaved Africans. The number of the victims of the slave trade is still object of debate among the scholars, but a good estimate considers that about 11-15 million of Africans have been forcibly taken across the Atlantic between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.[34]

As we have seen, slavery had existed in Africa since ancient times and most slaves were war captives of conflicts between local tribes. However, when the

[33] Falola Toyin, Warnock Amanda, *Encyclopedia of the Middle Passage*, Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport CT, 2007, pp. 237-240.
[34] Blackburn Robin, *The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery*, in William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series 54.1 (1997): 65-102.

Europeans began to trade for slaves, tribal wars increased both in size and in number. Although Europeans were trading from the western coast of the continent, slaves were also captured hundreds of miles from the coast. They were often bought and sold several times on their march to the slave ships and then embarked for a very long, dreadful and dangerous journey across the Middle Passage.[35] In the New World, slaves worked in agriculture and lived in rural areas. On plantations, they grew crops such as sugarcane, tobacco, coffee, and cotton to be exported to Europe. Slaves were also used for industrial purposes, in mines, factories, and workshops. All these activities, due to the appalling working conditions and the dangers connected to each specific task, proved to have quite a high mortality rate. Slaves also worked as domestic servants in the households of plantation owners. Domestic slaves surely lived in better conditions than rural slaves, but if a classification is to be made, city slaves generally enjoyed the highest degree of personal freedom that can be allowed in bondage, for they were permitted to live on their own and to hire out their own labor, provided that they paid their masters part of their wages.[36]

Slaves were considered chattel, someone's property. They were treated worse than animals, as if they were objects: pure labour force deprived of humanity. About 30% of them died in their first three to four years due to overwork, poor diet, diseases, and harsh and frequent beatings. Slave masters tried to obtain as much out of their investment as quickly as possible. Most of them believed that if one fourth of their slaves lived longer than three years, they had gotten their money's worth.[37] Death mortality was particularly elevated among recent immigrants if compared with creoles born on the islands, both for African slaves and white planters (although in smaller numbers than slaves). This was due to the fact that their bodies were not adapted to the climate of tropical islands and to the hard work required by sugar.[38]

[35] Sylvester Theodore L., *Slavery throughout History*, Thomson Gale, Farmington Hills, 1999, pp. 40-44.
[36] Davis David B.*, Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006.
[37] Sylvester, p. 42.
[38] Davis, p. 117.

The more rapidly the plantations in a particular area were growing, the worse the working and living conditions of slaves were. These also had a negative impact on the slaves' fertility and on the birth rate of the slave population. The consequence of a low birth rate was an increase in import of new slaves from Africa. This means that Caribbean plantations, especially when they grew rapidly, always depended on destroying the lives of more and more Africans to be taken into slavery in the New World.[39]

Throughout history, slaves have fought their condition of bondage by resisting their masters, running away and rebelling. The penalties for such behaviours were always the most severe possible: slaves were whipped, beaten, branded, burned, mutilated, and killed. But such violent reprisals did not prevent slaves from trying over and over again. Rebellions in the Americas were very frequent, although mostly unsuccessful.[40] For the majority of slaves, freedom came only in one way: with death.

It has been argued that slavery in the British colonies was far more severe and dreadful than in French or Spanish colonies. This has often been attributed to the benevolent influence and control of the Church in France and Spain and, therefore, their territories. However, it has also been proved that the Christian Church did not really condemn slavery, on the contrary, this institution seems to have been justified by a manipulative and too literal interpretation of the most important sacred text: the Bible. From the book *Genesis*,[41] the account of Ham's curse has been often related to slavery. It is told that one day Noah drank too much and fell asleep completely naked. One of his sons, Ham, saw him and was severely punished for this. Actually, he was not directly punished for this transgression, for Noah's curse fell on Canaan, Ham's son: "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren."[42] Leaving aside the controversial interpretation of this biblical passage, concerning the nature of

[39] Stinchcombe Arthur L., *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, p. 12.
[40] Sylvester, pp. 43-44.
[41] The First Book of Moses, Called Genesis, King James Bible.
[42] Genesis 9:20–27, *King James Bible.*

Ham's transgression and the severity and injustice of Noah's punishment, Noah's curse on Canaan has often been interpreted as a religious justification of slavery. Given that Africans were believed to be descendants of Ham, according to biblical references, it appears quite clear why it was impossible to oppose the enslavement of Africans on religious grounds. Noah's curse, however, was not the only proof of a religious justification of slavery: Africans were repeatedly condemned for their bahaviour and lifestyle, which did not conform to the norms of Christianity and their dark skin reminded of the devil, for it was often portrayed as black.[43] Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church, the most powerful institution in Europe in the fifteenth century, provided strong ideological support for European enslavement of the black peoples of Africa, and from the very beginning. As a matter of fact, Popes Nicholas V and Calixtus III granted the Portuguese the right to subdue and enslave native, non-Christian peoples in Africa and the New World, as a way to oppose Islam's rapid expansion into Western Europe. The Christian approval of the slave system can be proved with various important church documents, such as the *Dum Diversas* of 1452, the *Romanus Pontifex* of 1455, and the *Inter Caetera* of 1456 which provided the moral, legal, and political justification for the western European trade in African human beings. These Papal Bulls granted Spain and Portugal dominion over the lands they "discovered" and encouraged the enslavement of non-Christian peoples in Africa and the New World.[44]

Throughout the slave period in the Americas, the trade in slaves from Africa to the colonies in the West Indies was a very lucrative business. It has been proved, in fact, that much of the commercial success of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was based on profits made thanks to slavery, as will be explained later in this chapter. As James Walvin explains: ''To put the matter simply, African slavery worked, it provided labour at a price Europeans could afford, in numbers they required and all to profitable economic use. Thus it was that Africans were quickly reduced from

[43] Blackburn, pp. 90-97.
[44] Falola Toyin, Warnock Amanda, *Encyclopedia of the Middle Passage*, Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport CT, 2007.

humanity to inanimate objects of trade and economic calculation.''[45] The triangulation worked all in favour of the Europeans, for slaves were the central gear of a very lucrative machine: in Africa, they were purchased with European goods and in the New World, they produced commodities for the Europeans. Without them, both of these trades would have been impossible or at least far less lucrative.

The abolition of slavery was a long and troubled process that involved, slowly, all slaving countries. Britain pioneered with the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, immediately followed by the United States in 1808, Sweden in 1813, the Netherlands in 1814 and France in 1817. The abolition of slavery arrived for British colonies more than thirty years after the ban on the trade, in 1838. After having abolished slavery in all its territories, Britain started to pressure other countries to do the same. Denmark followed in 1846 and France in 1848. In 1858 Portugal abolished slavery in its colonies, although all slaves were subject to a twenty-year apprenticeship, therefore real freedom for slaves in Portuguese colonies only came in 1878. In 1861 slavery is abolished in Dutch Caribbean colonies and in 1865 in the United States. The last two countries that, with much pressure from other states, abolished slavery were Cuba in 1886 and Brazil in 1888.[46]

This short excursus of slavery throughout history does not claim to be exhaustive nor complete. The purpose was to underline the important and stable presence of slavery in the various societies and civilizations throughout the history of the world. Now that Atlantic slavery has been briefly introduced, the following chapters will look at it more in details, with the purpose of acknowledging the impact it had on Europe and its industrial development. I will deal with Atlantic slavery both in general terms and more specifically focused on sugar slavery, to show how bitter its history really is and what a revolutionary effect it had on Western societies. The

[45] Walvin James, *Atlas of Slavery*, Pearson Education, London, 2006, p. 2.
[46] Davis, pp. XIV-XV.

reasons for this choice to focus on sugar are related to the uniqueness of this commodity, for it is very different from all the other products of the trade.

Sugarcane was a very difficult crop to grow, it needed expert hands and several attempts to learn the best way to cultivate it. The refining process was even more complicated. However, those planters who finally succeeded in starting a sugar plantation, would profit greatly from it and increase their wealth extremely rapidly and abundantly. If sugar was a blessing for planters, it surely was the worst curse for the slaves that had to work it: sugar plantations are believed to be among the worst from all perspectives. Working in sugar fields was in fact exhausting, very difficult and delicate and, because of the high economic value of sugar, every mistake was severely punished by the owners.[47]

Furthermore, the importance of sugar is also related to its effect on Europe: sugar started off as a small-scale luxury trade, but it proved extremely influential. It created a taste for sweetness, and a commercial and financial system to satisfy that taste. Sugar did not transform only the place of its final destination, but also that of its origin. It usually caused an increase in population of 5-10 %, because it was far more labor intensive per acre than any other crops. Of course, this signified a growth of the slave population, which needed to be imported on a large scale until the nineteenth century, that is, when the trade became illegal. The "sugar turn" in many of the Caribbean islands, the period in which much of the land and population started to raise sugar cane to extract and produce the so called "white gold", greatly increased the intensity of cultivation. On sugar islands, at least four people out of five were employed in the sugar production process, a rate that was never reached by any other commodity. The planters who ran sugar plantations were the richest and most powerful people in these societies. Sugar plantations were indeed extremely powerful: with their two hundred slaves and a few white managers they had roughly ten times the economic and political weight of any other plantation producing cocoa, coffee or

[47] Walvin in Angeletti, p. 221.

tobacco with twenty slaves and an owner family to manage them, and one hundred times the weight of a small plantation held and cultivated by a peasant family with a couple of slaves. [48]

3.1 Atlantic slavery and the making of the modern world

In world history, only two models have proved to be successful for the industrialization process: a private market-based model and a state command-based model. England was the first example for the former model, while the Soviet Union was the first example for the latter. The private market-based model cannot be successfully completed without intensive international trade. Nevertheless, its role has been long ignored in studies of the Industrial Revolution. It is very much clear that without the fundamental contribution of international trade the process would not have been successfully completed at the time it was.[49]

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were marked by the successful expansion of trade and with regard to Britain, quite an interesting role was played by the so-called "triangular trade". In this business triangulation, Britain supplied the exports and the ships, Africa the human capital and the colonies the raw materials. The manufactured goods were shipped from England, exchanged in Africa for slaves, who were taken to the colonies and eventually exchanged for raw materials. In all these exchanges, the profits the English obtained were extremely high. This kind of commerce gave a triple impulse to British industry. First, slaves were purchased with English manufactures; second, the products cultivated in the plantations needed to be processed and for that new industries were created in the mother country; third, as time went by and the colonies started to prosper, a new market was created for

[48] Stinchcombe, p. 87.
[49] Inikori Joseph E., *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

Britain.[50] This last point is particularly relevant, since not only were the colonies one of the main sources that financed British industrialization, they also contributed to its rapid growth and development. Such an increase in production could not have been absorbed by the continental market, the colonies played an important role, since their increasing demand extended the British export market and prevented any inflationary risk.[51] The value of British manufacturing exports more than doubled between the beginning and the end of the eighteenth century: manufacturing exports going to Europe fell from 82 to 42 percent, while those going to America and Africa rose from 12 to 43 percent. Therefore, it was the widening of the market that saved British exports, since the old markets were drying up. The profits obtained from this machinery constituted one of the primary sources that financed the Industrial Revolution[52].

Nonetheless, many studies have been carried out on the European and more specifically British Industrial Revolution without taking into account the contribution given by the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the colonial plantations. This omission is due to an understatement of the economic importance of the trade; as a matter of fact the theories that make a case for such inference are all based on Stanley Engerman's *small ratios* argument[53], which claims that the import of the trade to British economic growth was too small to be even considered. However, the statistical share for overall British trade at the end of the eighteenth century compares favourably with many major modern industrial powers[54].

The first lengthy study on the African contribution to European industrialization is Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), which ultimately triggered a series of

[50] Williams Eric, *Capitalism & Slavery, N*ew York, Russell & Russell, 1944.
[51] Inikori Joseph E. and Engerman Stanley L. editors, The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe, Duke university press, Durham, 1992.
[52] Solow Barbara L., Engerman Stanley L.*, British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery. The Legacy of Eric Williams,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987.
[53] For more details see: Engerman Stanley L., "The Slave Trade and British Capital Formation in the Eighteenth Century: A Comment on the Williams Thesis", *The Business History Review*, Vol. 46.4 (1972): 430-443.
[54] Inikori, Engerman, p. 254.

researches and studies on the topic. To date, many recent scholars have challenged Williams' theory on the centrality of the African slave trade to British industrialization. These scholars have concluded that the slave trade was not exceedingly profitable and its profits were not large enough to be considered *the* or even *a* major contributing factor in that accumulation of capital which is believed to have triggered the Industrial Revolution. If one reads Williams strictly, the critics on statistical grounds are correct; however, overseas markets incentivized cost-reducing technologies and capital mobilization. Therefore, slavery's contribution to capital accumulation was probably less exceptional than what Williams claimed but it did play a role nevertheless. There is a much broader agreement on slavery's decisive role in the creation of the Atlantic economic system than on its precise contribution to British and/or European industrialization, which remains quite an unresolved issue, source of an on-going debate among the scholars.[55]

3.1.1 Economic growth and industrialization

In the centuries of the so called “Mercantilist Era” there was no industry or activity that was not directly or indirectly connected to the trade. It was estimated that one family living in the West Indies gave work to at least five seamen and many more manufacturers and tradesmen and that every person living there brought in ten-pound clear profit to England each year. The annual income from West Indian plantations was assessed at four million pounds, which was four time the average income in the rest of the world[56]. The key points that relate international trade to the industrialization process in Britain are the following: the expansion of the international market, the role of imported goods in the creation of new tastes and consumption patterns; the

[55] Seymour Drescher, From Slavery to Freedom. Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery, Macmillan Publishers, London, 1999.
[56] Williams, pp. 52-53.

subsequent development of new industries; the role of the colonies in providing essential raw materials; the development of shipping and financial institutions; the adoption of new technologies and new forms of organizing production.[57]

The Atlantic trade and the employment of African slaves in the New World offered, probably for the first time in the history of the world, the opportunity to develop a division of labour through various countries spread all over the globe, all linked by one single, though very large, market. This stimulated production, which resulted in accumulation of wealth and consequently in growth of consumption, which, in turn, triggered production even more, creating a circuit of growth almost unstoppable. These were the premises for the future technological and industrial development.[58] The code word for this success in Britain was monopoly. The mercantile system was indeed based on a principle of strict monopoly: the colonies were forced to send their products to England and England only, using English ships. They could buy nothing from other countries without passing through England first. The Navigation Laws prohibited commerce with rival countries such as France and especially the Netherlands, which could provide services at far more attractive rates.

The branch of industry that received the highest impulse from the trade was shipbuilding. England had a long history as a naval force and its ships had sailed the seas for centuries. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this industry simply boomed: the amount of ships needed for the trade was increasing day after day. Employment to more and more seamen was therefore provided and all the subsidiary activities related to shipbuilding also flourished. The number of ships entering the London port tripled between 1705 and 1795, the dock activity thus increased as well and port cities benefited greatly from that. Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow became indeed prominent cities and had a major role in the trade. In those cities there is not a single spot upon which slave blood has not been shed. In 1787 Bristol had thirty vessels engaged in the slave trade and seventy-two in the West Indian trade, which

[57] Inikori, p. 8.
[58] Klein Herbert S., The Atlantic slave trade, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

was worth to the city twice as much as all the other overseas commerce combined. It has often been said that Bristol, without the West Indian trade, would have been a modest fishing port.[59] Liverpool is even a better example: in 1565, only seven streets were inhabited, there were 138 householders and at the port only twelve ships. However, between 1709 and 1771 the number of ships increased four times and the sailors six times; the population rose from 5,000 to 34,000. Liverpool was the leading city in the African trade and it has been estimated that the 138 ships sailing from its port to Africa represented a capital of over a million pounds. It would be wrong to limit our analysis to England, since the Act of Union of 1707 allowed Scotland to take part in the trade. This gave a strong impulse to the growth and development of cities such as Glasgow, where sugar and tobacco refining industries flourished until the mid-nineteenth century.[60]

The manufacturing of various products also boomed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the more prosperous the colonies became, the more they were willing to spend on goods manufactured in the mother country. Together with slaves, the ships sailing to the colonies were loaded with any kind of product: clothing, ornaments, food and beverages, weapons, potteries, hardware and so on. Wool was, before the development of the cotton industry, one of the top exporting products of the trade. Woollen clothing was traded especially in Europe and North America but, despite the non-practicality of this fabric in such torrid climate conditions, it was largely exported to Africa and the Caribbean as well. In the eighteenth century however, the cotton industry took over and replaced the woollen industry in the trade with Africa and the West Indies.[61] The growth of Cottonopolis, the eighteenth-century nickname for Manchester, is largely dependent on this very lucrative slice of market. In 1779 the Manchester cotton exports amounted to over 300,000 pounds, of which one third went to the slave cost, one half to the West Indies and the remaining to

[59]Williams, p. 61.
[60] Williams, p. 56.
[61] Williams, pp. 65-68.

Europe and other smaller markets. The number one competitor in this market was India, which mastered the technique of dying fabric so formidably that its products *would have been* far cheaper than the English ones. *Would have been* because the protectionist England prevented these products from being competitive through the application of prohibitive duties on Indian imports. This measure gave Manchester a complete monopoly, as far as Britain and its colonies were concerned. Moreover, the cotton textile industry developed in England as an "import substitution industry", which means that its products replaced those coming from another country, in this case India. This is indeed the reason for the rapid expansion of this industry, which simply exploited already well-established markets.[62]

The slave trade also gave impulse to the metallurgical industry, through the demand of gruesome goods such as chains, padlocks, bars, fetters, branding irons and weapons. Birmingham became the centre of this industry, whose products were both directly used by the traders and exchanged for slaves. Indeed, a common saying of the time was "the price of a Negro is one Birmingham gun".[63] Iron exports almost tripled between 1710 and 1735 and together with iron, copper and brass went along. The latter was especially used for pans and kettles, exported both to Africa and to the West Indies. Copper was essential for ship sheathing.[64]

The refining of colonial raw material gave birth to new industries in England, among which the most important was undoubtedly sugar. Brown sugar was obtained in the Caribbean colonies through the processing of the sugar cane and then exported to the mother country, where it was further processed in the refineries and turned into the common white sugar, which was finally distributed all over the world. Sugar was not refined directly in the colonies, for there was a ban on refining sugar on the plantations. This had nothing to do with the lack of skills or resources, but was a deliberate policy of the mother country to obtain greater profits. The sugar industry

[62] Inikori, Engerman, pp. 145-147.
[63] Williams, p. 82
[64] Williams, pp. 81-84.

grew exceedingly as it became one of the necessities of life and not a luxury product anymore. The earliest reference to sugar refineries in England dates back to 1615, while by the mid-eighteenth century there were over 120 refineries, which gave employment to over a thousand men. Moreover, the distribution of the product required many subsidiary activities along with ships and wagons for transportation. Bristol was an important city in the sugar map, in 1799 there were twenty refineries, whose sugar was considered superior in quality than the one produced in London. Due to its geographical position, its principal markets were Ireland, Wales, and West England. Another city that profited a lot from this business was Glasgow, which entered the market already in the second half of the seventeenth century. However, before 1707, direct trade with the colonies was prohibited and the city had to depend on Bristol for the raw materials, which was a great disadvantage. With the Act of Union Glasgow became one of the leading ports of entry for sugar cargoes. What is particularly interesting about sugar is the peculiar way it contributed to British economic growth: leaving numbers aside, sugar managed to create a brand new market and created new needs, new tastes and new consumption patterns. In a few years, what was an exclusive product became very common and almost a necessity. This was the real economic force of sugar.[65]

One of the most important sugar by-products are molasses, from which rum can be distilled. Rum, however, did not contributed to the British industrial development as wool, cotton, and sugar did, probably because it was directly produced in the colonies and imported in the mother country. Nonetheless, rum was a fundamental product for the trade, both because it was used as naval ration for seamen and, more importantly, as primary tool of bargain with African slave traders. West Indian planters claimed that rum accounted for one fourth of the value of all their other products. However, its production was against the interests of English corn cultivation, from which gin could be distilled. Rum and gin contended for the pole

[65] Inikori, Engerman, pp. 183-200.

position throughout the eighteenth century, which was quite notorious for its alcoholism.[66]

Britain was thus accumulating great wealth from the triangular trade, which eventually financed the industrial expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many British banks established in that period were directly associated with the trade, as for example Barclay and Lloyds, which later became important sources of credit for British industry.[67] At that time, it was very typical for tradesmen to turn into merchants and then into bankers. Many bankers were indeed slave traders themselves or had some interests in the trade. This is not of secondary importance, since the high initial costs and the long time required to start obtaining some profit meant that those who didn't possess a capital to invest had to resort to bank credits.[68] Since the slave trade and the plantations in the West Indies were the most valuable activities, the rising insurance companies found a large and lucrative market.

The heavy industry also has to thank the triangular trade for its success. Famous names of the Industrial Revolution were closely connected with the trade. We all have studied at school the wonderful invention of steam engine by James Watt, which was however financed by capitals coming directly from the West Indies.

In general terms, the assessment of the role of Africans is based on their contribution to the growth of England's international trade between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, which is directly proportional to the growth of Atlantic commerce that involved the colonies across the Atlantic. This latter growth is explained through the employment of Africans as forced labour force in large-scale production of commodities. The decline of the Amerindian population and the subsequent rise of the African is another proof of the essentiality of slave labour. Export production in the British Caribbean, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, was carried out entirely by Africans. It is not just a coincidence that from the

[66] Williams, pp. 78-81.
[67] Inikori, Engerman, 257-258.
[68] Klein, 1999, pp. 100-101.

mid-seventeenth century, as export production expanded, the African share of the total population increased from 42 percent in 1660 to 91.1 in 1780 and to 93.8 in 1833. Furthermore, the African population was concentrated exactly on those areas specialized in export commodity production and, as the African population grew over time, so did their production, which rose to 69 percent in the seventeenth century and to 80 in the eighteenth.[69]

3.1.2 The debate on economics and racism

It has been estimated that the British Atlantic trade was the most profitable slave trade and for various reasons. British industry was able to provide goods to trade more easily and cost-effectively, the geographical area for their commerce was immense and their ships were lighter and faster[70]. However, it is very difficult to give precise profit rates, especially because it was a very fluctuating market, in which very successful expeditions went side by side with clamorous failures. This kind of trade resembled very much to a lottery: the success of an expedition or of a planter depended on so many variables that it was more a matter of luck than skills.

As for exactly how profitable this trade was for Britain and Europe in general, many theories have been elaborated, some of them talking about very huge quantities. However, recent studies have proved that the average profit was around ten percent of the total, which is undoubtedly a good rate for the time, but not as extraordinary as was believed in the past.[71] Slavery did help making eighteenth-century Britain richer, more commercial, and more industrial and these developments,

[69] Inikori, p. 192.
[70] Olivier Petre-Grenouilleau, *La Tratta degli Schiavi*, *saggio di storia globale,* Il Mulino, Bologna, 2006
[71] Klein, 1999, pp. 98-99.

combined with other factors, led to the extraordinary technical improvements that we call Industrial Revolution.[72]

It is clear how Britain (and many other colonialist countries) was unable to establish an adequate labour force in the colonies without resorting to enslavement. The natives were soon decimated by European conquests and diseases; wage labour would have been less profitable than slavery and more difficult to be found in large numbers, which were required by the large plantation system. In a new colony, where land is abundant and cheap, there will be no voluntary supply of labour, because labourers would prefer working on their own land. Therefore, the only solution Britain could find to meet the labour demand was bondage.[73]

Eric Williams, in his *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), argues that the reasons why black African slaves were employed had to do, at first, more with economics than with racism: black slavery had nothing to do with the colour of the labourer, it depended on the cheapness of the labour provided. Racial theories of inferiority came later to justify the inhuman way slaves were treated, but the choice of Africans was made on a pure economic reasoning. Williams's theory, which was quite revolutionary at that time, contends that the rise of mercantilism in the sixteenth and throughout the eighteenth centuries required slavery and thus caused its rise, while the decline of mercantilism towards the end of the eighteenth century caused its fall.[74] Williams presents African slaves as a productive source of wealth for England and as victims of economic exploitation. Indeed, blacks were undoubtedly superior than whites in terms of endurance, docility and labour capacity and the money that bought a white man's servitude for ten years, could buy a black man for life. The fundamental fact behind slavery is that products such as sugar, tobacco and cotton required large plantations and hordes of cheap labour. Barbados for instance had in 1645 11,200 small white farmers and 5,680 black slaves, while in 1667 there were 745 large plantation owners

[72] Solow, Engerman, pp. 1-24.
[73] Williams, p. 29
[74] Drescher, pp. 1-5.

and 82,023 slaves. The crops were worth, over a twenty-month period, over three million pounds, which correspond to fifteen million today.[75] Thus, Williams concludes that slavery was not born of racism, but rather that slavery led to it. Black slavery was only a solution to the Caribbean labour demand, without it, the great development of sugar plantations would have been impossible. Williams' hypothesis is supported by hundreds of articles, which prove that scholars of economic history agree quite unanimously on the primacy of economics as explanation for the rise of slave labour. Non-economic factors, such as race, can and should be taken into account, but only marginally.[76]

Consequently, if the origin of slavery was purely economic, its abolition, Williams argues, was based on economic reasons as well. After the American Revolution, the trade became less profitable for the British and this is the primary reason for the emancipation of slaves, which, according to Williams, had little to do with the rise of philanthropic or humanitarian values. For Williams abolition was mainly a history of elites. Hegemonic interests played the greater part: slave resistance finally managed to undermine the system, but only after and because the metropolitan capitalists had already turned against it. Even abolitionist movements are given little credit in the dissolution of this institution; in *Capitalism and Slavery* they are treated as an echo, a chorus that sustained, rather than led to, abolition.[77] This has given rise to many heated debates about humanitarian against economic motives. Humanitarianism does not have to lose its force only because economic reasons happened to coincide. Undoubtedly, slavery had been sustained by those seeking to maximize wealth, but it had been opposed and overthrown by those who had nothing to do with its profits, such as humanists, philosophers, and religious people. Williams' economic determinism is now outdated; modern scholars sustain a more complex view, which entails both an economic and a social explanation.

[75] Williams, p. 25.
[76] Drescher, p. 1-5.
[77] Williams, pp. 178-196.

Recently, and for the first time, the political power of anti-slavery campaigns is analysed independently, rather than treating it as a chorus echoing to elite propaganda.[78] On the one hand it is true that slavery had come to be no longer essential for Britain in the eighteenth century, since in industrial societies technical improvements and investments played a more important role than production and trade expansion. However, on the other hand, workers, clerks, shopkeepers, even rural people were starting to confront the political hegemony, of which West Indian planters were also part. These emerging classes supported antislavery because it was an effective ideological weapon against the establishment: since the slave colonies were imperial monopolies, the attack on monopoly became an attack on slavery.[79]

Capitalism and Slavery is surely a work of his time. Nevertheless, some acknowledgments need to be made. An important point underlined by Williams is the relevance of the Industrial and the American revolutions as turning points in many ways: in economic organization they marked the shift from agriculture to industry, in political economy from mercantilism to free trade, and, more importantly, in social relations, from slavery to free labour. The greatest contribution of *Capitalism and Slavery* was to drag Africa into the debate on the European industrialization process that for a long time had been focused only on internal factors.[80]

[78] Drescher, pp. 1-4.
[79] Solow, Engerman, pp. 1-24.
[80] Drescher, *op. cit.*

JACKIE KAY'S *THE LAMPLIGHTER*

1. Jackie Kay

Jackie Kay was born to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father in Edinburgh on 9 November 1961, and was adopted as a baby by Helen and John Kay. She grew up in Bishopbriggs, near Glasgow. She studied English at Stirling University and graduated in 1983. Subsequently, Kay moved to London, where she dedicated herself to poetry and in 1991 her first collection of poems, *The Adoption Papers,* was published. It was an immediate success. Politically engaged, she is interested in exploring human experiences and emotions and the issue of identity.[81]

Jackie Kay's career as a Black feminist activist started in the 1980s. She worked with various women artists, whose engagement has been defined as the "Black British Renaissance", which was a movement that aimed at changing the popular and political understanding of race and what it meant to be black in British society. Therefore, she deals with the concept of identity combined with difference: difference related to gender, skin colour, origin, social status, and sexual orientation.[82]

In 1993 she published her second collection of poems, *Other Lovers*, in which identity is explored through the history of Afro-Caribbean people and their experience of slavery. She also wrote prose works, among which *Trumpet (1998)*, inspired by the life of musician Billy Tipton. She has also published several short stories and narrative and poetry for children. In 2007 she wrote *The Lamplighter*, a radio play in which various voices evoke the experience of the Atlantic Slave Trade, to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade.

[81] scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/jackie-kay/.
[82] Carla Rodríguez González, *Re-charting the Black Atlantic: Jackie Kay's Cartographies of the Self*, 2015, accessed on journals.openedition.org/etudesecossaises/977.

Jackie Kay lives now in Manchester with her partner Carol Ann Duffy, her son Matthew, and Duffy's daughter. She is Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University. In 2014 she was appointed Chancellor of the University of Salford, where she has been the University 'Writer in Residence' since 2015. In 2016 she was appointed Scottish Makar, national poet. Her recent works include *Red Dust Road* (2010), a memoir about meeting her Nigerian birth father, and two new collections of poetry: *Fiere* (2011) and *Bantam* (2017).[83]

2. The Lamplighter

Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* is ascribable to the literary sub-genre of neo-slave narratives, which has flourished in the past four decades in literatures coming from the New World. The decolonization and black liberation movements of the '50s and '60s gave impulse to the development of this new literary form which can be described as contemporary works about slavery and about the investigation of black subjectivity. Starting from the 1970s, the growing black feminist movement influenced new-slave narratives which came to be more interested in the investigation of the condition of black slave women, challenging in this way the official (white and male) view.[84] *The Lamplighter,* however, is a very original neo-slave narrative as far as the form is concerned. This literary subgenre generally employs first-person narrators and use archival sources to fictionalize historic characters and events, which is what Jackie Kay has also done. But these narratives tend to prefer the novel as literary form, while *The Lamplighter* is an original and extraordinary mixture of poetry and drama.[85]

[83] literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/jackie-kay.
[84] Nadalini Amanda, *"A New British Grammar": Jackie Kay's The Lamplighter* in Black arts in Britain: literary visual performative, edited by Annalisa Oboe, Francesca Giommi, Aracne, Roma, 2011.
[85] Nadalini, p. 52.

The Lamplighter was first broadcast on BBC radio 3 on 25th March 2007, so that it would coincide, two centuries later, with the date on which the bill abolishing the trade was signed, on 25th March 1807. This work was then published as a book accompanied by a CD of the radio play. The fact that this play was born as an oral story, a story that should be listened to rather than read, is another feature that makes *The Lamplighter* an original and exceptional neo-slave narrative.[86]

One question that can legitimately be asked concerning neo-slave narratives in general is about the purpose of opening the debate on slavery nowadays, since it is a chapter in history which was closed almost two centuries ago. This is exactly what Jackie Kay contests with her play: it is not a closed chapter that belongs in the past. Past and present are always intertwined and bound together, they ask each other questions and are both necessary to find answers.[87]

When Jackie Kay was asked to write something for the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, she refused for two reasons, as she stated in a *Guardian* article.[88] The first reason was that she did not want to be labelled as the classic black writer that writes about slavery and race. The second reason lied in her conviction that enough had been written about slavery, so that her contribution would have been superfluous. However, after researching about slavery and slave trade she found out "how ignorant she was".[89] She had no idea that Scotland, her beloved Scotland, was involved and responsible for the trade as much as England. Scotland was simply hiding behind the label 'British' slavery. She found this lack of acknowledgment on the part of Scotland simply outrageous and unbelievable and decided to write this contribution with the purpose of waking dormant minds and make them aware of a forgotten past.

[86] Tournay-Theodotou Petra, *"Love Letter to My Ancestors:" Representing Traumatic Memory in Jackie Kay's "The Lamplighter"*, in Atlantis 36.2 (2014):161-182.
[87] Angeletti Gioia*, "The Plantation Owner is Never Wearing a Kilt": The Power of Memory Versus Scottish Amnesia in Jackie Kay's The Lamplighter*, in *Within and Without Empire: Scotland Across the (Post)colonial Borderline*, Edited by Carla Sassi and Theo van Heijnsbergen, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, Newcastle, 2013.
[88] Kay Jackie, "Missing Faces", The Guardian, 24 March 2007.
[89] Kay, "Missing Faces".

The Lamplighter is therefore a play that comes from historical and archival research on Atlantic slavery. We tend to think that we know everything about it, that it is a story told and re-told many times. However, there are so many important issues and details we do not know nor have ever heard about. We have all heard the story of African men and women forced to board a ship and taken to the colonies across the Atlantic to work on the plantations as slaves. But there is much more to this story, in Kay's words: "At school, I was taught about the industrial revolution, but not about the slave trade which financed and powered it. I was taught about the suffragettes, but not about the women abolitionists who came before them […] I learnt about the French revolution, the Russian revolution, but not about the Demerara rebellions, the St Kitts uprising."[90]

Slavery is often reduced to a couple of paragraphs in the chapter on Atlantic voyages and discoveries. This part of history has undergone a process of statistical reductionism: we read about the 10-15 millions of Africans transported to the Americas and enslaved. But behind those numbers there are personal stories of sufferings, humiliations, deprivation and torture. "Marking the abolition is also marking the missing faces: the people buried at sea, the deaths in the tobacco and sugar fields."[91] This is exactly what Jackie Kay does with *The Lamplighter*. She brings those faces, or better, those voices back to life and through them we hear stories that have long been forgotten. She urges us to embrace our history and our past, for this is the only way to keep it alive, to prevent it from falling into the darkness of oblivion.

Remembering should be very important for everyone because slavery is not only black history, it is not only related to those countries who had direct links to the colonies, as Jackie Kay explains: "The history of the slave trade is not 'black history' to be shoved into a ghetto and forgotten, or to be brought out every 100 years for a brief airing, then put back in the cupboard. It is the history of the world. It concerns each

[90] Kay Jackie, *The Lamplighter*, Bloodaxe Books, Eastburn, 2008. All references are to this edition and will be henceforth indicated parenthetically by page number.
[91] Kay, "Missing Faces".

and every one of us."[92] Not only because, in a way or another, were we all involved in this terrible crime, but also because it is the foundation of our modernity and we must acknowledge that. Writing *The Lamplighter* is Kay's way to keep these memories alive. In an interview, Jackie Kay declared that while she was working at the project, she realized she had almost been hiding from it, but then she added that, after some time, this work had become a sort of obsession: "I was staying up till one, two in the morning and I was getting very, very angry. But I also felt like I was being renewed, which was a strange feeling, like the way you first write when you're 13 or 14, out of a need, out of things you feel strongly about." [93] Kay felt the need to bring those voices to life, so that they could be heard. Indeed, to fully appreciate this work, one really has to listen to it being performed. Reading the story is not as effective as hearing it. It is quite a short story but its message is huge and very powerful. A lot of information is contained in a few pages but the result is not at all heavy. Long and complicated issues are treated with a simplicity that goes straight to the point and to the heart of the listener.

The Lamplighter is therefore a slim volume with a huge content, introduced by the innocent, but powerful in terms of its effect, voice of a young girl. In a poetic chorus of mainly female voices, this play re-creates the world of Atlantic slavery from capture in the African village through the appalling and dangerous journeys across the infamous Middle Passage, to the slave markets in the colonies and then to the life on the sugar plantations. Kay strongly emphasizes on the experience of slave women, whose bodies are described as battlefields: after having survived the dangers of the Middle Passage, they have to endure countless atrocities on the plantations. In this sense, the text can be understood as a celebration of survival and a homage to these women's resistance.[94]

One of the main elements that makes *The Lamplighter* such an original work is that it is the first neo-slave narrative that deals with a very specific portion of history:

[92] Kay, "Missing Faces".
[93] Thorpe Nick, "Jackie Kay, Inteview.", *Sunday Times*, 25th March 2007.
[94] González, p. 115.

Scotland's involvement in the trade. As a matter of fact, this country has always portrayed itself as one of the victims of colonialism, not as one of the perpetrators.[95] Scattered throughout the play we can find many references that hint at a Scottish involvement in the trade, for instance, the historical fact of the Neptune ship that arrived in Barbados with 144 slaves, sailing from Port Glasgow, is mentioned (p. 79). But we are also informed that "in 1770 on the slave island of Jamaica there were one hundred Black people Called MacDonald" and that "a quarter of the island's people were Scottish" (p. 81). *The Lamplighter* is strongly politically engaged: the author wants her readers to remember and acknowledge a chapter of history that does not only concern Africa and a few European countries but the entire world. This radio play is not the story of four female slaves, but of millions of people: Jackie Kay makes those voices speak and represent all the victims of the trade, all the "missing faces"[96] the world has long forgotten. All this is achieved in an extremely powerful way: in a work that is a mixture of poetry and drama, with some epic nuances she cries out loud what she discovered, what her beloved country has been hiding for all these years, what an entire population has forgotten or decided not to remember.[97]

2.1 The main voices

The structure of the text is polyphonic and should therefore give the impression that any single story is indeed a multiple one. We hear five distinct voices: Anniwaa, a little girl, four women: Black Harriot, Mary, Constance and the Lamplighter and a man: MacBean.

[95] Nadalini, p. 53.
[96] Kay, "Missing Faces".
[97] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 162.

The play opens with the voice of Anniwaa, an almost twelve-year-old African girl, who, terrified and traumatized, tells us her story: “I am a girl. I am in the dark. I don’t know how long I’ve been kept in the dark. High above me, there is a tiny crack of light. Last time I counted, I was eleven, nearly twelve. […] All of a sudden, some men come and take us. I know those people. They have the marks on the face of the enemy. I kick and scream and shout. Furious. They bundle us off through the woods.” (p. 9). She was playing with her brother, when they were both captured by some men, who dragged them for days through unknown territories, until they reached a fort near the coast. There, she is separated from her brother and imprisoned. The voice we hear is broken and terrified: she has no idea of where she is and why, she had never seen the ocean before and is scared of it, she doesn’t understand the language of the men that are keeping her imprisoned and she misses her family very much.

The fear and terror she feels drag her into a state of shock that makes her lose the ability to talk: “My tears dry up inside me. My mouth goes dry and my lips. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. After that, I stop talking. The words dry under my lips.” (pp. 9-10). In these few line, we witness the onset of trauma, which is represented by the loss of the ability to talk. She physically feels that she is no longer able to produce any sound. She loses her voice, which will be found again only at the end of the play.

After this touching and startling introduction of Anniwaa, the second voice we hear is MacBean’s with his *Shipping News* in scene 2. MacBean is a voice we mainly hear in the scenes called “Shipping News”, where he provides the reader/listener with statistical and historical information about the trade. However, MacBean can also be considered a sort of *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of time, or better, the voice of time. At the beginning indeed, his tone is very detached and he only gives precise statistical information: “The Dorothy reached Barbados, June 1709. One hundred slaves surviving” and “Rain then showers. Moderate or rough. Thursday, 13 June 1709 buried

a woman slave, n°47." (pp. 11-12). The language is very technical and specific, as typical of a captain's log.

At first, his voice stands for slave traders, masters, and politicians. However, as time goes by and some social and political changes and developments make their way, he evolves as well: "We may now consider this trade as having received its condemnation; […] that this curse of mankind is seen by the House in its true light; […] and that the greatest stigma on our national character which ever yet existed, is about to be [removed]. […] we are now likely to be delivered from the greatest practical evil that ever has afflicted [the human race]." (p. 85). Slavery is now described as a *curse of mankind, the greatest stigma ever existed* and *the greatest practical evil*. From his first position of almost compliance with the colonial discourse he shifts to a position that seem almost sympathize with the abolitionists: his voice represents them in the play when his judgement on slavery becomes harsh and severe. Towards the end of the story, we hear MacBean say: "Am I not a man and a brother?" (p. 89). This is a quotation of the famous medallion, symbol of the British abolitionist campaign. This medallion, designed by Josiah Wedgewood in 1787, represents a black slave, kneeled and in chains, with above the inscription 'Am I not a man and a brother?'[98]

With these examples it is clear how MacBean really is the voice of time. He represents the voice of pro-slavery discourse throughout almost the entire play, only in the end he transforms into the voice of abolitionism. In this way the changes in western thought about the institution of slavery are also reflected in the text.[99]

The third voice we hear is the Lamplighter's. As the title of the play suggests, we can consider her to be the protagonist or the main voice of the story. As the readers/listeners go further into the play, they would discover that Anniwaa and the Lamplighter are the same person. When the Lamplighter starts telling the story of how she became a slave, the reader/listener would realize that it coincides with Anniwaa's:

[98] www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/africans_in_art_gallery_02.shtml.
[99] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 165.

"[…] I remember how my brother and I watched out for kidnappers" (p. 24) and "I have been running away since I was a little girl, since I was eleven, nearly twelve years old." (p. 61). In an interview, Jackie Kay declared: "The Lamplighter was denying her past, as African people often have done, wanting understandably, to get away from it. So I invented a child self for her, trapped in a Cape fort until she could turn round and look at her".[100] While the Lamplighter, to shield herself from pain, tries to push her past away, Anniwaa constantly tries to call her and force her to remember: "my name is Anniwaa", "don't forget my name is Anniwaa" (p. 35). This idea is even more strongly conveyed with this statement: "I am the ghost of the child past. I am your past", (p. 81) which can be addressed to the Lamplighter, for Anniwaa is the ghost of her child past, but also to the audience of this play in general. It is an appeal, an invitation to acknowledge and assume responsibility, for slavery is part of everyone's past.[101]

The name of the Lamplighter is therefore Anniwaa. *Lamplighter* is thus a sort of nickname. The "lamplighter" is someone who lights lampposts, who brings light. Metaphorically speaking, this is what this character does throughout the play: "I carried the light to light the lamps. The lamps across the wide dark sea." (p. 42). She throws light across the Black Atlantic, which was indeed Jackie Kay's aim in writing this play: she wanted to bring light to a dark and forgotten past, she wanted to make these stories come out of the dark. The Lamplighter says that she is telling her story so that it will not be forgotten, as a sort of testimony. Furthermore, light can be a symbol for hope. Therefore, not only did the Lamplighter throw light across the sea, but she was also a symbol of hope, a guide towards a better future, a future of freedom.

The last scene is indeed entitled *Freedom* and begins with this words: "This is the story of the Lamplighter: one day, I finally managed to tell my story. I wrote it down. It was printed and reprinted and told. And retold again." (p. 92). The play ends

[100] Thorpe Nick, "Jackie Kay, Inteview.", *Sunday Times*, 25th March 2007.
[101] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 168.

with a message of hope and freedom: However, we are reminded that we should never forget. This story was printed and told and it should be told over and over again.

Although the Lamplighter might be considered the main voice of the play, the other voices contribute consistently in telling the story, so that the impression is created that any single story is a multiple one.[102] The other three voices we hear are other three black slave women: Black Harriot, Mary and Constance.

Black Harriot is a slave prostitute. Since there was already another white Harriot, she was called *Black* Harriot so that the other one could simply be Harriot. The story of how she ended up being a prostitute is briefly told: she was bought and taken to St Kitts. There she worked for a planter, Big Fat Planter as she calls him, who later took her to England, where he died of smallpox. She than became a prostitute in London, where many members of the House of Lords were her regular clients (p. 26-27).

Mary, whose surname is MacDonald, represents one of the many ways in which Jackie Kays shows Scotland's involvement in the slave trade. After attacking her master, she was beaten very harshly and left to die. But she survived and became very devout to God: "He had me flogged then tied to the cherry tree and left for dead. I was left swinging for three days. To be seen, to break the spirit of anyone whose spirit need breaking and after three days I was cut down, expected to be dead. I was alive, just. […] When I found myself alive I knew I had been born again and that the Lord Christ himself had come to give me salvation." (p. 31). Mary had to work so much and was beaten so badly, that her exhausted body was no longer able to bear children.

Constance is a slave who was forced various times to bear children for the trade. She gave birth to fifteen children, four of whom had been sold away from her, the others died (p. 66). The meaning of her name is also explained: "I was named

[102] Nadalini, p. 51.

Constance. Constance so that I would behave myself. So that I would be a virtue, like my sisters Faith, Patience and Charity." (p. 33).

In *The Lamplighter* the four slave women are present not only with their voices but also with their physical body in all their corporeality. This is quite in contrast with the disembodied voice of MacBean, who is not physically present in the play. This contrast clearly recalls the "absent presence" of the invisible but powerful white, western, male oppressor.[103]

2.2 Structure and style

The Lamplighter is divided into sixteen scenes, each introduced by a title and some indications for performers and producers. Six scenes are called "shipping news". In these scenes we mainly hear the voice of MacBean, who gives information about the weather, the voyages and the cargos of ships, the number of slaves transported and the number of dead. He also informs the reader/listener about important historical facts mentioned in or related to the content of the play, for example: "William, King of England from 1689 to 1702, had a favourite black slave. The bust is on display at Hampton Court, complete with carved white marble collar with a padlock, like a dog's collar." (p. 65). The other ten scenes all deal with different issues: resistance, death, industrial development, sugar, freedom and so on. Some of these topics will be discussed and analysed in details later in this chapter.

The Lamplighter is not a usual play with a linear plot structure or conventional dialogue, but is a series of sometimes not even connected scenes that fragment the narration. However, these dislocated pieces of the story ultimately converge to tell a

[103] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 175.

common, collective story that can apply to all enslaved women. The fragmentation is visible on paper but the audio effect is of uniformity: it sounds like a chorus of voices telling and contributing to the same story. This device, in my opinion, gives even more strength to the narration and gives the idea of a shared and common destiny.

The time frame of the play also deserves to be discussed. The narration carried out by the four female voices dislocates the past in several different sequences, without an apparent chronological order, except for the beginning and the ending of the story. This time fragmentation is in strong contrast with the linear narration of historical facts of MacBean. This irregular time frame contributes in giving the idea of a timeless story, of a never ending story that keeps repeating and repeating through the centuries of slavery. In this way, Kay reinforces the idea that *The Lamplighter* is not the story of four women, but the story of slavery and its victims. The individual narration recounted by Constance or Mary or any of them becomes a collective history of slave women.[104]

The narration is sometimes interrupted by songs and hymns. Music was indeed very important among slave communities, it set the rhythm of their work and cheered up their spirits. Slaves' songs were generally related to religious themes, as for example: "[…] Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel. Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel. And why not every man" (p. 38). Slaves who received a Christian education were particularly fond of the biblical passage about the liberation of the Jews. It inspired faith and hope that in the future, God would free them too.

In the text we find various stylistic devices typical of poetry: metonymies, rhymes, refrains, lists and accumulations, metaphors and so on. One of the main literary strategies in trauma fiction is the use of repetitions, which mimic the effects of trauma, by suggesting the continuous coming back of the painful event. In *The Lamplighter*, words, sentences, sometimes entire passages are repeated, as if these words and sentences are haunting the four slaves, like trauma is. The constant use of

[104] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 175.

repetitions is surely a device employed to convey the idea of a recurring trauma, of an endless pain and of a repeated story. However, we must not forget that repetition is one of the typical devices of the oral transmission of literature. Indeed, this work was created to being listened to, rather than read, so that the strength and the weight of these repetitions is almost physically felt.

Alliterations are also used quite often, as for example in the following passage: "hardSHIP, workmanSHIP, worSHIP, relationSHIP, authorSHIP!" (p. 72), in which the repetition of the term "ship" stands for the repetition of the traumatic experiences on board slave ships. This sort of pun with the word "ship", employed both as morpheme and as a noun is underlined by the author through the use of capital letters. The closing word of the sequence, authorship, is relevant for the entire play: this the story of *The Lamplighter*, narrated by herself as it is often said in the play.[105]

The Lamplighter has a circular structure, for the ending goes back to the beginning. The circularity of the structure reinforces the connection with Africa that Kay continues to seek in her writing: Africa is indeed the frame that surrounds the play. The story opens with an African setting and goes back there, symbolizing the recuperation of those roots slaves have been separated from.[106] The story started with Anniwaa and the Lamplighter being two distinct persons, in the end they could finally reunite and Anniwaa starts telling her story again: "Once upon a time, I lived in a house with a cone-shaped roof, in a big compound. My mother grew okra and pumpkin in her yard. My father shaped woods and metals." (p. 95) This circularity seems to suggest that calling back a traumatic past might re-enact the trauma itself, which is exactly what happened to the Lamplighter: the painful effort of remembering the traumatic experience of enslavement brought the trauma back. We can clearly see what an unclaimed traumatic experience can cause: the development of a dissociated personality.[107] Anniwaa and the Lamplighter are the same person but they talk as if

[105] Tournay-Theodotou, pp. 171-172.
[106] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 167.
[107] Nadalini, pp. 60-62.

they weren't: "[…] seems another me, lived that blessed life, another girl- girl, deep in the interior country far away from the coast, a girl who had never seen the sea, a girl who climbed to the top of trees. I like to think she's up there, still, mysterious, magical girl, that she would never ever hear this story." (p. 24). Trauma changes you profoundly. Anniwaa's experience made her a dissociated self. The Lamplighter imagines Anniwaa to be still that innocent girl that climbs the trees and not the grown-up woman that has lived in slavery for years. At an early stage, the Lamplighter relives her traumatic past experiences and no matter what she does, she seems not able to escape them: "No matter how fast I ran from my story, no matter how many years the story just kept coming in and coming back" (p. 25). She tries to gain distance from her past, so that she avoids being trapped in it but she also needs to remember in order to heal her broken soul. "Only when I turned and faced her, standing there like that, could I begin to tell this story." (p. 94). Remembering was her healing process as well as the only way to tell her story. In the end the Lamplighter managed to reunite with her past and tell her story. She made herself being heard and brought her truth, her version of history to the surface. She had to go through a painful process of recuperating her memories in order to recuperate her voice and herself. She had to fight against the desire to forget a painful past and only when she *turned and faced her*, Anniwaa, could she begin to tell this story, her story.

2.3 The issue of memory

As this brief analysis repeatedly pointed out, the issue of memory is central in *The Lamplighter.* "Remembering and forgetting" are indeed fundamental themes in the play, in which the trauma of slavery bounces from the need to remember and the desire to forget such appalling memories: "these are the things I cannot stop

remembering"; "these are the things I cannot stop forgetting";" I tell my story to remember"; "I tell my story to forget" (p. 35). The main voices seem to emerge out of that desert of silence and amnesia under which one of the most tragic chapters of Scottish history was buried. The process of remembering through which the characters have gone through stands for the same process of recuperating a memory of the past that Scotland has long forgotten. Writing *The Lamplighter* was for Kay a moral duty, she felt like writing a love letter to her ancestors, to quote her words.[108] This work is a testimony and a tribute to the memory of millions of slaves. It is about memory and the need to remember, so that we can be able to forget, to move on.[109]

The Lamplighter is about memory and history, the two are bound together. It is through memory that African slaves survive both for themselves and for us. The Lamplighter tells us constantly that nobody has ever told her story before, statement that can be understood as an indirect accusation: no one has told her story, she has been forgotten. She constantly reminds us not to forget her story: "I tell my story to remember" is a recurrent expression throughout the play and halfway through the story Constance states: "I tell the story to pass it on". This statement, besides echoing Toni Morrison's beloved[110] is also a request on the part of these slaves: their stories need to be told and retold over and over again, so that they will not be forgotten anymore. The importance of bringing these voices to the surface and to remember their stories is being underlined page after page by the author. With her work, she really tries to fight against the oblivion all this has fallen into. Furthermore, this process of remembering was painful for the four characters of the play, but their pain also stands for the pain Jackie Kay must have felt in discovering all this and the pain the world has to go through to remember and acknowledge the atrocities perpetrated in the past. This is why it is important to talk about slavery even centuries after its

[108] Kay, "Missing faces".
[109] Angeletti, pp. 219-220.
[110] Toni Morrison wrote: "this is not a story to pass on" in Morrison Toni, *Beloved*, Knopf, New York, 1987.

abolition. It is our duty to (metaphorically) look at those victims in the eyes and plead guilty.[111]

Kay's use of intertextuality is a way of "encoding a traumatic memory" and provoke explorations of how the past relates to the present and the future. The difficult relationship between trauma and memory is the key issue of this work, for it poses the controversial question of recuperating and transmitting traumatic experiences for the construction of a better future.[112] This is probably the ultimate reason for keeping the debate on slavery open. Acknowledging our faults and appalling mistakes of the past is important not only towards the victims, whose stories deserve to be known and remembered, but also to envisage a better future, in the hope that those dreadful acts will not be repeated.

With these stories, Jackie Kay is proposing a view and understanding of slavery and the slave trade that differs from the canonical history. The author contrasts the "big history" of imperialist records with the "small history" of the millions nameless victims. This is, once more, a powerful political act, for she gives voice to all those that have been silenced by the imperialist discourse. Neo-slave narratives have indeed this purpose: they challenge "mainstream History" by providing a different viewpoint, that breaks the silences and destabilizes the official history imposed by colonial and neo-colonial powers. The unconventionality of the structure is a symbol for the unconventionality of the message: even in its form, *The Lamplighter* fights against the mainstream and conventional accounts of slavery. [113]

Writing *The Lamplighter* was for Jackie Kay a way to also explore her own roots. She stated: "In a sense I was on a trail back to my own past. A lot of the original Africans were taken from the West Coast of Africa, where my father came from. So I was thinking if I trace back my family tree far enough I would find slaves."[114] Being African

[111] Tournay-Theodotou, pp. 180-181.
[112] Nadalini, p. 54.
[113] Nadalini, pp. 51-54.
[114] Thorpe Nick.

and Scottish, Jackie Kay decided to explore the heritage of these cultures and find the connection in history between the two.

To conclude, I believe that the importance of *The Lamplighter* can also be underlined by considering it an answer to the famous question posed by Gayatri Spivak "can the subaltern speak?". To this question, Spivak had a negative answer, for she believes that it is impossible to make the subaltern speak without manipulating their voices.[115] Jackie Kay challenges this view and *The Lamplighter*, with its combination of information coming from original sources, demonstrate that it is possible to give the subaltern its voice back. She retrieved those voices from the abyss of silence and oblivion they had fallen into and brought them to stage with the power of her poetry and imagination. Many critics have argued that neo-slave narratives are necessarily based on a sort of "postmemory", a secondary type of memory like that experienced by the offspring of survivors of trauma. Therefore it is an indirect, filtered kind of memory, where traumatic events are emulated through intertextuality, repetitions and a fragmented narrative voice.[116] It is true that in a way, these representations are mediated and the product of personal interpretation, but it is also true that Kay "speaks nearby or together with" rather than "speak for" or "about" the subaltern.[117]

In the following pages, I will analyse three central themes of *The Lamplighter*: the voyage and all its steps, slave resistance in all its forms and sugar as the product that changed the lives of many people on both sides of the Atlantic. I will explore how these issues are dealt with in the play and broaden the discourse to a more general and historical perspective.

[115] "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is the title of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay, originally published in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan Education, Basingstoke, 1988, pp. 271-313.
[116] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 163.
[117] Angeletti, p. 219.

3. The issue of womanhood

The very first aspect that the reader/listener of *The Lamplighter* notices is probably the absence of male voices. The only exception is MacBean, who is the voice of time, as explained before, and has the role of providing technical information, important facts, and events. He sometimes seems to be part of the narration, when the other voices interact with him by completing or echoing his statements, but some other times he appears to be detached, almost independent from the rest of the story. He incarnates several voices: ship captains, the law, local newspapers and so on, but never the voice of a slave. Therefore, the various experiences of slavery are left to only female voices. These women narrate their own personal stories and sometimes mention experiences of other slave women. The experience of slavery appears thus to be limited to a female perspective. It is only right to ask ourselves the reasons of what seems to be a deliberate choice of the author.

One first and very banal guess could lie in a higher "affinity", a higher degree of identification. Being a woman herself, Jackie Kay might have chosen to give voice to exclusively female slaves because she felt closer to them and more able to understand and therefore convey their way of suffering and experiencing traumatic events. This alone might as well be a good reason, but I think there is something more. While reading (or better listening to) *The Lamplighter*, I came to understand that although any form of enslavement is degrading and unbearable there can be different conditions of slavery. If it is possible to talk about "better" and "worse" when dealing with slavery, one needs to recognize that bondage was far worse for women than for men, and for several reasons. Both male and female slaves were employed for manual work on the fields and it was not uncommon to see women work as hard as men. In some cases, there was a sort of division of labour, which called for a female presence inside the houses. In small households, however, it was not unusual to see women working both inside and outside in the fields. Slave women were thus not treated more

indulgently than men, not even in case of pregnancy or maternity.[118] Furthermore, female slaves were also victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, which increased their condition of misery and made their experiences of slavery worse than those experienced by men. Slave women suffered a double subalternity: the first deriving from their black skin and the second from their gender. In *The Lamplighter*, Jackie Kay shows us in many ways how women were doubly victims of enslavement. This can be considered a further reason that might explain her choice of "cutting out" male voices. She probably wanted to make the last of the last emerge, to give their voice back to the most oppressed and marginalized and to show the most dreadful and appalling side of human cruelty.

In the following paragraphs, I am going to explore the different issues concerning slavery and womanhood tackled by Jackie Kay in her radio play. In *The Lamplighter* the author makes us understand that through enslavement African women were forced in a condition of double subalternity from various perspectives, such as sexual abuse and exploitation. Furthermore, the concept of motherhood in bondage and its meaning is also deeply explored.

3.1 Abuse

For masters, having sexual intercourse with their female slaves was normal. The idea of owning these women and having the possibility of disposing of their bodies the way they liked – even sexually – must have given them some sort of sick and perverted pleasure. This practice was not looked kindly upon but it was neither forbidden, nor condemned, as the widespread presence of mulattoes demonstrated. Slave women

[118] Patton Venetria K., *Women in Chains. The Legacy of Slavery in a Black Women's Fiction*, State University of New York Press, Albany NY, 2000.

were therefore in constant danger of being harassed or raped, especially if young and beautiful.[119]

In *The Lamplighter*, the main four voices give testimony of this. All four of them have experienced sexual abuse by their masters and explain how regular these attacks were. There was no place in which they could feel safe, because such terrible encounters could happen in the great house, in the fields, in the woods and even in their own sheds in the slave quarters. Mary tells us of how her master would came for her every day and every night, taking each time a piece of her, killing her inside little by little. She then remembers of one night she tried to resist him and hit him on the head again and again as hard as she could. Unfortunately for her, she did not manage to kill him and was harshly punished afterwards.

As a matter of fact, it is almost a miracle if she survived, but even if she had died, her master would have paid no further consequence than the loss of one of his slaves. As MacBean informs us, the law of the time protected every single conduct of masters: "Slave Code: Under British law, if any slave resists his master, or owner, or other person, by his or her order, correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction, it shall not be accounted felony […] as if such accident had never happened." (p. 30). This gives us a precise idea of how slaves were considered: the level of dehumanization is so high that not only is rape not recognized as a crime, but even murder is allowed. Mary was almost killed as punishment for having defended herself from rape. Reading between the lines of the Slave Code reported by MacBean it appears as though it was saying that slaveholders were entitled to do everything to their slaves, who could do nothing but obey, nothing but suffer. With an attentive reading of these lines from the Slave Code one would notice that it is said "or other person", which seems to suggest that slaves really were at the mercy of everyone. A further proof of this is provided by Constance: "And in that house, the planters offered me to their friends for sexual favours, to neighbours, to young men." (p. 39). She was

[119] Falola, Warnock, pp. 404-405.

not only abused by her master, but was used as bargaining chip, as a toy to be offered to whomever he wanted and for whatever reason. The kind of wound that these experiences must have left in her are beyond imagination. Nobody was on her side, she had no one she could complain to and no one who would defend her or protect her rights, because she had none. A few lines later she adds: "I could tell HouseLady didn't like it when Fatman did what he did to me. Next day, she'd punish me for his punishing ways." Denouncing what was happening to her would only make things worse. She went to the house lady hoping to find understanding or compassion, woman to woman, but she only managed to provoke her, to cause jalousie maybe, and she was punished for it. Violence, in every form, was part of a slave's daily routine and was the answer to everything a slave did "wrong".

Jackie Kay informs us that sexual intercourses with female slaves were so common that masters even kept diaries in which they wrote down in Latin every sexual encounter with them, how many time it happened and were. These notes were very detailed, which makes me think that even this practice was a sort of business in the eyes of a slaveholder. Indeed, they also kept track of slaves' monthly period, in this way they would know if one of them was pregnant. These pregnancies were undoubtedly a matter of business, for slaves' offspring, according to the law of *partus sequitur ventrem*, would be destined to slavery and thus another source of profit for slaveholders.

As a matter of fact, the possibility of "producing" and "transmitting" slavery was the only element that, in the eyes of slaveholders, distinguished slave men from women and made the latter more valuable. It has been argued indeed, that African slaves were deprived of their gender fonte.[120] The Atlantic system identified them as chattel, as merchandise, as labour force whose gender did not really play an important role in the eyes of their owners. The ideology of the period considered slaves to be just slaves, without a distinction between men and women. The only element of

[120] Spillers Hortense, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 72.

difference, as explained before, was that according to the law of the time a female slave's offspring was a slave. This is, however, a difference that concerns sex and not gender. Therefore, slaves were seen as de-gendered but surely not unsexed. After all, slaves were treated in the same way as livestock and sex rather than gender is a concept generally applied to animals.[121]

Consequently, masters did not consider female slaves as mothers, but rather as breeders. The concept of mothering among slaves is disrupted: since the mother belongs to her owner, her child does not belong to his mother but to her master, independently from the child's actual paternity. This increases the lack of kinship and family ties that started with the separation from the family of origin in Africa and continues in the New World. The concept of mothering is therefore separated from that of birthing. This becomes even more surprising if we think that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mothering was exalted and contemplated as the highest realization a woman could aspire.[122] This did not apply to slaves – again – because they were not recognized as women nor mothers but merely as "breeders". Nonetheless, slave women continued to view themselves as mothers, only that mothering for them took on a different meaning.

3.2. Mothers, mothering, and motherhood

A central theme in *The Lamplighter* is the issue of motherhood and the meaning it takes in bondage. Jackie Kay explores the trauma of separation from both the perspective of a mother and of a child. Furthermore, the denial of motherhood is dealt with throughout the play in several ways. The author looks into the importance of a

[121] Patton, pp. 8-9.
[122] Patton, pp. 29-31.

mother figure and the different meanings that "mothering" took for female slaves. Finally, the issue of sterility is also briefly touched.

In the third scene of the play, we hear the voice of the scared little Anniwaa who calls for her mother. She is still prisoner in the dungeons of the fort, terrified and, like children do when they are afraid, calls her mother. She closes her eyes and tries to picture her mother in her head: wearing a yellow head-tie, working in the fields, cooking, walking through the woods. It is a comforting thought for Anniwaa, but she is soon brought back to reality by the scaring noises inside the fort. She refuses to eat without her mother and her body becomes skinnier and skinnier. She is afraid of getting smaller: "Maybe I will start to grow backwards. Soon I might be ten, then nine." (p. 13). Without a loving mother that takes care of her, she is afraid she will not be able to grow up. However, growing backwards is not only impossible but also the very opposite of what she had to do to survive. Without a mother to protect and take care of her, she was surely forced to grow up faster. The innocence of her childhood was broken with every lash she received. She had to learn to survive without her mother and to take care of herself. Nonetheless, this forced and rapid growth could remain incomplete, little Anniwaa fears that she will grow "into a small woman" without her mother (p. 14). It is true that children take their parents as model while growing up. Her mother, as grown-up woman, was Anniwaa's reference point through the process of becoming a woman. Since this model was no longer available to her, she fears she will not be able to grow properly. Despite the lower price they were sold, children were a good source of profit: they were easier to capture and to keep under control, occupied less space and needed less food on board.[123]

After having dealt with the trauma of separation from the child's perspective, Jackie Kay moves to the mother's point of view with Constance, who shares with us the traumatic experience of being separated from her child. She explains that, while still pregnant, she used to count the months and tried to imagine how the child would

[123] Mustakeem Sowande M., *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign IL, 2016.

be. If the baby was a girl, she thought at the ways in which she could "make her look ugly enough when she got older […] so that none of them ever came near her"(p. 49). Beauty was a problem, a danger for female slaves, because beauty made them desirable in the eyes of their masters. Therefore, Constance thinks of a way to make her ugly, less desirable to protect her. But she never got to that, for her child was taken and sold away at the age of three. In a few very touching lines she describes the last moments she spent with her: the game of squeezing each other's hands, a secret code to share their love, the feeling of her small and warm hand in hers and the endless pain of the unavoidable separation that awaits them. This separation was so devastating that for months Constance did not say a word. The loss of her child left her empty, a hole that could never be filled. Unfortunately for Constance, this was not the only time she had to endure such sufferings. Four of her children were sold away: "how many years […] since I seen my four children? My baby boy, my wise girl with the big questions, my big boy whose eyes changed the time he saw me being beaten?" (p. 50). She lost four children to the trade and we can only imagine the devastating effects: every time a piece of her was taken away, leaving her broken, wounded, dead inside. Slave women were helpless when it came to their children. They had no way to protect them, to prevent them from being hurt or taken away. Even their children's innocence and childhood were impossible to preserve: Constance's "big boy" saw his mother being beaten and this changed the look in his eyes, deprived of the innocence that characterizes childhood.

Constance narration is fragmented, for the pain of remembering and telling it is too strong to continue without pauses. A few pages later, Constance resumes her narration and shares with us another episode with her daughter, her "bean girl" as she calls her. One night, she was wondering what was better between a "dead death or a living one" (p. 60), and was considering the idea of killing her daughter, but she could not go through with it. She let her live, despite she knew the fate she was going to have, but decided to have hope: hope for a better future for her daughter and hope to see her again someday. The idea of scarring and killing one's own children sounds

terrible to our ears, but from Constance's point of view, these were acts of love and protection.

The issue of infanticide is brought to the surface in this play, though briefly since Constance did not kill her daughter in the end, but I think it deserves to be analysed a little further. A lot has been written on this issue, but for the purposes of this work, I will report the main theories that explain the nature of infanticide in the context of slavery. The simplest and probably most accepted explanation for these acts is the mothers' desire of protecting their children from a life of enslavement. Constance indeed askes herself whether a physical and total death is a more desirable fate than staying alive but dying inside. That of killing becomes thus an act of mercy in the eyes of these mothers. Another possible explanation is given by a new interpretation of the Medea myth.[124] In Greek mythology, Medea kills her children out of hatred for their father. In the case of enslavement, we might consider slave mothers who kill their children as affected by the Medea Complex and thus the act of violence is explained as deriving from hatred for their masters and what the child represents. This is probably not Constance's case, but even in *The Lamplighter* we have seen the extent of the hatred slaves felt for their masters, especially when sexual abuse is an issue, as it was with Mary, who tried to kill her owner. It is thus not difficult to imagine that, being the baby a source of profit, killing it would cause economic loss and thus damage the owner. One last possible explanation of this extreme act could be the desire of re-appropriating of the right on children. Since slaves' offspring did not belong to their mothers but to the masters, the act of killing can be understood as an extreme way of asserting a mother's right to "dispose" of her children, in the same way that suicide was an extreme form of re-appropriation of one's own body.[125]

There's another feature of slaves' dysfunctional motherhood: not only were slave women deprived of their own children, but they were also forced to look after their masters' offspring. Constance explains to us that at a certain point in her slave

[124] Patton, p. 13.
[125] Patton, p. 13.

life she was moved from the fields to work inside the house. Among her tasks, she had to look after her masters' children. She tells us that these children's mother would stay in bed until late in the morning. Her children spent most of the time with Constance and learnt to walk with her, to talk like her, to sing her songs. They knew her better than their own mother. But who should really be considered their mother? The biological or the nurturing one? Is giving half of the genetic patrimony enough to be considered a mother? Or is there something more to it? I think that, according to my understanding of the terms "mother" and "mothering", Constance is to be considered a mother to those children, and from what she tells us, probably even more than their biological one. In this sense we can say that, although Constance was denied the possibility of mothering her own children, she experienced nonetheless a different form of motherhood.

Constance's story appears to be particularly tragic as far as her offspring is concerned. MacBean informs us that she had 15 children, "4 of whom had been sold away from her, one is still held in Petersburg, the others are dead." (p. 66). Another delicate and tragic issue related to slavery is briefly touched here, that of child mortality: 10 out of 15 died, a rate that appears to be very high, but it is understandable in consideration of the unhygienic and unhealthy conditions slaves lived and the kind of physical effort they were asked to perform.

Constance's survived children were taken away from her and sold. This was a common practice, for children were considered to be a distraction for their mothers who, having to protect and look after them, were often accused of being less productive in their work. Selling children away, however, was not the rule. Sometimes they were allowed to stay, as Black Harriot tells us. She also appears to have been exploited as a "slave breeder", for she had her master's children, or "BigHouseMan's" (p. 29), as she calls him. However, despite them being his own offspring, they followed their mother's fate according to the law of the time and became slaves. As a matter of fact, they worked as servants to their white brothers and sisters (p. 29).

One last issue connected to the theme of motherhood is the impossibility of having offspring. This is Mary's case. She had to work extremely hard and was often punished harshly, one time she almost died, as we have seen. All this left her body so exhausted that she was no longer able to bear children: "My body never grew a child. I was barren. The child I might have had shrivelled up and died inside, all the sugar sucked out of it." (p. 21). This is another way in which the experience of motherhood was denied to slave and is also the umpteenth proof of the wearing and consuming effects of bondage.

As I said at the beginning of this section, the kind of physical and psychological abuses slave women had to endure because of their sex placed them in a condition of double subalternity and made the experience of slavery far worse if compared to slave men. This is what Jackie Kay is telling us with all the terrible stories narrated by the four female voices. The issues discussed so far are, in my view, the explanation of the author's choice to narrate the story from an exclusively female perspective.

4. Atlantic voyages

For African captives, sufferings and bondage began long before arriving where they were to work as slaves. In many cases, slavery started at the moment of capture, when they were taken from everything and everyone they loved. The nightmare continued with the dreadful Middle Passage, the sea voyage from Africa to the New World. The arrival in the West Indies was only the final step of a very long journey of misery, torture and death. In *The Lamplighter*, Jackie Kay explores the various steps of the enslavement process, from the capture in Africa, through the Middle Passage, to the plantations in the West Indies.

4.1 Africa

The play opens with Anniwaa's account of her capture, the first traumatic experience she had to face, like many other victims of the Atlantic system. While reading this touching lines, I stopped for a moment to try to picture the scene she was describing. I remember that I wondered whether her kidnappers were European or African. From the description she gives of the men that are keeping her locked in the fort, it is clear they are white: "Sometimes strange people came down. Their skin is pink. […] the sounds they make with their mouth are strange. I don't know what they mean." (p. 13). This is undoubtedly the description of white men, whose skin is pink in her eyes. Their mouths make strange sounds that she does not understand, because they speak a different language. However, when she talks about her capture she only states that her kidnappers had on the face "the marks of the enemy" (p. 9), which does not necessarily mean that they were white. As a matter of fact, it is far more likely that they were African.

Historians have demonstrated that slavery had become fully integrated into the African society long before the arrival of the Europeans. An internal slave trade was therefore already well-developed in the fifteenth century and slaves were employed in agriculture, in the production of various goods, in the mines, in some households and sometimes even in the local militia. This means that European slavers did not bring slavery in Africa, but exploited an already existing system. They rarely travelled into Africa's interior to capture people to enslave, for African rulers generally provided them with the slaves they needed.[126]

However, the issue of slavery in Africa deserves to be analysed more in details. It is true indeed that Europeans exploited an already existing system, but it is also true that the establishment of slavery and of a slave trade was achieved in Africa long before by the Arabs. For the Islamic world Africa provided the major source of slaves

[126] Falola Toyin, Warnock Amanda, *Encyclopedia of the Middle Passage*, Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport CT, 2007.

since the 8th century AD and until the 15th century, exactly when the Portuguese arrived in Africa.[127] African slaves formed a vital source of profit in the economic production of the Near and Middle East, where they ended up as sailors in Persia, pearl divers in the Gulf, soldiers in the Omani army and workers on the salt pans of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), as well as employed as domestic servants and, the women, as sex slaves.[128] It has been estimated that some 9.85 million Africans were shipped out as slaves to Arabia and, in smaller numbers, to the Indian subcontinent.[129] Therefore, Africa became a source of slaves for the cultures of the Mediterranean world several centuries before the discovery of the New World. Nevertheless, it was exactly that discovery and the resulting shift in focus towards the Atlantic that caused the extreme increase in slavery with those tragic, well-known effects.[130] This brief digression about slavery in Africa and the Arab slave trade is important to show how Africa has been plundered for many centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese. The present difficult conditions of this continent are surely a consequence of the impoverishment in terms of human resources that has lasted for many centuries. This historic event played an important part in the shaping of Africa, from an economic, cultural and social perspective. It has been suggested that it has affected economic prosperity, ethnic diversity, institutional quality, political instability and many other factors.[131]

Resuming the account of Anniwaa's capture, later in the play, the little girl explains that she used to watch out for kidnappers while playing with her brother, which probably means that at a certain point, the trade was so spread that even children in the remotest villages of Africa's interior would know about the danger of

[127] Pavlu George, *Recalling Africa's harrowing tale of its first slavers – The Arabs – as UK Slave Trade Abolition is commemorated* on newafricanmagazine.com/recalling-africas-harrowing-tale-of-its-first-slavers-the-arabs-as-uk-slave-trade-abolition-is-commemorated.
[128] "The story of Africa. Slavery" on www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/9chapter3.shtml.
[129] Pavlu.
[130] Willis John R., *Slavery and Slavery in Muslim Africa. The servile estate*, Frank Cass & Co., London, 1985.
[131] Nunn Nathan, "The Long-Term Effects of Africa's Slave Trades", *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 123 (2008): 139-176.

being captured. If the process of systematic enslavement of Africans was so well-known, it is reasonable to think that it was carried out with the consent of local authorities. Records show that the whole system of the European slave trade relied on the permission, support and protection of local authorities. This, of course, does not serve as justification. It is true that African slaves already existed when the Europeans arrived, but it is also true that their enormous demand of captives fed the institution beyond imagination. The selling of their own people on the part of African rulers is surely startling, but in my opinion, it does not mitigate our share of responsibility.

After the capture, Anniwaa is led to a fort on the Atlantic coast, which was a very common step of the enslavement process. For miles and miles along the West African coast, many forts were built by Europeans to keep captives imprisoned before a ship was ready to take them across the Atlantic. The slaves who suffered that fate were so many, that the coast was named after them.

In her play, Jackie Kay makes exactly this observation: “I was brought up on the Guinea Coast. Imagine how much gold they took to name a coast after it. Imagine how much ivory to call a coast Ivory Coast. Imagine how many slaves to call a coast Slave Coast?” (pp. 25-26). This is another example of the author’s extraordinary ability to convey a powerful message in a very simple way. This consideration is brilliant in its simplicity: how many lives have been taken to name a coast Slave Coast? In my opinion, this is an important question to ask, because even if there is no answer, even if there are no precise figures, this simple consideration is sufficient to have an idea of the extent of the trade. Furthermore, in these short lines another message is implied, for the juxtaposition of gold, ivory and slaves suggests a sort of equivalence among the three words, as if they had the same value and could thus be placed on the same level. As a matter of fact, in the system of the Atlantic economy slaves were precious goods, just like gold and ivory.

Geographically speaking, the Slave Coast was the section of the coast along the Bight of Benin, an area that today corresponds to Togo, Benin and West Nigeria.

Traveling west from the Slave Coast, European traders would find various towns along the Gold Coast. In terms of slaves, the Gold Coast never reached the significance of the Slave Coast, but it was an important area as a source of gold,[132] as suggested in the lines of the play commented above. From an historic perspective, trade forts were built by European trading companies to protect their commercial interests along the coast of Africa. The primary function of these forts was as storage for goods brought to Africa by European traders, and as living quarters for company employees who carried out the trade and soldiers who provided military protection. European slave traders built several forts along the coast of Africa, among which the most important was Elmina on the Gold Coast, built by the Portuguese already in 1481. Its original purpose was to have a basis to have access to gold, but this was soon replaced by the slave trade. Its warehouse was able to keep more than a thousand slaves. In all, seventy-two forts were built along a coast of two hundred miles. Forts needed the permission of the local authorities to be built, who demanded in exchange the payment of taxes.[133] These forts were most likely the place in which many slaves had their first encounter with Europeans. However, for many of them, their nightmare had already started weeks before. Slaves were indeed brought to the forts along the coast from Africa's interior and travelled for days, maybe even weeks, to get there. After having reached the fort, they were generally divided per gender and kept prisoners in the dungeons until a ship was ready to sail. This "waiting time" could be either very short and very long, but in both cases, the slaves would have a taste of how their lives would have been on the plantations: full of violence, torture, humiliation and pain, a lot of pain.[134]

[132] Mustakeem Sowande M*., Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign IL, 2016.

[133] Falola, Warnock, pp. 151-152.

[134] Klein Herbert S., The Middle Passage: comparative studies in the Atlantic slave trade, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1978.

4.2 The Middle Passage

Anniwaa's experience, the capture, the separation from her family and the voyage to the New World constitutes a radical rupture with everything she knew before. Slavery promoted a new social order marked by captivity and mutilations which ended up with interrupting entire centuries of black African culture. When slaves were taken across the ocean, they went through a process of cultural alienation, for they arrived in their new countries £culturally unmade".[135] Jackie Kay renders this concept of unmaking with a biological metaphor: "I am getting smaller by the day. I am a girl getting smaller.[136] Maybe soon I will be the size of a goat, then the size of a yam and then the size of a cricket and the I will vanish. Maybe I will start to grow backwards. Soon I might be ten, then nine." (p. 13). The unmaking of slaves is conveyed through the idea of a physical disintegration: Anniwaa fears she will be physically unmade. This physical reduction also symbolizes the physical annihilation of slaves, as part of the process of dehumanization. Some critics have posited the distinction between "body" and "flesh", the first pertaining to free subjects, the second to slaves. Slaves were deprived of their will and possibility to choose for themselves in their reduction to mere property, their bodies were turned into mere flesh, to the lowest degree of social conceptualization; slaves were treated as a commodity, a commodity with flesh.[137]

After being captured and kept prisoner in the fort, Anniwaa was forced to board a ship and thus transported across the Atlantic: "I was the one who was stowed away. For weeks on the *Mary,* the ship roared and tossed and everything was green. Nobody knows what I went through coming here." (p. 19). The last sentence is what I would like to focus on. We will never really know how terrible those voyages were but in my opinion, it is only right to explore the topic a little further, for the terrors of ship voyages are worth to be known. The infamous Middle Passage is so called since it was the middle step of a three-step journey: the first part was that from Europe to Africa,

[135] Nadalini, pp. 61-62.
[136] Nadalini, pp. 61-62.
[137] Nadalini, p. 62.

the second was the journey from Africa to America and the third part was the return to Europe, thus the famous triangular shape attributed to the trade. However, the typical triangulation of the market is more a myth than the reality. Slave ships were important in the first two parts of the voyage, the third step, from the colonies back to Europe, was actually the least important one. In fact, most of the colonial goods were shipped to Europe in ad hoc ships, generally larger than slave ships, and specifically designed for the transport of goods.[138] As many accounts of slaves and seamen prove, the Middle Passage was particularly dreadful and dangerous.

Information about the dangers of ship voyages across the Atlantic are scattered throughout the play, especially in the scenes entitled Shipping News. For instance, Black Harriot says: "into the howling, moaning Atlantic, into the open-grave-green sea. Into the choppy water, another body. Another stiff black wave into the tight black waves of the sea. Into the turbulent water, another body yet." (p. 12). And the Lamplighter adds: "into the shark infested Atlantic, the black deaths slipped" (p. 44). In these lines the recurrent use of the adjective black echoes the concept of the "Black Atlantic" developed by Paul Gilroy.[139] The term points at those cultural and historical connections that unify the peoples of African descent across the Atlantic. These connections have their roots in the diaspora of black Africans resulting from the Atlantic slave trade and are fundamental not only from an historical perspective, but also for their current relevance. In fact, the economic, political and social structures of the societies in the Atlantic region have been largely determined by the connections caused by the trade of black Africans. Furthermore, all these societies are interdependent and interconnected today as they were in the past. With her reference to Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* Jackie Kay conveys the diasporic reach of her play.[140] Furthermore, the idea of terror and despair evoked by the Middle Passage is here very poetically conveyed. the horror of ship voyages is one of the themes tackled in the

[138] Klein, 1999, pp. 97-98.
[139] Gilroy Paul, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, London and New York, 1993.
[140] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 168.

play. In the scenes called Shipping News, for example, we are informed about the number of dead slaves at sea, as well as about the cause of their death. For example, in scene 12 a list of dead is provided: "January 1st buried one man – of dysentery. January 3rd – one woman – ditto. January 6th – one woman – of a lethargy. January 15th – one boy of a dysentery. January 16th – one manboy – ditto. […] January 31st – one woman – of sulkiness." (pp. 68-69). Disease was indeed the main cause of death on board a slave ship. Jackie Kay informs us that one out of three did not survive the journey (p. 69) and since corpses were cast overboard, sharks followed these ships (p. 45) that provided abundant and frequent meals. Jackie Kay does not explore in detail the life on slave ships, but I took these short inputs she gave about disease and death at sea as suggestions to delve into the topic. Jackie Kay has brought to the surface some aspects and events connected to the trade that are fundamental to convey a specific image of slavery. Therefore, I decided to explore the conditions of slaves at sea a little further. What I read and discovered is outrageous beyond imagination, thus the choice to include some information, which is relevant not only to understand the conditions in which slaves lived for weeks while crossing the Atlantic, but also to have an idea of their physical and mental states once arrived in the New World.

The Middle Passage was a journey of abuses, starvation, despair and death. Slave mortality is one of the most controversial aspects of the Atlantic slave trade. Especially controversial is the issue of mortality during the Middle Passage. Some historians believe that mortality was extremely high and remained so until the mid-nineteenth century. Other scholars affirmed that the mortality rate fell after the mid-eighteenth century, although it may have increased again after 1830, since it had become illegal. Slave mortality depended on various factors and surely their health conditions before the voyage influenced their chance of survival. Before boarding a ship, many slaves had travelled from distant regions and thus have been exposed to various diseases. Their imprisonment in the fort might also have worsened their conditions: torture, malnutrition and depression were very common. At sea, conditions on board had an impact on slaves and the ship's crew. Sea travels in general

were risky during the early modern period, but slave ships had some of the highest rates of mortality. Generally, deaths caused by sickness, suicide, depression, and rebellion averaged from 13 to 15 percent. As for the impact of such losses to the general profit of the expedition, it has been estimated that the death of 15 percent of the cargo could reduce profits up to 30%.[141]

As far as the amount of human cargo that a ship could carry, there were two different schools of thought among English captains: those who preferred a smaller cargo that allowed a better treatment of the slaves and thus reduced mortality rate and those who preferred a larger cargo, which allowed better profits despite the higher death toll. Unfortunately, this second kind of reasoning was prevalent.[142] The length of voyages ranged between 18 and 150 days, depending on the point of departure and arrival, the route chosen and, especially, the weather at sea. Undoubtedly, a longer journey automatically meant higher risks. Overcrowding was definitely an issue: slaves were really packed like sardines, to quote Jackie Kay,[143] chained in pairs, ankle to ankle and with less room than in a coffin. They were forced to crawl over each other to reach the toilet buckets and when they couldn't, they would lay among their excrement for days. All this, combined with poor ventilation systems, increased the spread of diseases. Because of these inhuman conditions and the hopelessness that surrounded them, many slaves tried to end their own life by starving or drowning themselves.[144]

The daily schedule on a ship was very basic. Slaves spent most of the time in the holds, were they barely had room to turn and air to breathe. Most ships had five or six air ports on each side to let air into the hold. They were generally fed twice a day, around 10 am and 4 pm. The kind of food served generally was boiled rice or stewed yam. If the weather was good, they were daily allowed on deck, to breathe fresh air and to exercise a little. This exercise was called "dancing the slaves", which aimed at

[141] Klein, 1999, pp. 133-134.
[142] Falola, Warnock, pp. 260-262.
[143] Kay Jackie, "Missing Faces".
[144] Mustakeem, pp. 55-75.

lifting their spirits but was in truth a real torture: captives were forced to dance in chains, without any consideration for their health or physical condition. The whip was the consequence for those who refused. While on deck, chains would tie them in pairs or trios to the ship, as a measure to prevent them from attempting a mutiny or jumping overboard. While the slaves were on deck, the holds were roughly cleaned with vinegar, quite an unpleasant task since the smell and dirt were often unbearable. It was however a necessary measure to prevent epidemics and preserve as much cargo as possible.[145] The fact of being chained side by side for weeks, sometimes months, allowed the creation of deep and important bonds among the slaves. The awareness of sharing a common destiny was a comforting and unifying thought. Despite age and ethnic differences, many slaves got very close and these bonds helped them survive the Middle Passage. Unfortunately, after reaching the final destination, many slaves would never see their shipmates again, for they might be purchased by different planters. This can be considered a second separation trauma, after that of being taken away from their families.[146]

The horrors of the Middle Passage would undoubtedly deserve a longer and more accurate discussion, but the short description I provided has the purpose of achieving a deeper understanding of the abuses perpetrated on slaves even before reaching their final destination. Regarding ship voyages, particular attention is given to ship names. The names of several ships have indeed been reported by Jackie Kay in her work: the Diana, the Othello, the Angel, the Jesus, the Bridget, the Perseverance and so on. These names all stand for western civilization, for they come out of mythology, literature, religion and western culture in general. Including these names was for the author a strategy to show the kind of hypocrisy of the slave trade and its players who claimed to act in the service of civilization.[147]

[145] Falola, Warnock, pp. 130-132.
[146] Falola, Warnock, pp. 341-342.
[147] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 172.

Furthermore, a very famous ship name is also reported in the play. In scene 9, *Shipping News*, MacBean mentions the case of the *Zong* ship: "6th September 1781, the Zong was on its well-tried route from Liverpool, to West Africa, and on to the Caribbean. Ship's Captain, Luke Collingwood, decided to jettison live slaves into the sea, so that he could claim insurance on each life." (p. 54). The *Zong* incident is a very notorious case in the history of ship voyages. The Zong was an English slave ship which, on September 1781, left Africa for Jamaica with 440 slaves on board. Due to navigational mistakes, the ship ran out of drinking water and the captain ordered to cast overboard 131 slaves among the ill, to save the life of the crew and of the remaining healthy slaves. The terms of the insurance policy that covered the voyage stated that if slaves died for a natural reason, the loss would not be refunded, but if slaves, in case of emergency, were thrown overboard alive, the loss would be covered. However, the insurance denied the claim, arguing that illness was not an acceptable reason to throw slaves overboard. The case went to court and in the end it was decided that necessity had required the captain to do so in order to save the crew and the remaining slaves and to ensure the success of the expedition. The insurance was consequently bound to pay.[148] I think that the Zong case is particularly relevant if we consider that during the process, no one was prosecuted for murder and that the court declared the slaves' death a mere loss of merchandise. It is safe to assume that Jackie Kay mentioned this case for its relevance as an example of the cruelty and brutality of the captain and his crewmen, and of the British institutions. Furthermore, this case is mentioned in the play also to deal with the issue of resistance. Black Harriot indeed adds some details to the story: "Ten people saw what was happening and refused to hang around waiting. They jumped, up high, they dived down into the sea. Those were the deaths with wings" (p. 55). Some slaves realized what was happening and decided to act, they did not want to die at the sailors' hands. They jumped and were therefore masters of their own destiny. Death is therefore presented as a form of agency, as an act of resistance.

[148] Falola, Warnock, pp. 144-146.

The Zong ship is one of the many tragically famous cases of failed ship voyages. Even more famous is probably the case of the ship called Amistad. The Amistad case is particularly important, for it was the very first trial of enslaved Africans to receive national attention and to be widely debated in the press.

The Amistad was sailing from Havana to Puerto Principe when one of the slaves freed himself and the other slaves, and murdered the entire crew except for two men, who were spared only to sail the ship back to Africa. The two sailors however, secretly directed the ship north. After two months, they ran out of supplies and were forced to land in New York. There, the two sailors took the case to court and accused the slaves of murder. The final sentence decided that the slaves acted as they did out of desire to regain their freedom and return to their families and thus could not be punished. Their enslavement was declared unlawful and their return to Africa was guaranteed. This case became of course extremely important for the abolitionist campaign.[149]

4.3 A New World of work and violence

Another important step of the enslavement process was the slave market. Ships could transport slaves both to the colonies and to Europe, according to the variation of supply and demand. However, independently of the point of arrival, captives had to undergo the humiliations of the slave market, which can be considered as the final site of retail sale, where human commodities became slaves. Once arrived at the port of destination, the sailors would arrange the sales for a few days later, so that they would allow as much buyers as possible to arrive at the dock. The average number of participants is uncertain, but the slave market attracted men from the remotest rural

[149] Davis David Brion*, Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006.

areas of the islands as well as those from the greatest urban centres. Animated by the desire and necessity of making good affairs, the amount of available and exploitable slaves generally attracted a considerable number of buyers.[150] The New World market where the slave ship ended its journey appeared very similar to the African one where the voyage had begun. African captives had passed through the entrance gate of the market on the African coast to board a ship and they had to go through a similar process to disembark. Slavers spent the time between the docking and the beginning of sales to prepare the slaves and hide the marks of the Middle Passage as much as possible. The heads were shaved to eliminate lice and white hair, the bodies were bathed and rubbed with palm oil to mask any depletion and weakness and in case of dysentery, anuses were plugged. After these preparations, buyers where welcomed on board, where wine was served and the merchandize was on exhibition. Many had already an idea of what they needed and started touching, fondling and grabbing slaves' bodies to assess their value and potential. Captives were chosen like horses at fairs: the strongest, healthiest and most youthful.

With time, buyers learnt about the dangers and difficulties slave ships had to endure while crossing the Atlantic and, though disappointed, came to consider cargoes with many women, children, older or sick people as ordinary. The first transactions involved young strong and healthy men, while women were generally a second choice. The "leftovers" of the sales, slaves too ravaged or sick to be purchased, were object of a second market: the auction of the "refuse". Here, men purchased these remaining slaves at low rates as a form of investment, in the hope of making them recover and sell them again at a higher price. Whatever the price, all slave markets produced the same outcome: every single person was sold, even the weakest and sickest. Cargoes that suffered extraordinary rates of disease or mortality had the same fate as the most

[150] Falola, Warnock, pp. 45-48.

fortunate ones, all types of cargoes could find a market somewhere in the Americas and no slave was rejected and returned to the African coast.[151]

There was no common currency throughout the Atlantic World. The value of slaves was determined by local needs and economic systems. In Africa slaves were purchased in exchange for goods, that could vary from clothes to weapons, alcohol and other products. It has been estimated that textiles accounted for 50% of the total value of imports to Africa, followed by alcohol beverages (12%), manufactured goods (10%), gunpowder (8%) and tobacco (5%). The price of slaves there increased and decreased according to the variation of offer and demand, but generally speaking it rose fivefold between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.[152]

In her play, Jackie Kay makes a few references to slave sales: Black Harriot illustrates the way she was prepared for the market: "When I arrived off the ship, I was polished with palm oil to make my dusty skin shine. My anus was plugged with wadding. To fetch the best price for me." (p. 32). Her skin was polished and made to shine with oil and her anus was plugged, which was a measure took in case of dysentery, as explained before. The slave market was another traumatic and mortifying experience for slaves who had already undergone the horrors of the Middle Passage. MacBean recalls the moment in which the Lamplighter was sold and describes how she stood there crying, desperate and afflicted. The market truly was another way in which the slaves' identities and humanity were denied; they were treated as any other commodity: polished and put on display. A board announcing a coming sale "Horses, to be sold at the Bull and Gate Inn Holborn. A very good Tim Wisky with good harness. A Chestnut Gelding, he goes safe. A good grey Mare and a well tempered Black boy who has recently had the smallpox" (p. 17) is one more proof of the dehumanisation and commodification of slaves. Here the message Jackie Kay wants to convey is very clear: at markets, people were sold together with horses, as if

[151] Smallwood Stephanie E., *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2008.
[152] Klein, 1999, pp. 109-112.

there was no difference. As a matter of fact, those who participated in these sales were invited to scrutinize, touch and assess the slaves' value and potential. "Men rushing towards us wanting to buy us, turning us roughly round" (p. 33) informs us the Lamplighter. They were "torn, yanked, pulled, pushed, kicked, stamped, branded" (p. 33) as if they were animals, or even worse, objects. This was nothing but the umpteenth abuse and mortification that these victims had to endure. Among the brutalities listed above, the worst is, in my opinion, that of branding. Brands were created with pieces of silver wire or small irons, heated to a red-hot state and impressed on the skin. Typically, their function was to indicate ownership to a specific master, but additional brands with particular symbols could have various reasons, for example: a cross signified that the slave had been baptized, an R stood for runaway.[153] I consider this practice particularly humiliating because it was meant to reduce the African to a slave by destroying his or her freedom and identity. This was probably the highest degree of identity denial. These marks impressed on the skin symbolized belonging to someone else, showed that slaves were totally in their masters' hands.

There was no end to violence and those who survived the nightmarish Middle Passage were welcomed to a life of harsh work. Also in *The Lamplighter* we hear the voices of the four slave women in alternate in recounting their experiences of working in the fields or in the households. They explain how they made the fields out of wilderness, how they performed any kind of task: from digging to planting, from cutting to carrying and loading. Every day it was the same hard work, from dawn to dark: the sun marked their time. Not only was their daily work very hard, but also extreme attention was required to perform the various tasks perfectly, or else the whip would have been the consequence. Constance explains: "The whip was made out of plaited cow skin. It could take the skin off horses' backs or lay marks in a deal board" (p. 37). Such instrument of torture was used on humans, another sign of how brutal and cruel men can be, even more if we consider that the whip was taken out for

[153] Falola, Warnock, pp. 67-68.

whatever reason, sometimes even without one, as Constance informs us. However, even when slaves did something to "deserve" punishment, masters were so hard on them that it was a miracle if they survived. This was Mary's case, as explained at the beginning of the chapter. Unfortunately, many slaves did not survive such appalling living conditions. As a matter of fact, "one African in three did not survive the first three years in her or his new country" (p. 69) as MacBean explains in scene 12. In contemporary historiography the first period slaves spent in the New World is crudely called "seasoning", which describes a process of adjustment and adaptation to new conditions. Seasoning involved adapting to the new environment, climate, food, work regime, clothing and language. Once slaves had been bought and taken to the place they had to work, whether on a plantation or in a household, a certain amount of time was required for them to adapt. The duration of this period could vary according to the location, the master and the slave himself. It is believed to be the worst and most fatal period for a slave, after the Middle Passage. It has been estimated that up to 25% of slave mortality in the West Indies occurred in the first 18 months. [154]

Most important of all was the adjustment and acceptance of their new status. Slaves had to learn, by means of violence and abuse, that they were slaves and had to obey their masters. The Lamplighter explains she had to learn "how to, how not to" (p. 19), while Constance was forced to address her masters with "Lord, Lady, Sir, Master, Misses, Miss" (p. 27). The use of these titles was one of the ways in which masters imposed their superiority. They looked upon slaves as their property, to be used for benefit, profit, and convenience. They did not see human beings with desires, needs and rights. At the very heart of the slaveholder mentality is a sense of supremacy and the right to exploit his chattel without limits. In this way, slaves learned to associate whiteness with power and superiority and blackness with subjection and inferiority. Not only were slaves taught to be inferior, but also to be marginal. Slavery is a condition that lies between two contradictory principles: marginality and

[154] Smallwood, pp. 193-194.

integration. Constance explains that her role was to be "visible, invisible. See. Be not seen. Hear be not heard. To be seen and not heard." Slaves are asked to be an invisible presence, to be there and at the same time not to. In this sense, the concept of marginality applies perfectly, for the condition of bondage places the slaves in an in-between position. Slaves experience social death but are also inserted in a new community, of which they are part but at the same time they are not. Again, Kay's words are extraordinarily effective in conveying this contradiction: slaves were social outcast and yet indispensable in the colonial system, despite their marginality they were the very heart of the mechanism.

5. Resistance

One of the main themes discussed in *The Lamplighter* is resistance. Jackie Kay explores the various forms of resistance employed by African slaves, from mere survival to maroonage to proper rebellion, both on an individual and on a political scale. Scenes 11 "Runaway" and 15 "Resistance" offer an articulated view of the ways in which slaves resisted their condition of bondage.[155] Through the four voices we are brought into a world of daily resilience, in which small acts of rebellion or defiance give proof of souls who have not been completely broken, of people who are "hanging in" and try to do anything to provoke a change. Running away is also contemplated among the various forms of resistance, although these desperate attempts of escaping often failed. The author then deals with more violent forms of resistance when she talks about Haiti, the only successful slave revolt. Finally, the issue of death is tackled as the only possible way for many slaves to find freedom and as a form of resistance in a broader sense. In *The Lamplighter,* however, the ultimate sign of resistance is the

[155] Nadalini, pp. 63-64.

telling of the story. White oppression did not break them, slavery did not silence them: in the end, they managed to tell their stories and make the world see what they had to endure. The play itself is Kay's homage to their resistance. In the following pages, I will analyse these themes to explore how they are tackled in the radio play and what their meaning is in a broader, historical perspective.

The relevance of the presence in *The Lamplighter* of the issue of slave resistance lies in being an answer to the alleged lack of resistance among black slaves. Jackie Kay fights against the stereotypes of the dehumanized, passive, lazy and silent slave, by presenting her characters not as passive victims, but rather as autonomous subjects, with their agency and ready to support revolutionary action.[156] In the past, African slaves have often been described as docile and meek people that accepted their condition without fighting. Frederick Douglass, an escaped American slave, during his abolitionist campaigns was frequently asked by whites why slaves did not rebel and overthrow the system as they surely would have done in their place. According to many whites of the time, if the slaves did not fight for their freedom it meant that they were fine after all.[157] This assumption has been proved wrong many times: slaves fought their condition of bondage every day, sometimes openly and violently, sometimes more quietly and privately. Resistance took indeed various forms throughout the history of black slavery.

[156] Angeletti, p. 226.
[157] Davis, pp. 205-206.

5.1 Daily resistance

The simplest and most common form of resistance was the slaves' daily resilience. In *The Lamplighter* agency and self-affirmation is achieved through several little, everyday actions. The simple concept of "hanging in", of not "giving up" is a proof of resistance. An insolent answer to their masters, a deliberate act of sabotage or an attempt to defend themselves also show agency.

Generally speaking, slave communities had their own private and social lives on the plantations: they kept their rituals and traditions, they played and danced their music and enjoyed various pastimes. Despite the masters' efforts to control every aspect and moment of the slaves' lives, they managed to find their own private space and time away from the whites. Slaves often lived separately from their masters, in makeshift huts separated from the households, which gave them the opportunity to indulge in those collective activities that their masters feared. Slaves were frequently wrenched from their natural families, but once integrated in a slave community on the plantations, family-like ties were recreated. They looked out and cared for each other, were loyal and unite. The older ones taught the youngest their traditions, religious beliefs and rituals, cooking and medical recipes and so on.[158]

Another common form of resistance was deliberately causing economic loss and damages. It was a common saying among white owners, that slaves were thieves. They were accused of stealing crops and animals, accusation at times valid: slaves sometimes stole food out of hunger, since their rations were often too scarce, some other times to deliberately damage their masters. Such behaviours were outlawed and harshly punished, but happened quite often nonetheless, therefore, masters were forced to accept these depredations as part of their economic costs.[159]

[158] www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/against-slavery/black-resistance-against-slavery/slave-resistance-at-work/.
[159] Walvin James, Slavery and the slave trade: a short illustrated history, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983.

Slaves were also often accused of laziness and obstinacy. They never worked hard and fast enough and were not as efficient and productive as their masters wished them to be. This was partly due to the appalling conditions of their daily routine and partly to deliberate acts of sabotage. Setting cane fields on fire, ruining tools and materials and hurting and poisoning animals are only some of the most common damages slaves caused. To stem the damages, white owners came up with a complicate system of punishments and rewards, aimed at increasing productivity. Nonetheless, no matter how harsh the punishment or desirable the reward, this system is very unlikely to have had the desired results.[160]

These acts were often caused by high levels of frustration, which were common among the slaves, or by simple desire of vengeance or by reaction to provocations. The most desperate and violent of these attacks were those directed to white people. These were either impulsive answers to provocations or well-planned and organized acts, motivated by a vengeful desire. Supervisors were generally victims of field slaves, while the masters' families had to watch out for their domestics. Poisonings were difficult to detect, since in the tropic islands it was common for people to die suddenly for a series of different reasons. It is true however, that masters who were hostile to their slaves easily pointed their fingers to them. For this reason, accusations (and punishments) for poisoning were far more common than actual poisonings.[161]

Resistance took many other forms: slaves faked mental insanity, pregnancies or sickness. They hurt or mutilated themselves, stopped working out of protest, pretended to misunderstand instructions, broke or stole furniture, set fields or houses on fire and ruined cultivations or entire sugar batches. Murder was another extreme form of resistance. White masters and overseers were often targeted by slaves who could not stand their requests and abuses anymore. Inside the households, white

[160] Walvin, 1983, pp.99-117.

[161] www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/against-slavery/black-resistance-against-slavery/slave-resistance-at-work/.

women and sometimes even children were victims of frustrated domestics and servants.[162]

Abortion and miscarriages among slave women were very common, but the nature of such incidents is very hard to tell. In *The Lamplighter,* for instance, the issue of abortion is briefly touched by Mary who says: "Remember Mountain Lucy? Mountain Lucy miscarried after she drank Contra Yerva every day on purpose." (p. 59). Since slaves' offspring followed their mother's faith thanks to the colonial law of *partus sequitur ventrem*, it is probably true that the last thing a slave woman wanted, was to bring a child to a life of enslavement and misery. Moreover, since these children were generally taken from their mothers and sold, aborting them meant that the master was deprived of this source of profit. However, it is also true that the appalling conditions in which they lived made natural miscarriages very likely to happen. Pregnant slaves were forced to work hard until late in the pregnancy and their poor diet and scarce hygienic conditions could lead easily to lose the baby.[163]

5.2 Runaway

Running away can also be contemplated among the ways in which slaves tried to resist their destinies. The Lamplighter tells us: "I ran away five times. Four times they got me and brought me back. Even the forty lashes on my back, even the hundred and forty, didn't stop me trying again, just to feel those moments of freedom, to taste the air. But the fifth time I made it!" (p. 65). These frequent attempts at escaping, whether successful or not, are another sign of resistance and desire to be free. Here we hear the Lamplighter saying that no matter how harsh her punishment was, as soon as she

[162] Abbott Elizabeth, *Sugar: a bittersweet history*, London, Overlook Duckworth, 2009.
[163] Walvin, 1983, p. 104.

got another chance she tried to escape again. Even just to feel free for a few wonderful moments. A resigned slave, not willing to fight and risk, would never try to run away. The consequences in case of failure and recapture were extremely severe. We are indeed informed that: "Any slave who escape beyond the River is to lose and ear and be branded with the letter R on the chin." (p. 61). In the play, the Lamplighter tells us that on her fifth attempt, she succeeded. She managed to board a ship and get to London, however, there she was captured again and brought back to the plantations.

Punishments for runaways varied greatly: they were tortured, beaten, flogged, put in iron collars and chains, amputated and sometimes even killed, to serve as examples for other slaves. Runaway slaves were particularly bad tolerated by the masters: they deprived them of labour force, disturbed the equilibrium and the daily routine of work and were a symbol of resistance. Furthermore, when fugitives ran and hid on other plantations, were fed and protected by other slaves, who further undermined the masters' authority.[164]

Some slaves ran away to be free, other to reunite with family members on other plantations. Recidivist runaways, like the Lamplighter, were common. Sometimes they were caught and brought back with force, some other times, it was the slaves who came back on their own, having nowhere to go and nothing to live with.[165]

Even in case of success, fugitive slaves would not have an easy life. Leaving the islands was almost impossible, which meant that they had to live in hiding and try to survive with what the forests had to offer. The bigger islands offered the possibility to establish maroon settlements in the woods or on the mountains. Maroonage, running away and living in communities away from civilization, was another form of resistance and a chance of surviving for fugitive slaves. This term comes from the Spanish "cimarrón", which means fugitive. To the slaves on the plantations, these communities represented hope for freedom, to the masters they were a constant threat and a

[164] Abbott, p. 204.
[165] Abbott, pp. 204-207.

symbol of failure. Maroon settlements were military guarded and ruled according to African way of living. These communities were often not officially recognized as independent and free and had to fight constantly for their freedom.[166]

5.3 Rebellion

So far I dealt with resistance as individual acts. However, history is full of accounts of organized rebellions, some more successful than others. Rebellions were very common on the tropical islands, less so in the US South. Surely did slaves revolt in North America as well, but those uprising were not as frequent and as important as those on the islands, where slaves burst into spontaneous or organized revolts on a small and large scale. It was very common in the Caribbean to find hundreds of slaves regularly involved in violent acts, killing whites and destroying properties. These acts were followed by harsh punishment and reprisals from the whites: many slaves were atrociously killed, whether they were guilty or innocent.[167]

In *The Lamplighter*, Jackie Kay also deals briefly with organised rebellions, when she mentioned the case of Haiti. In the history of black slavery in the Americas, in only one case did revolts lead to the destruction of the slave system. That case is the former French Colony Saint Dominique, today known as Haiti. From the mid-eighteenth century, the booming economy of Saint Dominique had made it the most important French colony, leader in sugar production. The enormous production required more and more slaves, so much so that almost 90 percent of the French slave trade was directed towards that island. In 1750 there were over 230,000 slaves on the island.[168]

[166] Walvin, 1983, pp. 107-109,
[167] www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/against-slavery/black-resistance-against-slavery/slave-resistance-at-work/.
[168] Walvin, 1983, p. 114.

The large number of blacks, the unbearable work rhythms and the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity inspired by the French Revolution constitute the basis of the major slave revolt in history. The famous "Black Spartacus" Toussaint Louverture guided his island in war against France which, despite the help received by the British, ultimately had to withdraw. The victory of the rebels was mainly achieved thanks to yellow fever, that decimated the French militia. The independence of Saint Dominique was proclaimed on 1 January 1804.[169]

This rebellion was surely successful in terms of the liberation from slavery, however, that freedom came for Haiti at a very high cost. Jackie Kay indeed informs us that: "In exchange for diplomatic recognition by Great Britain, Haiti must agree to pay France 150 million gold francs compensation for the loss of "property", including slaves. […] It took Haiti one hundred years to pay the 'liberty debt'." (p. 87). Once more, the author provides a reading of history which differs from the one provided by the imperial records. She makes us acknowledge our share of responsibility not only in the impoverishment of Africa but also of states like Haiti.

As stated above, records are full of accounts of slave revolts and uprisings. Jamaica, for instance, has quite a reputation as far as revolts are concerned: from the English settlement and up until the mid-eighteenth century scarcely a decade passed without an uprising, between 1730 and 1740 there was one each year. Jamaica offered indeed the perfect geography for organized revolts. The Caribbean islands were very small and often overcrowded, which meant that the slaves had nowhere to hide in case of failure. Jamaica instead, with its mountains and woods, offered the perfect shelter for rebellious slaves on the run. These geographical conditions were favourable for the rising of maroon communities. At first, the British tried to eradicate them and this resulted into constant fighting between the two communities. In 1739 a peace treaty was signed and maroons were finally recognized independent.[170]

[169] Abbott, pp. 214-217.
[170] Philip D. Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

A very common cause or source of inspiration for revolts were rumours. Major slave revolts are generally believed to have been inspired by rumours of emancipation movements or laws regarding an amelioration in the slaves' condition. For example, the first major revolt in Barbados was in 1816, the year in which an important discussion was having place in the British Parliament on the institution of a central registration system for slaves. This was presented as a measure to prevent illegal trades, but in the eyes of the abolitionist it was a first step towards regulating and improving the slaves' lives. Barbadian planters opposed this measure, as it was against their interests. After many discussions, this law was not approved and the slaves, who in the meantime had read and heard about it, had started an insurrection, known as the Bussa Rebellion. Unfortunately, this was another unsuccessful rebellion, which ended up in the killing of hundreds of slaves. What strikes particularly about this rebellion, is that despite the massive property destruction, only one white man was killed.[171] The famous three-day insurrection in Demerara, was also inspired by rumours of an abolition act. This uprising was led by slaves who wanted to defend their rights and the abolitionist cause, for this reason they kept the whites prisoners but only killed a couple of them, for they knew that killing them would not have helped their cause. On the contrary, the white reprisal was not as merciful.[172]

Keeping the order in the Carabbean islands was extremely difficult, especially in those countries were slaves outnumbered their masters. In Barbados, for instance, in 1713 there were 45,000 blacks and 16,000 whites. In Jamaica, the imbalance was even greater: 55,000 blacks to 7,000 whites. However, with the only exception for Haiti, slave rebellions were suicidal. The possibility of success was extremely low and the consequences they had to face afterwards were terrible. Mass executions were the common form of reprisal and used as "deterrent" for future attempts. Furthermore, the conditions the surviving slaves had to live in would become far worse

[171] Davis, pp. 168-169.
[172] Walvin, 1983, p. 116.

after a revolt. Finally, a failed rebellion was often used by planters to sustain anti-abolitionist propaganda.[173]

5.4 Death

Death was a daily reality for slaves. Their lives were in constant danger: they could die at sea, on the plantations, trying to escape or doing their daily hard work routine. In *The Lamplighter*, an entire scene is dedicated to death: scene 10, entitled *Death – free at last*. This title, or better its second part, has a very powerful effect, especially if we consider that there is an entire scene, the last one, dedicated to freedom. The message given here is very negative, as if death was the only way to freedom. Unfortunately, this is not far from the truth. For many slaves, death was a liberation and this explains the frequent suicides and suicide attempts. Slaves hanged, drowned and starved themselves, threw themselves into vats of boiling sugar, took poisons or stabbed themselves with knives and other working tools.[174] When their condition became too unbearable for them, even the natural instinct of self-preservation abandoned them, who preferred death to slavery.

Although illness, malnutrition, unsanitary and unhealthy conditions, overwork and depression caused the death of many slaves, among them, suicide was very common as an act of both self-distraction and self-affirmation.[175] It is indeed arguable whether suicide can be considered a desperate, ultimate form of resistance. It is a difficult issue to deal with and giving an answer to such extreme acts of self-destruction is almost impossible. Desperation, depression and the feeling that they

[173] Walvin, 1983, pp. 116-117.
[174] Abbott, pp. 197.
[175] Abbott, pp. 196-197.

could simply “take no more” was very common. Nonetheless, as said before, slaves were an important resource for their owners and the death of one of them meant a great loss in terms of profitability and costs. It is therefore reasonable to think that behind some suicides there was a precise will of causing damage. Furthermore, since slaves were perceived and treated as bodies totally at the mercy of their masters, suicide can be interpreted as a way of regaining the control of their body, deciding their own destiny, making the final decision for themselves.

6. Sugar

Scene 8 of *The Lamplighter* is entitled *Sugar*. This section is rich in information and details related to sugar. The four voices talk about various products in which it is employed, like cakes, puddings, rum and so on. Sugar had an extremely revolutionary effect on the European cuisine, since it completely reshaped the taste and nutritional patterns of millions of people. Jackie Kay has also included in her work references to the importance of sugar on both sides of the colonial economy: she very effectively shows how to the increase of sweetness experienced by the whites corresponded an increase in harshness, bitterness and pain in the lives of the slaves. Although all slave systems in the New World were characterized by violence, it has been argued that it was even more so in the Caribbean. James Walvin indeed claims that: ‘‘The bitterest of slave experiences were to be found in the sweetest of all crops—sugar’’.[176]

Today sugar is so widespread that we take it for granted, but a couple of centuries ago it was not that common and its arrival on European tables had a very high cost, not only in terms of money but especially in terms of human lives. For the

[176] Walvin in Angeletti, p. 221.

purpose to sweeten our dishes, we have shed a lot of blood. This is what Jackie Kay is telling us in this particular scene of the play. A refrain repeated several times throughout this scene is: "my story is the story of sugar", the lives of slaves who worked in cane fields was indeed shaped by sugar and its rhythms. Slaves' work in sugar fields is explained in details: they had to dig very large holes to plant seeds, when canes reached full growth, they had to cut them and transport them to the sugar mills, which was a particularly exhausting task, for canes were extremely heavy and cumbersome. We are told that 20 tons of cane were required to produce one ton of sugar and that in 1775 the British West Indies produced 100,000 tons of sugar (pp. 47-48). We can only imagine how much work was required and how many lives were sacrificed to reach that amount.

The slaves' story is the story of sugar but it is not sweet, as the Lamplighter reminds us. Quite the opposite: their lives swung between hard work, as we have seen, and violence. The Lamplighter tells us that whenever she did something wrong, she was not even told so, but directly stripped and whipped: "I was whipped so many times, my back was all corruption, as if it would rot. After the lashes they'd wash my back with salt water, rub it with rags and send straight back to work" (p. 51), such a treatment goes even beyond torture. These extreme punishments were so often that her back is completely scarred and resembles cut cane. Sugar becomes therefore the metaphor for a life of hard work and torture. The sweet sugar we know and love is here associated to gruesome and bitter images, creating an oxymoron hard to stomach.

The central role assigned to sugar summarizes the history of slavery: capture, physical and sexual exploitation, death, loss of kinship:[177] "My story is the story of sugar. I was stolen for sugar. I gave my body up for sugar. I nearly died for sugar. Sugar is my family tree." (p. 49). And Black Harriot echoes: "We were sold for sugar in the coffee. Sugar in the tea" (p. 17). Again, the human costs of these products is

[177] Angeletti, p. 221.

underlined, together with the idea of the small value attributed to slaves, who could be sold and bought so that Westerners could add sugar to their lives.

The entire eighth scene is indeed a bitter remark on sugar products and the ways in which it was employed, as for example: “Hot puddings, cold puddings, steamed puddings, baked puddings, pies, tarts, coming soon. Moderate or good. Creams, moulds, charlottes, bettys, trifles, fools. Coming soon.” (p. 44). This is a list of desserts and sweet products that are prepared with sugar. The very sugar produced through the exploitation of many slaves. These delicious products arrived on the richest English tables thanks to slaves, although the upper classes seemed to ignore that. It is a sort of appropriation on the part of the slaves, of all those products that they have made. Accumulations of words are particularly frequent in the play, especially in scene 8 and 13, and acquire a specific relevance in the text, here this device is used as a metaphor for the accumulation of goods and of capitals.

Jackie Kay is making us reflect on the costs of our modernity, she is telling us that everything we have, even products as simple and cheap as sugar, have become so common only thanks to slavery. In scene 8, the contrast of the sweet lives of the whites who enjoyed these products is in direct contrast with the bitter and hard lives of the slaves that produced them. This contrast underlines, once more, the brutality and injustice of this system of exploitation. I can personally say that after having learnt all this I look at sugar in a very different way. The ultimate purpose of works like *The Lamplighter* is indeed to raise awareness, to draw the links between the present and the past and to bring to a deeper understanding of the world we live in.

The recurrent refrain “my story is the story of sugar” in the play is therefore a metaphor that suggests the correlation between this product and slavery, but can also be understood as a form of appropriation or better re-appropriation on the part of the slaves of what belongs to them. The issue of re-appropriation is even more evident in scene 13, called *British Cities*, which is entirely dedicated to the growth and development of some British cities. Here a similar refrain is repeated: “my story is the

story of the city" (p. 70), a statement that connects this scene with scene 8 and that ties together slavery with the development of British cities. "Bristol, London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh" (p. 17) are the cities that Constance indicates as those which profited greatly from the trade and from the slave labour in the colonies. Black Harriot adds: "London, Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester, Glasgow belongs to me!" (p. 80). This is another example of accumulation of words used as a metaphor for the accumulation of goods and capitals, furthermore this list of words helps to convey the image of British cities "being built, brick by brick" (p. 70) through words. Jackie Kay's stage directions for this scene say that "the women should speak fast in this section and overlap each other, to give a sense of the city being built, brick by brick, in words", in this passage, language and physical work are intertwined and the accumulation of words stands for the accumulation of bricks that built the cities.[178]

The constant repetition of the concept that those cities belong to them is a way to re-appropriate the results of their hard work and sufferings. Jackie Kay is indeed suggesting that all these British cities owe their economic growth to the exploitation of slaves. As explained before, the mention of Glasgow is very significant, for this city is now enlisted among those whose streets and buildings are blood-stained. Statements such as this: "I belong to Glasgow and Glasgow belongs to me!" (p. 79) are a clear and open denunciation of Britain's and especially Scotland's responsibility for supporting the slave system. Through the voices of these four women, Kay asks her readers/listeners to reflect upon the roots of our modernity and the source of Western wealth. She makes us see how it was the slave trade that helped many cities, among which Glasgow, to prosper thanks to products such as sugar.[179]

These constantly repeated refrains sound like warnings: do not forget us, do not ignore our contribution in shaping the world you live in. The debt we have towards slaves is even higher if we talk in these terms. "I put those cities on the map" is another

[178] Tournay-Theodotou, p. 174.
[179] Angeletti, pp. 221-222.

often repeated statement throughout this section. This further form of re-appropriation underlines, once again, the contribution of slaves in making those cities so prosperous. In a few decades, the slave trade transformed fishing villages in the great port cities we know today. In this section of the play Jackie Kay brilliantly brings to the surface another troublesome issue which, as many others connected with slavery, had been buried in the past.

The Lamplighter is on the one hand a testimony of the atrocities of slavery and a celebration of the slaves' resistance, and on the other hand a reflection on the foundation of our modernity. Jackie Kay stresses that the European lifestyle is a result of black slavery. I think that the ultimate aim of this work is indeed a reflection on the legacy of slavery and a denunciation of the economic development of the UK that was carried on on the backs of its slaves. An important point in *The Lamplighter* is acknowledging how slavery financed the industrial revolution and how Britain (and thus Scotland as well) prospered and profited greatly from the trade. Basing her work on an extensive archival research, the author makes a conscious effort to write back to the official history and provide a different viewpoint. *The Lamplighter* is not only a work about the past, but also and maybe more importantly about the present. Jackie Kay refers to history as a key to read the present, for she does not only want the suffering of millions of *missing faces* to be acknowledged, but also their contribution in the shaping of our world.[180] It is the author's desire to see Third World debt payed back through a symbolic recognition of what the West owes to enslaved Africans. "I really do believe in human compassion and the ability to understand things you though you couldn't" she stated in an interview, "I believe in redemption, though I'm not particularly religious. And most of all, I think that once people start to tell a story that has been silenced, very positive things can come of it."[181]

[180] Tournay-Theodotou, pp. 180-181.
[181] Thorpe.

SUGAR: A BITTER HISTORY FOR A SWEER COMMODITY

Before moving to the analysis of the second literary work, I believe it is interesting to investigate the history of sugar, a product that has changed the lives of millions of people, as we have seen in *The Lamplighter* and as we will see in *Sugar in the Blood*. The revolutionary force oh this product is not limited to slaves, for it influenced entire societies across the globe and had a strong impact on the environment as well.

For the contemporary western society, sugar is so familiar and common that it is difficult to imagine a world without it. At breakfast, lunch and dinner sugar is a constant presence under various forms. Its positive and negative effects on our health are continuously studied and doctors and researchers keep arguing about the ideal amount of sugar we should consume. Although this sweet product has been a constant in our diet for centuries, over the past few years it has indeed become quite a disputed subject on a social, scientific and political level. If in the past sugar was not so common in people's kitchens, today we have it in abundance but we are constantly discouraged from consuming too much of it. A sweet treat was the reward for good and obedient children, today its use is restricted even to them. Nowadays, when sugar is discussed in the media, it is often portrayed as a serious threat to our health, the major contributor for poor dental care, obesity, diabetes and other disorders all around the world. As a result, global debates on sugar and its effects are at the centre of the discussion of health organisations and several sugar-free campaigns have been launched by famous brands, such as Coca-Cola.[182]

Already by the late sixteenth century, it was clear that sugar caused great damage to people's teeth. Rotten teeth and painful dental treatment are relatively modern phenomena and are generally associated with sugar. In recent years, archaeologists have revealed that in fact, our forebears did not suffer the widespread

[182] Walvin James, *Sugar. The World Corrupted: From Slavery to Obesity*, Pegasus Books, London and New York, 2018, pp. II-III.

dental problems we often imagine, at least not until the widespread and excessive consumption of sugar. Dead bodies, dated back to the Victorian Age, offer repetitive evidence of widespread dental problems. What this remarkable discovery shows is nothing more than the story of sugar.[183]

Although now demonized, sugar has been consumed regularly in Western societies for many centuries, but before the seventeenth century it was a very expensive commodity, a luxury only available to the richest and most powerful. With the rise of European sugar colonies in the Americas, everything changed. Thereafter, sugar became cheap, very common and extremely available. What had formerly been a luxury commodity then became an everyday necessity, even for the poorest working people.

Sweetening our food and drinks has been part of human cultures and traditions for centuries. Sweetness for the love of its taste, sweetness to remove the bitterness from foods and drinks, sometimes even sweetness as a medical prescription. Sugar is such an important part of our culture that all the words related to sweetness have entered our vocabulary with a double metaphorical meaning: words such as ‘sugar’, ‘sweet’ and ‘honey’ are also very often used to call loved ones. ‘Sweetheart’ is another common name given to partners. After marriage couples go on a ‘honeymoon’. The English language thus proves that sugar and its semantic field do not only convey the idea of a physical, sensorial pleasure, but also of a spiritual and emotional one.[184]

[183] Walvin 2018, p. 21.
[184] Walvin 2018, p. 1.

1. From honey to sugar

After these observations, we can fairly say that sugar is an indisputable protagonist of our modernity. Only a few centuries ago, however, it would have been equally difficult to imagine a world with so much sugar in it. When we think of sweetness today, we tend to think of sugar, but before this product was even known in the west, other natural sweeteners were employed. In the past, fruit juices and fruit syrups such as fig and date juice were useful food sweeteners and preservatives in the Middle East. The Romans were used to boil must to concentrate its sweetness. Another important ancient sweetener was maltose, a malt sugar made from germinating grains. Tree sap was also employed: in ancient China it was extracted from sugar palms (*Arenga Saccharifera*). Another typical, almost legendary sweetener of ancient times was manna. This word was generally applied, though not exclusively, both to exertions of insects and to exudations from branches or leaves of plants or trees, which occur by unusually high atmospheric temperatures. The majority of reports of manna have come from desert areas and its occurrence has often been described as a fortuitous or miraculous event.[185]

Together with all these sweeteners, honey surely deserves to be mentioned. Honey is a nutritious sweetening substance which contains calcium, phosphates, iron, sulfur, vitamins C and B as well as sucrose, and is a very good natural source of energy. In ancient times it was considered the "food of the gods". It can be gathered wild throughout much of the world, but beekeeping greatly improves its availability. Apiculture has indeed a long history, that dates back at least to 2560-2420 B.C. in Egypt. Honey was fundamental in the cuisine of the Greco-Roman world where it was used in cakes, sauces and dressings of any sort. In the Middle Ages, honey was employed to preserve meat and fruit, and to sweeten drinks.[186]

[185] Galloway J. H., *The Sugar Cane Industry: An Historical Geography from its Origins to 1914,* Cambridge University press, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 1-2.
[186] Galloway, p. 4.

As a matter of fact, honey was the main source of sweetness in several ancient societies. Several paintings from ancient Egypt and from ancient Indian societies portray honey as a source of sweetness. From classical antiquity comes evidence about the frequent and widespread use of honey. The literature of the classical world is very rich in references to honey: in Homer's *Odyssey*, in Virgil's *Fourth Georgic*, and in many other famous texts.[187] The Bible contains many references to honey as well, both in the Old and in the New Testament. Both the Bible and the Koran talk about an afterlife rich in fine food and drink such as milk, wine and honey. Honey has long been used as a sweetener in medicine and pharmacology. It was a significant commodity in a large number of ancient civilisations. Honey is now a sweetener of only minor importance but its flavor and the fact that it is a "natural food" ensures for it a continuing demand.[188]

Due to the lack of statistical data, it would be difficult to determine when exactly sugar became the principal sweetener in the western world but surely not until the early 18th century, when Caribbean sugar had begun to arrive in considerable amounts. In the New World, cane sugar was unknown until Columbus introduced it, towards the end of the 15th century. Nevertheless, the importance of honey was to be wiped out by the arrival of sugar in the West. Sugarcane indeed spread rather fast across continents and oceans and, over time, came to be a rival and then a replacement for honey. As matter of fact, honey's strong and distinctive taste can be too strong for some food and drink, while sugar is more neutral and sweetens without altering the taste of the products it is put into. It is a better preservative than honey, it can be fermented to make alcoholic drinks and it is way easier to store and transport than honey. Over the centuries, various factors contributed to promote sugar over honey. With the development of refining techniques, artistic bakers showed how it is possible to transform sugar into elaborate confections impossible to craft with honey. Anyway, apart from the intrinsically different qualities of honey and sugar, its usage,

[187] Abbott Elizabeth, *Sugar: A Bittersweet History*, Overlook Duckworth, London, 2009, p. 11.
[188] Walvin 2018, p. 4.

supply, technology, culture and cost determined the superiority of sugar.[189]

The first reference to sugar in England dates back to the 12th century.[190] At that time the English diet was rather meagre. Food consumption at that time was limited to local products, only the richest classes could afford precious and exotic products coming from far-distant places. It is only after the 17th century that sugar could be afforded by many. Since 12th-century agricultural production was still limited and the diet quite narrow, the arrival of sugar had a revolutionary effect on consumption patterns.[191]

Cane was first cultivated in New Guinea very anciently, already in 8000 B.C. Over time, it spread to various regions, from the Philippines to Indonesia, to India and China, where sugarcanes have been cultivated since 286 B.C. The spreading of Buddhism helped the spreading of sugar, for it was considered an important product for its healing properties; in Chinese literature Buddha is sometimes even referred to as "King of Sugarcane".[192] Crystallized sugar, as we know it, did not appear until the Christian era. The first reference to a "concrete kind of honey, that can be broken between the teeth like salt, dates back to the first century A.D., in India.[193] By the sixth century, the sugarcane reached Persia and by the early seventh century it was being manufactured there. Egypt was growing it from the mid-eighth century, and by the tenth century sugarcane was an important Middle Eastern crop. Subsequent Arab expansion and conquest spread it throughout the Mediterranean.[194] However, before the eleventh century A.D., sugar was unknown in Europe.

It was the Arabs who introduced the cane, its cultivation and production process in the Mediterranean regions such as Sicily, Cyprus, Malta, Rhodes, Morocco

[189] Abbott, p. 15.
[190] Mintz Sidney W., *Sweetness and Power. The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, Penguin Books, London, 1985, pp. 3-10.
[191] Mintz, pp. 3-10.
[192] Abbott, p. 12.
[193] Abbott, p. 14.
[194] Abbott, p. 12.

and Spain.[195] Crusaders had the possibility to control the production of sugar in those areas of the Islamic world they conquered. Furthermore, Venetian merchants decided to try to develop a sugar enterprise in Crete and Cyprus, these attempts did not last long, because of the rise of a competing industry in the New World and, even before that, because of warfare and plagues, whose resultant decline in population increased the costs of sugar production. It is indeed argued that it is at this point in history, that sugar became tied to slavery. Thanks to the Mediterranean production of sugar, the European elite became slowly accustomed to this sweetening substance, but the Mediterranean era of sugar soon came to an end, for the production was moved across the Atlantic. [196]

The development of the sugar industry by the Portuguese in the Atlantic islands, which moved this production from the Old to the New World, revolutionized the character of European sugar consumption. As a matter of fact, at the time in which the Portuguese and the Spaniards established a sugar industry on the respective Atlantic colonies, sugar was still a luxury in Europe, employed mainly as a medicine and a spice. The decline of its production in the Mediterranean regions coincided with its growth in European demand. Individual entrepreneurs where therefore encouraged to establish a sugar plantation in the Americas and trade the product in Europe.[197]

In the second half of the fifteenth century, Madeira was the leading sugar supplier in Europe, followed by São Tomé and the Canary Islands, the latter characterized by a mixture of free and slave labour. Sugar cane was first carried to the New World by Columbus on his second voyage in 1493 from the Spanish Canary Islands, to be grown in Spanish Santo Domingo. It was exactly from that island that sugar was first shipped back to Europe from the Americas, at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The first African slaves arrived shortly after the cane and started working on those plantations. Therefore, it was the Spanish that pioneered sugar

[195] Mintz, pp. 25-26.
[196] Galloway, p. 43.
[197] Mintz, pp. 26-29.

production through slave labour in the New World, although Spain's profits did not rival those of the Portuguese until centuries later. The sixteenth century saw indeed Brazil as the leading sugar supplier from the Americas. Within only a century, the French would succeed the Portuguese and later, the British. [198]

At first, northern European countries, contrary to their southern rivals, focused more on the production of other goods in their oversea colonies, cultivating cotton, indigo, tobacco and, soon after, cacao and coffee. Only by the end of the seventeenth century did they turn to sugar. This turn, however, proved to be crucial, for already at the beginning of the eighteenth century sugar production was exceeding that of tobacco both in the British and in the French West Indies. Earlier attempts to start a British sugar industry were made in the 1620s in Jamestown and a few years later in Bermuda, but without success. The turning point for Britain, as far as sugar production is concerned, was the Barbados settlement, which started to positively affect the British market in 1650. From that moment onwards, the British sugar industry boomed.[199]

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, sugar was already extremely popular among the upper classes of English society. They ate and drank it in abundance and displayed it ostentatiously as a proof of their wealth and power. When the Queen visited the Hampshire in 1591, the Earl of Hertford laid on a sugar display of castles, forts, ordnance, drummers, soldiers, animals and exotic beasts… all made from sugar.[200] Queen Elizabeth had indeed a very sweet tooth. At that time, sugar was still a luxury that only the upper classes could afford, but starting from the second half of the sixteenth century, the production of sugar increased so consistently, that its price significantly fell and could thus be afforded by a larger portion of population.

[198] Mintz, p. 30-31.
[199] Mintz, p. 37.
[200] Walvin 2018, pp. 17-19.

In 1660 England imported about 1,000 hogsheads of sugar, in 1700 about 50,000 and in 1730 100,0000.[201] This increase in production was of course stimulated by an increase in demand, for more and more people were consuming sugar and each consumer was using it increasingly. However, this booming production was not accompanied by improvement in sugar cultivation or processing. The growing demand was satisfied by a mere extension of crops: more plantations were created and more slaves employed. The eighteenth century was eventful in England, which was the European leading country in warfare, colonial expansion, slave importation and plantation system developments. The most important product, indisputable leader in British markets, was sugar, whose amount in production and exportation, number of consumers and range of its usages far exceeded any other product.[202]

The increasing production of sugar and its by-products in Britain led to the formation of two "triangles of trade". The first and most famous was the one that linked Britain to Africa and to the Americas: finished goods were sold to Africa in exchange for slaves, who were sold in the colonies in exchange for commodities produced there (especially sugar) and taken to the mother country. The second triangle was in a sense opposite to the first: rum was taken from New England to Africa, from Africa, slaves were taken to the West Indies, and from there molasses went back to New England to make rum. This second triangle represented of course an economic collision with Britain, which soon became a political matter.[203]

Cane sugar remained the unchallenged sweetener until beet sugar was introduced in the market in the early nineteenth century. Sugar beet produces a refined pure sugar not at all different from the refined sugar obtained from canes, and has thus become this latter's rival number one. Beet sugar soon became a booming industry, for already in the early 20th century it accounted for 65% of world sugar production. Presently, the two sugars together dominate the sweetener market, with

[201] Mintz, pp. 38-39.
[202] Mintz, pp. 39-40.
[203] Mintz, p. 43.

approximately 37% for beet and 63% for cane sugar. Nevertheless, in recent years some new sweeteners have appeared and are rivalling sugar, with ever increasing rates. Modern chemistry has indeed produced artificial sweetening substitutes such as aspartame, which is having more and more success for its capacity of providing a calorie-free sweetening effect.[204]

In England, the annual consumption of sugar per capita increased twenty times between 1663 and 1775. The rise in prosperity over time allowed people to buy and consume more sugar, while the popularity of tea and coffee provided new opportunities to use it.[205] Western societies have not only been able to satisfy their cravings for sweetness but they have over-indulged in it: jams, marmalades, confectionery, cakes, biscuits, ice creams, canned vegetables and fruits, sauces, soft drinks… these are only a few example of the many delights for the palate sugar has made possible. These new commodities have contributed in increasing sugar consumption, at least until only recently, when the first alarms about the negative effects on our health have been raised. These health concerns together with modern fashion, which tends to prefer slim figures, have contributed in decreasing the consumption of sugar over the past few decades.[206]

2. Cultivation, refining process and usages

The sugar cane is a tropical and subtropical crop with a growing season of about twelve months. It requires large amounts of water and hard labour, especially if the crop is to be used to make sugar and not just for the extraction of its juice. It has always been a

[204] Galloway, p. 5.
[205] Galloway, p. 1.
[206] Galloway, p. 7.

labour-intensive crop, at least until recent technological developments of the twentieth century. It is quite a thirsty crop that requires continual watering: in fact, although it can flourish even without irrigation, regularly watering increases its sugar content. In ancient Egypt, where the weather was mostly dry, it was irrigated twenty-eight times a season.[207]

What we call sugar is the final product of an ancient and complex process, which starts with the sugarcane plant itself, a large grass of the *Graminaeae* family. Six species of sugarcane have been identified, with *Saccharum officinarum*, the "sugar of the apothecaries" or "the noble cane," the most widely grown. It is tall and strong, its stalks are up to two inches thick and as tall as twelve to fifteen feet at maturity. It is jointed and quite soft and, according to the nature of the soil and the climate, the stems may be yellow, green or reddish brown.[208] Once planted, the cane sprouts and with enough heat and moisture, it reaches the perfect condition for extraction; this generally takes from nine to eighteen months, depending on the cane variety, the soil, the climate, the amount of irrigation, the effectiveness of the fertilizer nourishing it (if any), and other environmental factors. However, cane grows again without replanting for several seasons, which makes it a very convenient crop.[209]

After cutting the cane, the extraction needs to be extremely rapid to avoid rot, desiccation or fermentation. The extracted liquid is then heated until evaporation, which leaves a sucrose concentration. Sucrose is cooled and crystallized. The process is long, delicate and quite complex. The production of sugar appears a complicated combination of heating and cooling processes, in which liquefaction and solidification alternate in a series of complex operations. Pure and refined sugar was usually white. It could have been made in any colour, but the very fact that it was white was to

[207] Mintz, pp. 25-26.
[208] Abbott, p. 12.
[209] Abbott, pp. 12-13.

underline its fineness and purity, which, in the colonial era, needed to be associated with whiteness.[210]

Processed cane is quite different from a stalk cut down in the field. It is liquefied and boiled into dense molasses and finally crystallized into a form, generally the common grain that closely resembles salt.[211] The final, crystallized form is more adaptable and thus used more easily in cooking. Nevertheless, sugar is not only used in the kitchens, traditionally, it has been used for five main functions: as medicine, spice or condiment, as decorative material, as sweetener, and preservative. It is often difficult to separate these uses from one another. However, sugar used as a spice or condiment, for instance, differs from sugar used as a sweetener mainly in terms of the quantities used. Moreover, the different uses of sugar did not evolve in any clear sequence or progression, but often overlapped. The fact that sugar could serve more than one purpose simultaneously was considered one of its most extraordinary feature.[212]

3. How sugar changed the world

The scale of health problems, from dental decay as discussed above, to the current obesity epidemic is frightening: the damages sugar causes to our health are countless. According to a recent study, an excessive consumption of sugar can even cause heart diseases. When fructose is broken down, one of the end products is a

[210] Mintz, pp. 22-23.
[211] Abbott, pp. 13-14.
[212] Mintz, p. 78.

form of fat called triglyceride which, once released into the bloodstream, can contribute to the growth of fat-filled plaque inside artery walls. [213]

Sugar's corruptive power, however, goes beyond our health. If we consider sugar from an historical perspective, it appears clear how it physically transformed large portions of the earth's surface, changing its landscape and natural equilibrium forever. Sugar was also responsible for one of the most startling and damaging forced migrations in the history of mankind, which still has repercussions today.[214]

The development of the sugar plantation came at a very high price. As explained above, entire natural environments were largely damaged by this crop, but it is the *human* cost of sugar cultivation which is the most obvious and dramatic consequence. Cultivating sugar cane was an extremely hard job, and it was the labour of slaves and indentured that transformed sugar from a luxury item to an essential commodity. Throughout the New World, sugar plantations became the home of uprooted people, almost aliens, forcibly shipped far away from their homes to undertake the exhausting, intensive labour on sugar plantations. The final result was, therefore, human and ecological damage which may be beyond repair and which reshaped the world completely. At the very heart of those human and environmental changes was the story of sugar.[215]

The claims that sugar is corrupting are very recent. However, if it is bad today, when was it ever good? It rather seems that sugar has been bad for centuries: it was bad for those who worked it and it was bad for the environment. Recently, we have learnt that it is the cause of several diseases and disorders.[216] The sweetness of this product lies only in its taste, for everything that gets in touch with it, nature or human being, is irremediably corrupted.[217]

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[213] Brown Jessica, *Is Sugar really bad for you?*, BBC, 19 September 2018, accessed on: www.bbc.com/future/story/20180918-is-sugar-really-bad-for-you
[214] Walvin 2018, pp. 283-290.
[215] Walvin 2018, p. XXI.
[216] Walvin 2018, p. XXIII.
[217] Walvin 2018, pp. 283-290.

ANDREA STUART'S *SUGAR IN THE BLOOD*

1. Andrea Stuart

Andrea Stuart is a Barbadian-English writer who was born in the Caribbean, lived briefly in the US and was educated in the UK. Born in Barbados in 1962, she spent her early years in Jamaica, where her father was Dean of the medical school at the University College of the West Indies, the first university in the Caribbean. In 1976 she moved with her family to England, where she studied English at the University of East Anglia and French at the Sorbonne.

She began her career as a journalist, but she also explored the worlds of publishing and television documentary production. She has taught at Kingston University as a Writer in Residence since 2011. She also teaches at Faber Academy, and regularly reviews books for *The Independent*. She has been the co-editor of *Black Film Bulletin* and the fiction editor of *Critical Quarterly*.[218]

She has published three non-fiction books. Her first, *Showgirls*, is a collection of several showgirls' biographies, from Marlene Dietrich to Mae West to Madonna. It was published by Jonathan Cape in 1996 and was adapted into a two-part documentary for the *Discovery Channel* in 1998. This book has inspired a theatrical show, a contemporary dance piece and various burlesque performances. Her second book is *The Rose of Martinique: A Biography of Napoleon's Josephine*, in which she adeptly portrays the entire life of Josephine Bonaparte. It was published in the United States in 2004, has been translated into three languages, and won the Enid McLeod Literary Prize. Her third and last book is, again, non-fiction: *Sugar in the Blood. A Family's Story of Slavery and Empire*, which is the story of the author's own family through centuries

[218] Andrea Stuart, No Dead White Men, Kingston University, 26 November 2012, accessed on nodeadwhitemen.wordpress.com/tag/andrea-stuart/.

of slavery and plantation life in Barbados. It was published in 2012 by Portobello Books and was shortlisted for the BOCAS Literary Prize and the Spears Book Award. The book was the Boston Globes' non-fiction book for the year 2013.[219]

About her writings, Stuart said, "I write about history because I believe that it is the bridge to our future; it is our history that decides how we live in the present, what is possible for us in our social and psychological worlds, and even in many cases who and how we love."[220]

Although Andrea Stuart was born and raised in the Caribbean, she never knew much about her ancestors. As a curious adult, she started to speak with family members to collect stories, to research in library archives and was able to trace part of her ancestry as far back as the seventeenth century, when her first known English forebear decided to cross the Atlantic and try his fortune in Barbados. Through an accurate research she discovered her mixed heritage, for her family tree is made up of slaves and masters.

Stuart was raised in Jamaica but often visited relatives who had remained in Barbados and still lived on the very land her English ancestor originally acquired in the seventeenth century. As Jamaica experienced violent unrest in the 1970s, her family performed the reverse migration of her earliest known ancestor, moving back to England.[221] This change of landscape was particularly disorienting for Stuart, for in England she learnt that her skin colour meant something different than what it meant in the Caribbean. There, in fact, her slightly lighter skin marked her as a descendant of the old white elite, which made her a little more privileged. In Britain different hues of skin colour did not matter: she was simply black and had to suffer a series of prejudices and stereotypes.[222] She became very aware of her race for the first time and felt

[219] Andrea Stuart, *The Conversation*, accessed on theconversation.com/profiles/andrea-stuart-129466.
[220] Braswell Kristin, "6 Caribbean Authors to discover this Summer", *Ebony*, 18 June 2014, accessed on www.ebony.com/entertainment/6-caribbean-writers-to-discover-this-summer-504/#axzz3PTd8kfFg.
[221] Spindel Barbara, "*Sugar in the Blood* by Andrea Stuart"*, Barnes & Noble Review*, 5 February 2003, accessed on www.barnesandnoble.com/review/sugar-in-the-blood.
[222] Gross Terry, Interview with Andrea Stuart, A Barbados Family Tree with 'Sugar in the Blood', accessed on

completely displaced. In an interview,[223] she talked about the shocking experience of her arrival in England, and explains that at first she accepted the idea that Afro-Caribbeans in England were the newcomers and that English people were kind to accept them in their country, and felt she did not belong there. After having written *Sugar in the Blood*, however, she feels more certain about her place in Britain, since she can trace her English origins much further in the past than many Europeans. Furthermore, she realised how much her slave ancestors worked and suffered to build that country, therefore she feels she has the right to live there.

Stuart's parents prioritised her education: she attended the renowned English program at the University of East Anglia, and later the Sorbonne. The author admits that her privileged background has allowed her to partially overcome the racial legacies that still oppress many other black lives.[224] Nevertheless, slavery's racial legacy affects Stuart's life to this day, like it does for most blacks: "My colour still enters the room before I do and in some situations I have to work inordinately hard to make others put it aside", she writes (p. 475).

When she is asked about her relationship with Barbados and the Caribbean she answers that it is a sort of a "curious love affair": "I have a very passionate attachment to the Caribbean and particularly Barbados. […] It's hard to think of it as home entirely because I haven't lived there for a very long time and I am to a very large degree anglicised. [..] But it is also simultaneously the place where I feel happy and at peace. So I suppose it's the closest that I come to as the place to call home. I just know that I am, like so many people, displaced."[225]

Fresh Air www.npr.org/2013/02/04/170552296/a-barbados-family-tree-with-sugar-in-the-blood?t=1563956830902.

[223] Werman Marco, Sugar in the Blood: "Andrea Stuart's Barbadian Legacy" Interview with Andrea Stuart*, PRI's The World* (June 06, 2012), accessed on www.pri.org/stories/2012-06-06/sugar-blood-andrea-stuarts-barbadian-legacy.

[224] Herschthal Eric, "The Original Slave Colony: Barbados and Andrea Stuart's 'Sugar in the Blood'", *The Daily Beast*, 24 January 2013, accessed on www.thedailybeast.com/the-original-slave-colony-barbados-and-andrea-stuarts-sugar-in-the-blood.

[225] Werman.

2. Sugar in the Blood

Sugar in the Blood is a fascinating story of a family, whose past is an adventurous mixture of migrations, power and sufferings. It is the result of an enormous work of research, which lasted six years, as the author reveals in an interview.[226] Stuart managed to tie together all the latest works in Barbadian and Caribbean history over several decades. Alongside her family story, Stuart traced back the history of her country, making this book so much more than a simple family saga. As I wrote in the introduction of this thesis, *Sugar in the Blood* is ascribable to the literary subgenre of neo-slave narratives. However, as was the case with *The Lamplighter*, *Sugar in the Blood* is quite a peculiar neo-slave narrative. The author's aim was to tell the story of her family and, despite several difficulties, she manages to do so. This story is nonetheless enriched with historical facts and information that go beyond Stuart's family, making this book a very interesting mixture of major historical facts and private family stories. Furthermore, due to the lack of primary sources regarding some of Stuart's family members, much of the story the author tells is contingent, if not completely made-up. Therefore, this is an interesting case of faction, a mixture of real facts and fiction. Moreover, the peculiarity of *Sugar in the Blood* as a neo-slave narrative lies in it giving much space to white colonial history. As we will see, Stuart tried to reconstruct not only the story of her black slave ancestors but also of the white ones.

The Lamplighter was an answer to the question of Jackie Kay's roots and origins. She stated: "In a sense I was on a trail back to my own past. A lot of the original Africans were taken from the West Coast of Africa, where my father came from. So I was thinking if I trace back my family tree far enough I would find slaves."[227] This is exactly

[226] Barbadian Independence Celebrations-Evening with Barbadian Andrea Stuart the author *of Sugar in the Blood*, The Barbadian High Commission in association with the National Council of Barbadian Associations, Barbados High Commission Office, London, 7 November 2013.
Accessed on: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AY_a_W_CeSg.
[227] Thorpe Nick, "Jackie Kay, Inteview.", *Sunday Times*, 25th March 2007.

what Andrea Stuart did. She traced back her family tree and she found not only slaves, but also masters. Both these authors deal with the delicate issue of slavery moved by personal motives and thus the two works can be considered, as Kay said, love letters to their ancestors. Like Jackie Kay, Andrea Stuart believes that more should be told about slavery and that Britain still needs to work on that chapter of its history. In an interview, she declared:

"I think that in Britain there's still a degree of denial or an unwillingness to really confront the story of British slavery and so on. So there's a sense of it being something that happened sometime a long time ago in some far away place, rather than […] something that happened in Britain in the world of British life and something that still has repercussion today, and I think that's the thing that, as a culture, Britain hasn't quite come to terms with". [228]

Therefore, we can read Sugar in the Blood as another attempt to bring this appalling past to the surface and face it, as was the case with *The Lamplighter*. Furthermore, as Kay also did, Stuart insists in the importance of acknowledging slavery as history of the whole world: "I wanted to take slavery out of its niche," she said. "It's not a black story, it's not a white story. I want to remind people that this story belongs to us all".[229] Stuart accuses Britain of having deliberately ignored its past, under the excuse that those colonies, in which these crimes were perpetrated, are now independent. "What I think is fascinating in Britain" says Stuart, "is how little memory contemporary Britons have of the fact that when my family story started, Britain was not very far away at all, culturally speaking. They[230] called themselves Englishmen transplanted."

[228] Barbados Free Press, Bajan-Brit author Andrea Stuart: Britain still in denial about British slavery, *Barbados Free Press* accessed on barbadosfreepress.wordpress.com/2012/06/09/bajan-brit-author-andrea-stuart-britain-still-in-denial-about-british-slavery/.
[229] Herschthal.
[230] The first Englishmen who left England to try their fortune oversea. The author is referring to her earliest known ancestor, George Ashby, who in the 1630s embarked on a ship to the Caribbean.

In an interview, Stuart revealed that she faced a lot of resistance coming from English publishing houses. “British publishers weren’t interested, which is quite fascinating, bearing in mind that it is an English story.”[231] Whereas, when she tried to publish it America, she immediately received many offers. This was yet another proof of the attitude of refusal Britain has towards this part of its history. Publishers told her that her book was about blacks’ interests only, and therefore it would not sell. Stuart really had the impression that it was a story Britain wanted to forget, for it does not fit in the version of history they prefer. The author explains that Britons tend to remember their ancestors as those who abolished slavery and worked hard so that other nation would abolish it too, but they forget that Britain was also the nation that helped create the Atlantic system. The abolition of slavery needs to go together with its beginning. “It is a question of what we remember and what we chose to forget”[232], she said.

Stuart admits that she has always been interested in the epic story of how sugar, slavery, and settlement shaped individual lives. She just had to find a way to tell it.[233] Ultimately, her way “to tell it” was *Sugar in the Blood.* In her book, Stuart wonderfully traces, as much as records allow, the various developments of her family’s story and how it is linked to important events, movements of capitals, goods and people, central to the understanding of the New World and its transformations.[234] Andrea Stuart is a very gifted author, for she managed to make an intimate family story extremely interesting. *Sugar in the Blood* is an example of the interpenetration of the history of Europe with the history of Africa and the Americas. It is not only Stuart’s family that has sugar in the blood, we all have. It is a page-turner book that weaves together personal accounts and general history and keeps the reader involved until the end. Her ability to create suspense by pausing the engaging family story with fascinating

[231] Barbadian Independence Celebrations-Evening with Barbadian Andrea Stuart.

[232] Barbadian Independence Celebrations-Evening with Barbadian Andrea Stuart.

[233] Herschthal.

[234] Goddard Robert, “In Praise of the Caribbean Plantation?”, *The Journal of the Historical Society*, 2013, accessed on: www.researchgate.net/publication/259552855_In_Praise_of_the_Caribbean_Plantation, p. 453.

background information is extraordinary and keeps the reader's curiosity always very high. This work is rich and complex, for the author blends together poetry, history, articles, and biographies. All this is enriched with elements of guesswork and imagination to make up for the lack of historical records. With her mixed roots, Stuart is well placed to understand the intertwined cultures of masters and slaves and reveal how the plantation system damaged all those trapped by its extreme exploitation and systemic violence. *Sugar in the Blood* is not only a beautiful story, but also a powerful one, for it touches delicate issues and uncovers forgotten truths that still need to be acknowledged. The book should not only be an enjoyable reading but also an invitation to look at the past to understand the present and reflect on the costs of our modernity.

2.1 The Story

Sugar in the Blood is a well-researched history of the interdependence of sugar, slavery, and power in the colonial settlements of the New World from the seventeenth century to the present day. The frame of such enormous research is Stuart's own family, whose genealogy the author managed to trace back eight generations. The book is divided into three parts. The first section, *The Pioneer*, traces the life of the English settler, George Ashby, his decision to emigrate, his dangerous journey into the unknown, and his arrival in Barbados, an island that promised huge profits, but was slow to deliver them. Section two, *The Plantocrat,* explores the life of Robert Cooper Ashby (George's great-great-great-grandson), who changed the family's destiny by marrying upward into the upper class of Barbadian society. Robert established a brutal but successful plantation regime and had relationships with enslaved women whose offspring continued the progeny up until the author. Finally, in the third and last

section, *The Legacy,* Stuart focuses on the legacy of slavery, the continued economic inequality and racial hierarchies that characterise Barbadian society, its relationship with Britain, and the lives of slavery's descendants.

The story of Stuart's family is interspersed with historical information about conflicts, politics and economics, analysis of sugar cultivation and its benefits for Europe, and personal considerations and comments. As in *The Lamplighter,* sugar is at the centre of the story. Stuart explores, with subtlety and accuracy, how this one particular commodity has shaped the destiny of her family: influencing its identity, genealogy, movements, hues of skin and so on. Furthermore, she underlines how our insatiable hunger for sugar has mobilized forces and had consequences that converged to shape the world for at least four centuries and still today.[235] The magical beauty of this book arises from Stuart's ability to tie together her imaginative speculations and her guesswork with family research, secondary sources and the work of various historians who studied Atlantic voyages and the Caribbean. The story in this book is told through a series of alternating operations of zooming in and out Stuart's family. The trait-d'union is the family story, but sometimes the author broadens her perspective to say something more general. In this way, *Sugar in the Blood* is a family story that represents the story of Barbados, of the Caribbean, and of slavery.

The first section of the book, *The Pioneer*, is the story of George Ashby, Stuart's maternal grandfather eight times removed. In the late 1630s George Ashby was an English young man in his late teens, who worked as a blacksmith and decided to embark on a journey across the Atlantic to try his fortune in the Caribbean. Stuart accurately re-creates the life of his earliest known ancestor, the small farmer George Ashby, in Barbados, a small island stifled in the growing of tobacco by larger colonies such as Virginia. The pioneer Ahsby witnessed one of the most important events in the history of the island: the turn to sugar, which would seal the success for many brave entrepreneurs, but cause the destruction of thousands of innocent lives. Sugar indeed

[235] Barbados Free Press.

prompted the replacement of indentured servants and natives with hardier, cheaper African slaves.

Already at the beginning of her book, Andrea Stuart pauses the account of her family's story to broaden her discourse and explain what it meant to go on a journey across the Atlantic at that time. She explains that in the seventeenth century world maps were inaccurate and incomplete: Australia and Antarctica had not been traced yet and much of South America had scarcely been explored. In England, people's lives played around their birthplace and their beliefs were still characterized by superstition and ignorance.[236] Therefore, determination, an adventurous spirit, and a lot of courage were required of this men to leave everything they knew and set sail towards the unknown.

Besides Stuart's ancestors, the book is full of different interesting characters. At first, the Caribbean islands were populated by pirates, reprobates and criminals. The "refuse" of the motherland were sent there and sometimes, in their new lands, they acquired high positions, as was the case of Captain Henry Hawley, the belligerent governor of Barbados, who had his predecessor executed, took over the control of the island, and sold plots of land to new arrivals. And it is exactly thanks to Hawley that George Ashby acquired the original nine acres of land, on which his descendants would continue to work generation after generation. Throughout his life as a small planter, George Ashby managed to expand his holdings to twenty-one acres; he also owned nine slaves. But it would take five more generations for the family to join the island's elite. It was with Robert Cooper Ashby that the Ashby family reached its most glorious days.

As Stuart explaines in various interviews, the main difficulty in writing the first section of the book was the lack of sources. George Ashby was not a noble man and his life was not particularly relevant, neither in England nor in Barbados and therefore,

[236] Stuart Andrea, *Sugar in the Blood. A family's Story of Slavery and Empire,* Portobello Books, London, 2012, p. 9. All references are to this edition and will be henceforth indicated parenthetically by page number.

his name only appears in official records of sea voyages and land acquisitions. Other than that, Stuart knows nothing about him. She writes: "He was most likely typical of the men who settled much of the New World, a man of action, not reflection, who did not take time out to write letters or keep journals" (p. 11). Therefore, she relies on historians and personal accounts of other pioneers like George Ashby to learn something more about him and make good guesses about what she cannot know.

The second section of the book is called *The Plantocrat* and is about Robert Cooper Ashby, George's great-great-great-grandson, who took over the plantation in 1795. He was born in 1776 and married into a wealthy family, a match that made him head of a large plantation of 350 acres and master of 200 slaves.

We learn about his controversial relationships with his wife, Mary Burke, and with many female slaves, from whom he had several children. Robert's offspring are so numerous to fill two entire pages. Right at the beginning of the book, we are provided with Stuart's family tree and the section of it related to Robert Cooper is remarkably large: besides his legitimate family with Mary Burke (who only gave him one son), he had relationships with at least four slaves, who gave him sixteen children. Of course, these numbers might be much greater, if we consider that Stuart only included those liaisons she was able to trace. One of these sixteen illegitimate children is John Stephen, the author's great-great-great-grandfather, a slave for the first half of his life, until emancipation in 1834. Stuart could find very little information about him. The first time she saw his name was on the 1817 return,[237] thanks to which she found out his date of birth and his work on the plantation. Ashby apprenticed him to a carpenter, thereby sparing him the hard labour of the fields. The author interprets Ashby's behaviour as a way to improve the prospects of his illegitimate son without actually acknowledging him. Robert Cooper Ashby's only legitimate son died at the age of 25. Therefore, in his will, the planter left his estate to those offspring born to the

[237] Yearly returns were documents in which slave owners had to register every slave they owned, along with other information, such as date and place of birth, sex, employment, colour of the skin and so on. Returns needed to be filled out every year after the abolition of the trade, as a measure to contrast illegal slave trades.

two slaves with whom he had had long-term relationships. John Stephen was not among them, but he was a skilled carpenter and thus managed to live a middle-class life following emancipation and so did his descendants.

The author often pauses the narration of events to speculate and imagine what the typical everyday life on the plantation might have been. She writes that it is not hard to imagine the Ashby family:

"slumbering on canopied beds piled lushly with cushions and covered with embroidered sheets, as the ubiquitous bats soared and dipped against the starlit night and the plantation dogs barked their messages to their neighbours; or gorging on lavish plantation meals; or sitting on the balcony's wicker furniture enjoying their lime water; or playing backgammon on the patio; or strolling in the garden against a backdrop of green pastures and a vivid sky, while the sounds of the slaves cutting cane wafted over to them from the far-off fields." (p. 188).

In the mornings, Robert Cooper Ashby would be awakened by his slave who would bathe, dry, and dress his master and fix his hair. After that, Ashby would have a breakfast that included "a dish of tea, another of coffee, a bumper of claret, another large one of hock negus; then Madeira, sangaree, hot and cold meat, stews and fries, hot and cold fish, pickled and plain, peppers, ginger sweetmeats, acid fruit, sweet jellies." (p. 195). This detailed reconstruction, which Stuart was able to create by reading accounts of other planters, letters, diaries and history books, allows the reader to immerse in the story and feel involved in it. It also makes it more real. It is easier to picture this past world if we are provided with these kind of details.

Stuart also portrays the slaves' typical daily routine, and starts by stating that "it was a point of honour in plantation society that no menial activity was undertaken by anyone but a slave, Cooper and his contemporaries would do as little for themselves as was humanly possible." (p.195). The author adds that slaves were "woken before sunup by the clamouring sound of the bell atop the mill, they hauled themselves off the floors of their fetid huts and quickly splashed their faces with cold water before

being led to the cane fields by the overseer" (p. 196). They worked until 9 o'clock, when they had a half-an-hour break to eat and rest and then back to work again, with a second midday break, until sundown or later. Slaves worked for a minimum of 10 up to 18 hours a day. Once returned to their quarters, they had "children to attend to, homes to be cleaned, allotments to be tended and food to be cooked" (p. 197). In this case as well, the author gives a complete picture. As she explained, *Sugar in the Blood* "is not a novel, so I can't completely create inner worlds, but I became very speculative about that, because that really mattered to me. I didn't want it to be just about facts and figures, I wanted to have evidence of, if not my own family, because I don't have records of what they felt, what other slaves felt."[238]

The Plantocrat section is the longest of the book, for several reasons. Not only did Robert Cooper live in quite an eventful period in history, but he also was a prominent man in Barbados, therefore the author was able to find out a lot more about him than about George Ashby. Among the various documents regarding Robert Ashby, Stuart found a ledger in which he wrote down the name, sex, date of birth of every slave he possessed, their price, the task they were assigned to and any particular ability. This is very similar to the diaries Jackie Kay talked about in her *The Lamplighter.* These ledgers and diaries appear to be particularly disturbing, for they are the proof of how human lives were reduced to a series of notations as if they were livestock or objects.

The third and final section, *The Legacy*, recounts the end of slavery in Barbados, its independence from Great Britain in 1966, the end of the plantation era and the island's shift to a tourism-based economy. The story of her family is circular: it starts in Britain, where Stuart's earliest known ancestor embarked for the Caribbean and it ends with Stuart's family moving back to England. It starts with George Ashby

[238] Barbadian Independence Celebrations-Evening with Barbadian Andrea Stuart.

purchasing a small plot of land to start his own plantation and it ends with the author and her family wanting to sell their land to finally close that chapter in their history.

What is striking about this last section is the part where the author reveals that her great-grandfather and her grandfather became planters. Five years after Robert Ashby's death the Burkes' plantation (so called because great part of his land was acquired by Robert through marriage with Mary Burke) was sold and the proceeds were divided among his heirs. However, his great-grandson, his descendant by one of his many slave children, returns to the plantation life with the purchase of Plumgrove (the very plot of land George Ashby worked on). The author writes: "It is interesting to speculate on why both my great-grandfathers would want, so to speak, to return the scene of the crime by purchasing sugar plantations" (p. 341). On economic grounds, she explains this decision as the most convenient choice, for owning a piece of land was still the highest aspiration in Barbados and sugar was still the most profitable crop. She adds that such a decision was not only motivated by economic interests and power desire, but also by a sense of nostalgia of the past: "Despite the dark realities of plantation life, the image propagated by planters was of a world of leisure and luxury, ease and elegance, and it remained a potent romantic symbol for some." (p. 342). A sense of "revenge" is also a good reason: the desire of vindicating their past of slavery by becoming masters. One last plausible reason is an attachment to the place itself, Plumgrove, for "the intensity of the relationship that its inhabitants had with this is proof that we are made by the places we love, just as we make them" (p. 280). George Ashby's legacy in clearing the land for his nine-acre plantation turned into the legacy of giving his descendants a sense of place. He surely could not have imagined that he would have African descendants, nor that they would become plantation owners themselves, but his legacy was passed from generation to generation, arriving to his eighth great-granddaughter, Andrea Stuart.[239]

[239] Berg Steven L., "Sugar Barons of Barbados*", Schoolcraft College International Institute - International Agenda*, 13.1 (2014): 23-25.

The idea that blacks could own a plantation seems rather contradictory for a society that had just come out of slavery. However, the concepts that the plantation was a "race-making institution", a place where race consciousness was created, and racial hierarchies were established is not entirely true. As several historians have noted, whiteness is a sign arbitrarily related to skin. What really makes whiteness in the Caribbean is power. Therefore, the idea of a black plantation owner is no longer contradictory.[240] This is also proven by the behaviour of Stuart's grandfather, who was a planter and had labourers who worked his sugar fields. These labourers were not slaves, for slavery had already been abolished, but were the lowest social class of Barbados and lived in conditions not very far from extreme poverty. Stuart tells us about his grandfather drinking habits and of his taste for extramarital liaisons, not much different from the same taste his white ancestor Robert Cooper had. Furthermore, the author tells us that among his liaisons, her grandfather had relationships with female workers on his plantation and that he had children from them. This really shows that some behaviours belonged to the plantocrat position and all what comes with it: power and the conviction of being allowed to do anything. Plantocracy meant power, it did not necessarily mean whiteness, and Stuart's grandfather is a proof of that.

Furthermore, black planters, or better, non-white planters are the very reason why Barbados was so successful, in comparison to other territories such as Guyana or Jamaica, which struggled despite the greater number of resources. Barbados continued to prosper after the emancipation thanks to the "blacks" who took over from where the whites had left.[241] Planters like Robert Ashby helped to spread the social form of the plantation system among the non-white inhabitants of Barbados. This is something very distinctive of Barbados: where the planter class is made up of both blacks and whites.[242]

[240] Goddard, p. 456.
[241] Goddard, p. 456.
[242] Goddard, p. 455.

While Stuart manages to trace her family's ancestors on her mother's side very well - although in some cases she was only able to find very little information - the same cannot be said for her father's side of the family, which only enters the book in the very last pages. "Although my father's family had links with the industry[243]—indeed, in Barbados it was almost impossible not to—they were not themselves planters, so the history I have been able to uncover is far more recent." (p. 347). In fact, it only begins with the author's grandparents. Nonetheless, Stuarts devotes two entire chapters to his father's family, according to her vision of history, as space for those nameless men and women who have always been ignored by traditional historical records.

The final section discusses the legacy of slavery, and how Barbados is still influenced by racist ideologies: skin colour is still highly relevant and a slightly darker shade labels people as descendants of slaves and, therefore, inferior. They have to accept the hardest and most unrewarding works, while the lighter-skinned elite, descendants of masters as well as slaves, still function as a kind of aristocracy. The story of Stuart's father and his efforts to obtain a higher education are a proof of that, but so is the author's own experience when her family first moved to England, about which she wrote: "We landed in a country that was a cauldron of bitter rhetoric about migration which left us in no doubt how unwelcome we were." (p. 373).

Stuart's narration brings us to the present and the book's final words aim at connecting what seems to be a forgotten past to our reality. Touching the very delicate issue of racism, Stuart openly affirms: "I cannot help resenting the notion that while I am, according to some, not good enough to be British, my ancestors were nonetheless good enough to help build the country, defend it and die for it." (p. 375). She feels surrounded by sugar in Britain as well, she names a series of renowned buildings that were built thanks to the profit of the trade. Stuart's conclusion of the book is not indulgent and comments on the legacy of slavery: "Over 150 years after slavery was

[243] The sugar industry.

abolished, Africans and the descendants of Africans remain markedly disadvantaged compared to the descendants of those who promoted the trade against them. The pernicious racial thinking that evolved to feed our insatiable hunger for sugar, and was used to justify our transgression of the laws of humanity, continues to influence us all." (p. 376). This conclusion highlights the importance of slavery in world history and is an invitation to remember, acknowledge, and reflect on it. However, Stuart suggests a different view, a different kind of reflection: we should not look at slavery just as something horrible that happened in the past, but also as something that is meaningful and has repercussions in our present.

2.2 A problem with the sources

"I was initially triumphant, but as time went on a sense of anticlimax overwhelmed me. What did my neatly formatted family tree really mean? It was, after all, just names on a page. Genealogical research has its limitations: it yields the skeleton, not the body", (pp. 1-2) affirms Stuart in the opening pages of *Sugar in the Blood*. She explained that when she was pursuing her own genealogical research, she was not satisfied with a family tree that simply included dates of births, marriages, and deaths. She probably felt triumphant when she realised she had an unbroken family tree dating back to the seventeenth century. But she also felt a little disappointed when she was not able to find as much information as she wished to. In the first section of *Sugar in the Blood*, for instance, Stuart worked under the not unexpected dearth of primary and secondary source materials about George Ashby. He simply was not prominent enough to enter historical records. Nevertheless, she did her best to try to

“put some flesh” on the bones of the long skeleton that was her family tree. Much of her work is based on speculation and imagination, but this should not be interpreted as a critique. Stuart knows what she does not know and openly admits it: the book is indeed full with disclaimers. A judicious blend of primary and secondary sources and well-thought speculations created a fascinating, engaging and breath-taking story.

Between the bones of the skeleton that represents her family tree, Stuart opens up questions that link continents, experiences and histories of the enslaved and the free. She writes a story of migration, settlement and slavery. Her family’s story is not simply a memoir: it is the story of the making of the Atlantic system. *Sugar in the Blood* is a highly personal account of one individual family, but it also has far wider resonances. As she writes in the introduction of the book, her family “is just one of millions across the globe that were forged by sugar and slavery” (p. XVII). It is a personal, intimate story that, together with many other similar stories, becomes the history of a country, Barbados, and much more: what Stuart is telling with her *Sugar in the Blood* is one of the most controversial, dark but fundamental chapters of the history of the world. In other words, through her family’s story she has told nothing less than colonial history.

2.3 Historical imbalances

Sugar in the blood, as *The Lamplighter,* fights the canonical representation of history, where only “big names” appear. Famous names of important historical characters are mentioned throughout Stuart’s narrative, but she builds her story around the unknown millions who made the island thrive. *Sugar in the Blood*, as *The Lamplighter*,

aims at demystifying history, turning our attention away from famous kings and queens, and uncovering abstract forces like slavery and empire. As the author explains: “It’s a challenge with normal people in history, and what to do with them, they leave so little trace in history, the small people, but they’re just as touched by history as kings and queens.”[244] The “small people” she chose to focus on are her own ancestors. However, as often happens with the “small people”, Stuart had to deal with several lacks of historical sources. As a matter of fact, what strikes particularly about this book is a sort of imbalance between the “white” side of her family and the “black” one. Stuart goes on for pages talking about her planter forbears, especially about Robert Cooper Ashby, but there is quite little about the slaves, and many of them simply appear with names and dates of birth. A very sad absence in the book is indeed the missing stories of the slaves, which is due to the lack of information about them. They were treated as chattel and as such, only few information were required to “keep track” of them. A lot of what Stuart writes about slaves comes from her own imagination or is general, well-known information about their living and working conditions. However, the author's inability to locate the slaves’ roots is a further sign of the inhumane nature of a system which deprived the slaves of their backgrounds and identities and transformed them into items of a list.

Much of her story is contingent: “This may have been the way”, “this may have been the reason” are recurring expressions throughout the book. This shows the difficulty of telling the story of the forgotten, the underrepresented, the faceless majority. She explains how painful it was to devote so much space to the white colonial story and so little to those black slaves who were the pillars of the colonial system and who made possible Ashbys' wealth and status. “The unknowability of their past”, she writes, “is one of the many terrible by-products of slavery, when people, reduced to chattels, are written out of history.” (p. XVIII). She sees her work, and we shall too, as a way of taking those stories out of the silence of canonical history. As Jackie Kay did

[244] Herschthal.

in her *The Lamplighter*, Andrea Stuart gives the slaves their voice back and makes sure that they are heard. “Slavery is still and remains a huge historical silence” she said in an interview, “Because, basically, if you're a product or a thing, you are not going to be recorded. Your stories are not going to be kept. So the whole side of my family that emerges out of black slavery can't speak for itself. […] therefore, I knew that there was no way I could tell the story in the details that historians would prefer. But I also knew that to not tell the story also falls into that terrible silencing of these complicated and wonderful stories.”[245] She had to turn to secondary sources to fill the blanks in her family’s story, but she managed to tell it. When she found record of the existence of Stephen Ashby she saved him from oblivion. It is true that she found very little about him, but she revealed his existence and gave him the kind of importance that history had denied him.

2.4 A mixed genealogy

An interesting aspect about Stuart’s genealogy is that she descends both from slaves and from masters. She has a rather complicated ancestry and we can only imagine what a shock it must have been when she realized that at some point, one part of her family *owned* the other part. This is a question Stuart was asked in various interviews and to which she always answered: “It was not until maybe four years into the research that I realized that this was the truth of my family story, that one side of my family had owned another. […] That is the quintessence of the hideousness of slavery, is it not?

[245] Headlee Celeste interviews Andrea Stuart, “A Family Tree That Includes Slaves — And Slave Owners”*, Tell me more, NPR News*, 15 August 2013.
Accessed on: www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=212292170.

That a family member could own their child, or own a series of children and live with that, and keep them in continued slavery and live comfortably with that. It made me understand slavery or see it in a very, very personal, intense way."[246] She added that it took her a while before she was able to fully accept the reality of her family's story.

In the various interviews with the author that I could read, she always declared that it was quite a shocking discovery, and one she has not completely come to terms with. In talking about George Ashby, she once said: "I remember thinking: my goodness, what bravery it must have taken to take this huge step to leave England. […] The chances of being killed by raiders or pirates - everything was so difficult about this journey. […] It seemed to me that he was extraordinarily brave. But then his generation and the subsequent generations make this terrible mistake. They become slave owners, and therefore […] I am deeply ambivalent about him. I admire him on one hand, and I lament him on the other."[247] She cannot separate the slave part of her family from the slave-owning part, they are both part of herself and it is thanks to them both if she is here. She explains: "slavers and slave owners were actually so intertwined with each other that they could not really be separated and that meant that you were dealing with a very morally complex world. And I think, in some ways, that is one of the things I wanted to show, that everyone was implicated."[248] She acknowledges the terrible mistakes made by the "white side" of her family but is also very honest in admitting that she feels grateful towards that same side that gave her family a certain status and allowed her to become the person she is now.

It was exactly her mixed racial heritage what helped her paint such a ruthlessly honest portrait of slavery, where she both admires and despises plantocrats like Robert Cooper. What makes this book different from other neo-slave narratives is that the author's perspective seems to be very neutral. Stuart does not openly side with the slaves, she rather seems to feel complicit in both sides of the story she is telling. If

[246] Gross.
[247] Headlee.
[248] Headlee.

Robert Cooper Ashby was her forebear, so was the unknown female slave who gave birth to John Stephen Ashby, Stuart's maternal great-great-great-grandfather. She tries to understand the white master and his cruelties, she understands the slave in her misery, and she tries to tell her family story leaving aside judgements and accusations.[249]

The neutrality Stuart employs throughout the entire narration is really surprising. For example, after having discussed in detail the horrors of the infamous Middle Passage, she ends with a brief discussion of the suffering of the white sailors on board slave ships, many of whom were often trapped into serving and repeatedly punished to stay in line (pp. 95-97). While it would have been reasonable for Stuart to omit the sailor's troubles, definitely of minor importance if compared to those of the slaves, she includes their difficulties as well, revealing another aspect of the iniquities of the slave trade.[250]

Another example is Stuart's approach to Robert Cooper Ashby. She captures the many sides of this complex man and gives him both credit and critique where each is due. She glorifies his entrepreneurial ability but despises his cruelty. She also unmasks the duplicity of some of his actions. For instance, when he decided to baptise his slave Sukey Ann, he was not just making her a Christian kindness. Stuarts promptly informs us that many planters baptised slave girls before having sexual affairs with them: "Men like Robert Cooper were quite happy to seduce a girl barely out of childhood but were not willing to have sex with a heathen" (p. 189).

[249] Wilentz Amy, *Masters and Slaves*, The New York Times, 29 March 2013, accessed on https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/books/review/sugar-in-the-blood-by-andrea-stuart.html.
[250] Uzzilia Suzanne, *Fleshing the Bones of Caribbean Slavery*, 2013, accessed on http://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/reviews/fleshing-bones-caribbean-slavery.

2.5 Sugar

In her book, Stuart also spends some time to inform us about sugar cultivation and processing. Quoting the historian Adam Hochschild, she explains that "Caribbean slavery was, by every measure, far more deadly than the slavery in the American South. This was not because Southern masters were the kind and gentle ones of *Gone w ith the Wind,* but because cultivating sugar cane by hand was—and still is—one of the hardest ways of life on earth. Almost everywhere in the Americas where slaves were working other than on sugar plantations they lived longer" (p. 199). Stuarts adds that these slaves generally had a working life expectancy of seven years before dying like "overdriven horses". She then meticulously describes the process of cutting sugar canes, how delicate and precise this work must be, how much physical strength is required of the cutter and how exhausting it was, also because of the inadequate diet slaves were provided with. The dangers of the process were infinite: from "simple" wrenched backs and twisted ankles to more severe damages caused by a slip of the blade or stabs inflicted by sharp cane leaves.

The processing of canes in the mills is also accurately described, with almost a chemist's precision and accuracy.[251] This is proof of the wide range of fields Stuart researched to write her book. The boiling house, where the extracted juice is crystallized, is described as a Dantesque "humid inferno" (p. 200) where "near-naked slaves laboured in the glow of the flames and the roaring noise and the ferocious heat of the boiler room." She adds: "Slaves worked up to eighteen hours a day during the harvest, first to cut and transport the canes and then to extract the juice and manufacture the raw sugar. Inevitably they were exhausted and accidents were commonplace; and so an axe was kept handy to severe the limbs that got trapped in the machinery" (p. 201). Stuart also includes a list of potential perils for workers in these factories: "if a stiller slips into a rum cistern, it is sudden death: for it stiffs in a

[251] As far as the sugar cultivation and refining process are concerned, Stuart based her research on the works of Abbot (2009) and Mintz (1986), among others, which I also used in the previous section about sugar.

moment. If a mill-feeder is caught by the finger, his whole body is drawn in, and he is squeezed to pieces. If a boiler gets any part into the scalding sugar, it sticks like glue or birdlime, and 'tis hard to save either limb or life." (p. 202). These few lines are rather unsettling but they represent the other side of the coin: these were the risks required to produce the 100,00 pounds of sugar that made Stuart's ancestor Robert Cooper rich and powerful. The processing of sugar was so complicated and dangerous that slaves with expertise were extremely valuable: one wrong decision would compromise an entire batch. In fact, a good boiler man was worth his weight in gold, as Stuart explains.

"Too much sugar is bitter", says an old Nepalese proverb, and Andrea Stuart proves it so in her book.[252] She states that "sugar was the commodity that drove the geopolitics of the era, just as oil does today" (p. 166). She talks about its portentous arrival in the New World and how it revolutionized the Atlantic economy. It took time before planters learnt how to grow and work it, but by the mid-1650s the sugar industry was booming in Barbados. Settlers like George Ashby promptly jumped in and switched over to sugar. This commodity was revolutionary not only in economic terms but also in the way it shaped the world. The arrival of sugar changed everything, for it required large amounts of capitals and labour force to make the crop commercially viable. Indentured servants were not enough to cover such a demand and even so their cost was far greater than the cost of employing African slaves (pp. 85-86). Stuart explains a crucial point: it was sugar that mainly caused mass deportations of Africans in the New World. In fact, according to the author, "Barbados was important not because it was the first society with slaves, but because it was the first slave society in the British Americas: that is, it was the first society that was entirely organized around its slave system and, as such, it would become the model for the plantation system throughout the Americas." (p. 98). The entire society revolved around sugar: its economics, its politics, its social structure. As a matter of fact, already by the end of the seventeenth century, 80 percent of Barbados's 85,000 inhabitants were Africans,

[252] Spindel.

giving rise to a rigid racial hierarchy: a very small elite of whites on top, the masses of black workers on bottom, and, somewhere in between, a small group of illegitimate mixed-race children.

Sugar can be considered the crop that made Barbados work as a colony. When the colonists discovered sugar, they realised that they had finally found a crop that was lucrative. Before that, the unsuccessful attempts to establish a competitive tobacco market risked to end up with the abandonment of the island, considered a failed experiment. So, sugar, in a way, saved the island.[253] Today, sugar has been eclipsed by tourism and cane sugar has been replaced by the production of sugar beet in Europe, therefore it is no longer the white gold for the country as it was in the past. However, sugar has left its trace in Barbados, as the author explained: "when you go there you realise how much sugar hunts the island."[254] Some wounds take a long time to heal, and some never heal completely.

During one interview, Stuart was asked whether her approach to sugar changed after having learnt about her family's past. She said that she did not think about it at first, but at a certain point of her research, she read an abolitionist campaign which was specifically about sugar and defined it as "blood-stained sugar". At that point she realised that the very sugar she was consuming had reached Europe carrying the blood of the slaves. "I remember actually at that point putting some sugar into something and thinking: "Ah, it is this!" And I thought again about the way that commodities […] have such real, visceral impacts on the way our lives unfold."[255] Her book is thus also an invitation to reflect on those very products that we now give for granted but that a few centuries ago were considered exotic luxuries and revolutionised our lives, in the case of sugar, our taste patterns. This revolution came at a very high cost, one that is impossible to pay back.

[253] Beckles Hilary, *A History of Barbados: From Amerindian Settlement to Caribbean Single Market*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 20-23.
[254] Werman.
[255] Gross.

2.6 Barbados and its society

A vivid portrait of Barbados is provided by the author and through her narration, as time passes by, we can see how this country has slowly changed along with its people. The sugar plantation was the dominant economic and social system in the Caribbean. The so-called "Sugar Revolution" came to Barbados in the 1640s and then spread throughout the region.[256]

As already pointed out, the arrival of sugar marked the beginning of mass enslavement of Africans and, at the time of Robert Ashby, the Barbadian plantation system was entirely based on forced labour and exports of sugar. An important observation that needs to be made about such systems is that they foster what has been called "growth without development," which means that the economic stimulus provided by plantation agriculture tends to remain within the plantation sector without spreading throughout the economy in general. The portrayal of the plantation is, therefore, a very negative one. The plantation is a self-feeding system, a vicious circle of dependence and exploitation.[257]

The sugar trade and the plantation system also influenced the Barbadian social structure and ethics. Stuart illustrates how the exigencies of the sugar trade often caused moral confusion. She brings the testimony of Lt. Thomas Howard as an example: "When I first came into this Country, I had the most horrid idea of the treatment the Slaves received from their Masters that could possibly be formed; every time I heard the Lash sound over the Back of a Negro my very Blood boiled and I was ready to take the whip and the Lash of the Master. Since that time . . . I am persuaded my heart is not grown harder . . . yet I see the Business in a very different Light." (p. 181). In the end, Howard came to understand that violence was critical to the plantation economy. Without it the injustice and inequity demanded by large-scale

[256] Goddard, p. 452.
[257] Goddard, p. 449.

sugar cultivation could never be maintained. With this example Stuart shows us the costs of what the historian Edward Brathwaite calls “cultural action” or “social processing,” in which white newcomers, who were initially horrified by slavery, ultimately accepted it. Stuart moves away from stereotypes and understands that every person involved in that system was trying to grab at whatever possibilities or luck might come from that very inhumane system.[258]

One very interesting aspect described in *Sugar in the Blood* is the social dynamics created by sugar in Barbados. Plantocrats like Robert Cooper Ashby were free to do whatever pleased them: their wives could not leave them, despite their many extramarital liaisons, the neighbours would not condemn their behaviour because they were having affairs of their own, and there were no legal repercussions for their activities, since “in Barbados a man could not be accused of ‘raping’ his slave because the slave was property and therefore had no legal rights”. (p. 188). Stuart, when talking about Robert’s slave families, often wonders whether those intercourses were consensual and whether love was involved. Of course, having sexual relationships with female slaves meant that masters were breeding their own slaves to work on the plantation, which became absolutely necessary after Britain outlawed the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807. It was pointed out how such a practice gives a "sense of claiming your total power over everybody in the plantation world over which you preside."[259] It really shows how slaves were considered objects, disposable bodies in every possible sense. Writing about rape and abuse within her own family story may be troubling, but it is also essential, for it was a real part of many slaves’ lives. Slavery was not limited to the hard work on Robert Ahby’s plantation, ‘it permeated the intimacy of his home, his family and his bed’ (p. 227).

Robert Cooper Ashby had no fewer than five branches in his family tree: a colonially “legitimate” one with his white wife and four with black slave women. This

[258] Wilentz.
[259] Gross.

allows us to see, within one family, the extent of slavery's legacy. After his death, each branch is given varying degrees of recognition: property or position, manumission or nothing at all, probably according to the level of "attachment" he had with each of his slave mistress and their children. This really shows the contingent position of women of colour in relation to powerful white men. Not even his children were equal to Ashby, some were reserved a special treatment, others were freed before the official emancipation. John Stephen for instance, Stuart's first known slave ancestor, was not among Robert's favourites and was not freed. His father, however, taught him a craft that enabled him to live after Britain emancipated all its slaves in 1833. Nonetheless, he was still his father's slave and had to call him "Massa". At the time of his death Robert Cooper bequeathed most of his estate to his slave mistress Mary Ann and her children. He also left a house and six apprentices to his baby son Samuel. This is proof of a changing Barbados, and Stuart ably keeps track of time and its developments. She gives very precious insights into a plantation system that is otherwise generally known through cultural mythology and dry history texts. By using the life of her ancestor, Stuart adeptly "puts flesh" on the skeleton of the historical record.[260]

2.7 The concept of family

Sugar in the Blood is, above all, a family saga. Therefore, an analysis of the concept of family is due. Stuart especially reflects on what family could mean in slavery. Writing of her great-great-grandfather, John Stephen, son of the planter Robert Cooper Ashby and an unknown female slave, she writes:

[260] Berg, pp. 23-25.

"John Stephen had a number of other half-brothers and half-sisters. But it is unlikely that they considered themselves a family. The very concept of family had been so fractured and debased by plantation culture that one slave noted: 'Brothers and sisters we were by blood; but slavery had made us strangers. I heard the words brother and sister, and knew they must mean something, but slavery had robbed these terms of their true meaning.' Many slaves found it hard to generate any positive feelings for their siblings and fell instead into bickering and open competition" (p. 248).

In *The Lamplighter* Jackie Kay also deals with the issue of kinship among slaves. Anniwaa's trauma begins with the separation from her family and the fear of not being able to grow completely without her mother. Slaves who were captured in Africa and brought across the Atlantic endured the enormous suffering of being brutally and forever separated from their families. However, slaves born in the New World were not much luckier. Even if they stayed together with their mothers and were not sold away, they did not have a real family, not as we understand it. They might live among their step-brothers and sisters but did not feel as a family. They were forced to serve their fathers and white step-brothers who would consider them slaves and servants, not family. This is what happened to John Stephen, forced to serve his father and step-brother until slavery was definitely abolished. In fact, the strongest manifestation of this lack of familial ties occurs when siblings cross the divide between enslaved and free, so that brothers and sisters are divided between positions of servitude and mastery. Such relationships inevitably shape the way in which we understand the concept of a colonial family, a family torn by the colonial system. Families like Robert Cooper's are a metaphor of the exploitative power dynamics of colonialism.

2.8 Beyond the family saga

Sugar in the Blood brutally depicts the horrors of the sugar industry and the cruelty of human beings that are willing to do anything to create profit. The book is an interesting and thought-provoking family history, but it is also much more than that: it is a well-rounded account of the development of the Caribbean from an historical, political and economic perspective.

Stuart's family's story is indeed interspersed with the description and analysis of major historical events in the Caribbean. The author discusses the case of Haiti, she mentions the rebellions in Jamaica and she even makes comparisons with slavery in the United States. Nonetheless, the book doesn't appear to be overwritten, for every event is analysed in detail and offers inputs for further reflections. The neutral tone of the narration leaves readers to draw their own conclusions about motives and effects. From these accounts I learned many new connections of which I should have been aware, but was not. Putting these complex historical and geopolitical connections in the context of the Ashby family story made the narration much more interesting and the reading and understanding of such complex events much easier and more pleasant.

What makes *Sugar in the Blood* extremely powerful is this combination of family saga and history book. Stuart's family is only one of the thousands of families whose ancestry goes back to the slave trade. The Atlantic system was so complex that it is almost impossible to find someone that, at that time, was not even indirectly connected to it. Along with the author's family story, the reader finds that the history of the Caribbean and, by extension, of the world is shaped. In this lies the real power of this narration: it shows the relevance of slavery in world history, it shows how much the two are connected, it shows how our world was built, brick by brick, by the slaves.

2.9 Critical points in the book

Stuart's research is thorough and judicious, however, a few critical points can be identified in her work. The most serious mistake she made in her analysis is the falling into the trap of the "economic reductionism" many others have fallen into before her. When she deals with the reasons why Europeans went to Africa to get slaves, she places too much emphasis on economics: "in the end, the introduction of mass slavery to Barbados was driven largely by economics", (p. 86) she states, and adds that African slaves were cheaper than European indentured servants, which is only partially true. Stuart seems to sustain the famous William's thesis which, as already discussed in previous chapters,[261] has been proven wrong by several historians who studied the slave trade. As the historian David Eltis has argued, the British could have used their own lower classes as slaves, which would have been a lot cheaper than going to Africa. Contemporary historians now argue that the enslavement of Africans was driven by a mixture of different factors, among which racist ideologies are as important as economic considerations.

Stuart discusses the emergence of European racial thinking, but only as a consequence of slavery: "if it is clear that racism was not the catalyst for slavery and the slave trade, it is also true that the colonist's attitude to race made it easier for them to justify the enslavement of Africans" (p. 86). Once again, this was Eric William's hypothesis, which has been largely contested. On the contrary, many historians have argued that racism was something that, before the rise of the Atlantic system, might have been less fully formed, but still present, and that it might have influenced the decision to enslave Africans in the first place.[262] Furthermore, as several historians have underlined, Britain was committing an "econocide" when they ended the trade. If economics were so central to the rise of the trade as Stuart sees it, it would have

[261] See "Slavery and the Making of the Modern World" in Chapter 1.
[262] Herschthal.

made little sense for the British to abolish the trade in 1807, a time when their plantation system was flourishing and enormously profitable.

Another "naïve" mistake concerns George Ahsby's religious beliefs. Due to the introductory prayer that opens George Ashby's will, she concludes that he "had always been or had become a religious man" (p. 138). However, at that time, the opening paragraph of English wills typically presented a prayer.[263] This does not exclude that Ashby might have been (or have become) a religious man, but it does not necessarily mean that he was, as Stuart writes.

Another critical point concerns Stuart's personal reflections. For instance, she often reflects on the disadvantages of being female, independently from the social class. Females, Stuart notes, were always victims: from the white indentured woman who married George Ashby in the 1640s, to the slave women abused and forced to bear children, to the planter wives who lacked any right and was at the mercy of her husband. However, these frequent observations remain just that: observations. Stuart does not take them further to an explicit theorisation of gender relations. The author has fallen into the very common trap of reducing the analysis to the black and white dichotomy, but the structures of domination were based on more than simply racial ideologies. An example that proves how much more complicated gender relations were is provided by Stuart herself when she illustrates Robert Ashby's will. The very choices he made, when he decided what he shall leave and to whom reflect ties of sentiment mediated by gendered constructions of family and kin that goes beyond race.[264]

A further point that can be discussed is the background historical information that accompanies the story of Stuart's family. As several reviews of the book pointed out, sometimes Stuart spends too much time on historical and political issues at the expense of her ancestors. This complementary information is very interesting and

[263] Berg, pp. 23-25.
[264] Goddard, p. 455.

fundamental to complete her story, as I have explained above. It is also true, however, that sometimes the narration of these very well-documented events take over the story of her unknown forebears. For example, in a section on piracy, (pp. 127-134) five times more text is devoted to an extensive biographical research on Sir Henry Morgan than is devoted to draw the connection with her family story, explaining for example how piracy impacted the planter class of which George Ashby was a member.[265] It seems that sometimes the author lets herself get carried away by the narration of these complementary facts and it is understandable that the temptation of going on talking about such curiosities is strong, especially because sometimes the account of her family story is difficult to continue, due to the lack of primary sources, but the focus should always remain on her family.

[265] Berg, pp. 23-25.

CONCLUSIONS

"Slavery is one of those things we think we know everything about",[266] said Jackie Kay. But we do not. "In the end, it all comes down to what we remember and what we chose to forget",[267] said Andrea Stuart. We chose to forget a great part of it. With their works, these two authors are trying to take these themes out of the shadows of oblivion they have been cast in. They have fought against the mainstream representation of history, revealing unpleasant truths, they have rescued millions of voices from historical silencing, giving them a voice. We should acknowledge not only that slavery was the most terrible crime we committed, but also that the world we live in has been built by the slaves. Without the enormous profits coming from the trade and its products, the world might have been very different from the one we know. For these reasons, we should not forget. For these reasons, we should talk about it more.

This thesis comes from a strong personal interest in the topic. An interest that was further raised when I attended the course on contemporary literature. When I heard the story of *The Lamplighter* for the first time I was fascinated. The power and intensity of this narration is impossible to convey with words, but Kay's message was immediately clear. I knew that I wanted to work on slavery and learn more about it. *Sugar in the Blood* is a very different text, for it ties together a real story, the author's family story, and history. This combination shows how indebted we are to slaves for what we have. Through Stuart's narration we clearly see that her family story becomes the story of her country and, by extension, the story of the world, which was shaped by the sufferings of millions of slaves.

[266] Kay, *Missing Faces*.
[267] Stuart, Barbadian Independence Celebrations.

While reading and researching about slavery and the slave trade, I also happened to watch a documentary film called "Traces of the Trade",[268] which is about an American family who discovered that their ancestors were involved in the trade. After this startling discovery, some members of this family decided to learn more about it and went on a journey to Africa, to visit the places of the trade. This documentary is very interesting for various reasons, but I think that the aspect that struck me most is a reflection made by a member of this family. At first, when they were still in the United States, they considered the trade a product of its time and at the question "how could people have allowed such a terrible thing" they simply answered that the mentality and ethics of the time were different from ours. However, after visiting the Elmina fort, a member of this family stated: "It was an evil thing. They knew it was an evil thing and they did it anyway."[269] He explained that, after having seen the condition in which a thousand people were kept for weeks or even months, he could no longer excuse his ancestors, not even under a different time perspective.

This made me think. I think I also used to look at the slave trade with an indulgent look, before I started to work on this thesis. It is easier and in a way reassuring to think that slavery belongs in the past, and that we would never do anything similar. However, we should not rest on the comforting thought that we are different, more evolved and civilized. We should not look at these events with indulgence, because doing so would be like denying their cruelty and atrocity. The slave trade was as terrible then as it is today.

Furthermore, slavery, unfortunately, does not belong in the past. It has taken on different features and forms, but it is still a reality in many places around the world. I have always found history fascinating, for I believe that a lot can be learned from the past, especially to understand the present. History should teach us not to repeat the

[268] Browne Katrina, *Traces of the trade: a story from the deep north*, Ebb Pod Productions, Bristol RI, 2008 (DVD).
[269] Browne Katrina, *Traces of the trade: a story from the deep north*, Ebb Pod Productions, Bristol RI, 2008 (DVD).

same mistakes again, but it seems that human beings never learn and that history is a cycle that keeps repeating over and over again.

Remembering is also about breaking this cycle of violence. This is the ultimate message I want to convey with this thesis. Why is it important to talk about Atlantic slavery two centuries after its abolition? The answer to this question should be clear by now: the two literary worked I have discussed in these pages have exhaustively answered. With my work, I can only hope to have conveyed the idea of the relevance of slavery and to have stimulated some interest in the topic.

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RIASSUNTO IN LINGUA ITALIANA

Lo scopo di questa tesi è studiare il fenomeno della tratta atlantica degli schiavi, con particolare attenzione agli "schiavi dello zucchero", ovvero alle migliaia di Africani che sono stati schiavizzati per coltivare e produrre zucchero.

Per questo lavoro mi sono basata su una ricerca storica, economica e geopolitica e sull'analisi di due opere letterarie nelle quali la tematica è centrale: *The Lamplighter* di Jackie Kay (2007) e *Sugar in the Blood. A Family's Story of Slavery and Empire* di Andrea Stuart (2013).

Quando si pensa alla schiavitù, spesso la nostra mente tende a evocare le note e terribili immagini di migliaia di schiavi Africani che vengono forzatamente trasportati al di là dell'Oceano Atlantico per lavorare nelle piantagioni del Nuovo Mondo. Tuttavia, la schiavitù esisteva già da molto tempo, ben prima dell'era delle esplorazioni che portarono alla scoperta dell'America. Infatti, questo fenomeno è sempre esistito e ha sempre accompagnato gli esseri umani e lo sviluppo di ogni nuova civiltà. Si potrebbe dire che la schiavitù sia antica quanto l'umanità stessa.

I primi documenti scritti che attestano l'esistenza della schiavitù risalgono al 2000 a.C. e riguardano l'antica civiltà dei Sumeri. Anche nel Codice Hammurabi della Babilonia del 1600 a.C. si parla di schiavi. È abbastanza noto, inoltre, che le piramidi d'Egitto siano state costruite da schiavi e persino la Bibbia contiene diversi riferimenti alla schiavitù. Nell'antichità gli schiavi lavoravano nei campi, nella costruzione di edifici pubblici o come domestici nelle case più abbienti. La schiavitù presso queste civiltà era scontata e naturale, ma non essenziale per il sostentamento e l'esistenza della società stessa.

La prima civiltà nella quale questa istituzione ebbe un ruolo così fondamentale fu quella greca e in seguito quella romana. L'antica Grecia viene generalmente

ricordata come la culla della democrazia, dimenticandosi però che era largamente dipendente dal lavoro dei suoi schiavi. La schiavitù nell'era Greco-Romana è molto ben documentata e può essere considerata l'antenata di quella che si sarebbe sviluppata oltre oceano a partire dal sedicesimo secolo.

Essendo l'epoca Greco-Romana piuttosto lunga, dal 1000 a.C. al 500 d.C., è difficile parlare della schiavitù in termini generali, in quanto anche questa istituzione è cambiata e ha subito delle trasformazioni con il cambiare e l'evolversi delle società stesse. Come il filosofo greco Aristotele testimonia, la schiavitù all'epoca era percepita come naturale e nessuno ne metteva in dubbio la ragione d'esistere. La condizione degli schiavi, spesso prigionieri di guerra in nuove terre conquistate, era generalmente regolata dalla legge. Tuttavia, spesso il modo in cui venivano trattati era totalmente arbitrario e dipendeva dal padrone. La maggior parte era impiegata come servitù domestica, che poteva comprendere anche il lavoro nei campi, ad alcuni veniva insegnata l'arte dell'artigianato e veniva concesso loro di lavorare in modo indipendente, dietro pagamento di una tassa fissa. Generalmente, gli schiavi lavoravano in piccoli gruppi di pochi individui, le grandi squadre di servitori, che avrebbero caratterizzato la schiavitù nelle piantagioni del Nuovo Mondo, erano in antichità molto rare. La percentuale stessa degli schiavi rispetto all'intera popolazione era molto inferiore rispetto a quella nelle Americhe.

Fino all'arrivo della schiavitù nelle colonie oltre oceano, in nessun'altra civiltà quest'istituzione ha avuto un ruolo così importante come nell'antichità classica. Ciò non significa che scomparve, al contrario: continuò a esistere fintanto che fu possibile trarre profitto dalla vendita di prigionieri di guerra e dal loro lavoro gratuito. La forma dominante di servitù nell'Europa medievale è il vassallaggio, che si distingue dalla schiavitù in quanto il vassallo non è considerato proprietà, come è il caso per lo schiavo. I vassalli, infatti, non erano legati a un padrone, ma alla terra che lavoravano: in caso di cambio di proprietà, essi rimanevano a lavorare quella stessa terra sotto il nuovo proprietario. Il vassallaggio era perciò la condizione tipica della classe sociale

più povera, quella dei contadini, che si assoggettavano a un signore e lavoravano la sua terra in cambio di protezione. Il vassallaggio è durato per tutta l'epoca feudale, estinguendosi insieme ad essa a causa della peste e delle numerose guerre religiose che decimarono la popolazione, soprattutto quella più povera.

La scoperta dell'America da parte di Cristoforo Colombo e la successiva colonizzazione di quei territori hanno avuto come ultima conseguenza la nascita della tratta atlantica degli schiavi Africani. Tuttavia, prima di rivolgere lo sguardo verso l'Africa i coloni europei sfruttarono le popolazioni aborigene locali, le quali, però, già decimate dalla conquista coloniale vennero definitivamente e in breve tempo sterminate dalla schiavitù. Inoltre, gli europei provarono anche a impiegare la propria forza lavoro, attirando nel Nuovo Mondo gli strati più bassi delle società europee per lavorare a contratto.

Man mano che la nuova economia prendeva piede e le piantagioni aumentavano di volume, cresceva anche la necessità di forza lavoro che non poteva più essere coperta solo da lavoratori a contratto. Fu così che si decise di sfruttare gli Africani. Gli storici stimano che tra il sedicesimo e il diciannovesimo secolo tra gli undici e i quindici milioni di Africani furono brutalmente strappati dalle loro case e dalle loro famiglie e condannati a una vita di schiavitù nelle Americhe. Non è escluso, tuttavia, che questo numero possa essere anche più alto.

Generalmente, gli schiavi lavoravano nelle piantagioni e vivevano perciò nelle zone rurali. Coltivavano zucchero, caffè, tabacco, cotone e altri prodotti che venivano poi trasportati e venduti in Europa. Gli schiavi venivano impiegati anche nelle miniere, nelle industrie e nell'artigianato, nonché all'interno delle case come domestici. Le terribili condizioni in cui erano costretti a vivere e lavorare li logorava nel corpo e nello spirito, il 30% non sopravviveva ai primi tre o quattro anni nelle colonie. I loro padroni erano crudeli e spietati: orientati solo al puro profitto, non si preoccupavano minimamente delle condizioni dei loro schiavi.

Quantificare questo profitto e quindi valutare il contributo effettivo della schiavitù all'economia dell'epoca è difficile. Gli storici e gli economisti hanno a lungo dibattuto (e dibattono tutt'ora) per concordare su una stima. Nei secoli dell'Era Mercantilista non vi era attività alcuna che non fosse direttamente o indirettamente collegata alla tratta atlantica. Il processo di industrializzazione fu accelerato in Gran Bretagna (e in altri paesi europei con colonie oltre oceano) grazie a un'espansione del mercato internazionale, all'arrivo di nuovi beni da commerciare, alla conseguente creazione di nuove industrie e istituti finanziari, allo sviluppo dell'industria marittima e all'adozione di nuove tecniche e tecnologie di produzione.

La famosa triangolazione del mercato, che collegava la Gran Bretagna, l'Africa e le Americhe, andava tutta a favore della prima. L'economia britannica ne ricavava un triplo guadagno. In primo luogo, gli schiavi Africani venivano acquistati in cambio di prodotti inglesi; secondo, i prodotti coltivati nelle piantagioni necessitavano di essere raffinati e a tale scopo nuove industrie furono create nella madrepatria; terzo, con il passare del tempo, le colonie iniziarono a prosperare e così si creò un nuovo mercato in cui la Gran Bretagna poteva commerciare i propri prodotti. È estremamente difficile fornire cifre precise, trattandosi peraltro di un mercato altamente instabile, nel quale spedizioni di successo si alternavano a disastrosi fallimenti. Tuttavia, appare piuttosto chiaro che le maggiori ricchezze, l'ampiamento dei commerci e lo sviluppo industriale abbiano portato a quell'insieme di straordinarie trasformazioni che gli storici hanno chiamato Rivoluzione Industriale.

Questo breve *excursus* storico aiuta a meglio contestualizzare le due opere letterarie di cui si parlerà successivamente, *The Lamplighter* e *Sugar in the Blood.* Entrambe possono essere ricondotte al sottogenere letterario delle *neo-slave narratives*, narrative contemporanee sulla schiavitù.

The Lamplighter è un radiodramma scritto dall'autrice scozzese Jackie Kay. Nata da madre scozzese e padre nigeriano, fu adottata da una coppia scozzese. Nelle sue opere esplora le esperienze e le emozioni umane, indagando il tema dell'identità.

Come attivista femminista nera, si occupa molto delle tematiche dell'identità e della differenza, in relazione al genere, al colore della pelle, all'origine, allo stato sociale e all'orientamento sessuale.

Tra le sue opere, principalmente di poesia, ha scritto un radiodramma*, The Lamplighter*, che venne trasmesso alla radio 3 della BBC il 25 marzo 2007, in occasione del bicentenario dell'abolizione della tratta degli schiavi. In questo lavoro, che è il prodotto di un'accurata ricerca storica e d'archivio, un coro di voci principalmente femminili rievoca l'esperienza della schiavitù. Come dichiarato dall'autrice stessa, *The Lamplighter* è il suo contributo per far emergere una storia dimenticata. Jackie Kay esorta la sua stessa gente a riconoscere la tratta degli schiavi come parte del proprio passato. Nei testi scolastici, la schiavitù è spesso ridotta a un paio di paragrafi nel capitolo sui viaggi e le esplorazioni atlantiche. Questa parte di storia ha subito un processo di riduzionismo statistico: leggiamo dei dieci/quindici milioni di africani trasportati nelle Americhe e ridotti in schiavitù, ma dietro quei numeri ci sono storie personali di sofferenze, umiliazioni, privazioni e torture. Con la sua opera, Kay dà voce a quei numeri senza nome e li salva dall'oblio. L'accusa principale dell'autrice è rivolta alla sua amata Scozia, che si è sempre dipinta come una vittima del colonialismo, e non come responsabile. All'interno della narrazione, l'autrice ha inserito diversi riferimenti al coinvolgimento scozzese nella tratta, dimostrando che questo paese non ha fatto altro che nascondersi dietro l'etichetta "colonialismo *Britannico*".

The Lamplighter è un'opera molto poetica, suddivisa in sedici scene nelle quali le voci di quattro donne che raccontano la loro esperienza di schiavitù si alternano a una voce maschile, che rappresenta lo spirito del tempo e fornisce informazioni tecniche, statistiche e storiche sulla tratta. La narrazione non ha uno sviluppo lineare, è invece piuttosto frammentata: ogni voce aggiunge un pezzetto al racconto. L'effetto finale però è di uniformità: un coro di voci che raccontano la stessa storia. Tutto ciò fornisce grande forza alla narrazione e dà l'idea di una storia comune e di un destino condiviso.

Nel testo troviamo varie figure retoriche tipiche della poesia: metonimie, rime, ritornelli, allitterazioni, elenchi e accumulazioni, metafore e così via. Particolarmente rilevante è l'uso delle ripetizioni, che imitano gli effetti del trauma, suggerendo il continuo ricorrere dell'evento doloroso. In *The Lamplighter*, parole, frasi, a volte interi passaggi vengono ripetuti, come se queste parole e frasi stessero perseguitando le quattro voci narranti, così come il trauma che hanno vissuto le perseguita. L'uso costante delle ripetizioni trasmette l'idea di un trauma ricorrente, di un dolore senza fine e di una storia ripetuta.

Ricordare e dimenticare sono i temi fondamentali di quest'opera, in cui il trauma della schiavitù oscilla tra la necessità di ricordare e il desiderio di dimenticare ricordi così terribili. Le voci principali sembrano emergere da quel deserto di silenzio e di amnesia sotto il quale uno dei capitoli più tragici della storia scozzese è stato sepolto. Il processo di ricordare, effettuato dalle quattro voci nell'opera, simboleggia lo stesso processo di recupero di un passato che la Scozia ha da tempo dimenticato. Per Kay, questo lavoro è una testimonianza e un omaggio alla memoria di milioni di schiavi. Memoria e storia sono qui connesse. È attraverso la memoria che gli schiavi africani possono sopravvivere. Nell'opera le quattro voci ripetono costantemente che nessuno ha mai raccontato la loro storia, affermazione che può essere intesa sia come un'accusa indiretta: nessuno ha raccontato la loro storia, sono state dimenticate, sia come una richiesta: le loro storie devono essere raccontate più e più volte, affinché non vengano più dimenticate.

Si tratta di un piccolo volume, che però racconta una storia enorme con un messaggio molto forte. In un coro poetico di voci, quest'opera racconta l'esperienza della schiavitù, dalla cattura, attraverso il terribile viaggio attraverso l'atlantico, alla vita nelle piantagioni del Nuovo Mondo. La natura orale di quest'opera la rende ancora più unica e consente all'ascoltatore di sentirsi completamente coinvolto e immerso in una storia impossibile da dimenticare. *The Lamplighter* parla di sofferenza e di morte,

di abusi e umiliazioni, di privazioni e perdite, ma anche di speranza, ribellioni e resistenza.

Tra i vari prodotti della tratta degli schiavi, quest'opera si concentra sullo zucchero. È quasi paradossale che la forma più dura e amara di schiavitù si trovasse presso la più dolce delle colture. Jackie Kay lo dimostra nella sua opera teatrale, nella quale mette in luce la sofferenza subita dagli schiavi per addolcire l'Europa. Il lavoro degli schiavi nelle piantagioni di zucchero viene spiegato dettagliatamente e, attraverso questa descrizione, viene creato un ossimoro tra la dolcezza dello zucchero e le vite amare di chi lo ha prodotto. Nell'opera, gli schiavi si riappropriano dei prodotti del loro lavoro disumano e, così facendo, viene trasmesso un messaggio molto forte: non solo abbiamo dimenticato quello che è probabilmente il peggior crimine nella storia dell'umanità, ma sembriamo anche ignorare che il mondo stesso in cui viviamo è stato costruito, mattone dopo mattone, dagli schiavi. La rivoluzione industriale è stata in effetti largamente alimentata e finanziata dalla tratta, i cui enormi profitti hanno reso possibile tutto ciò che abbiamo oggi. Questo, ci dice Jackie Kay, è un altro motivo per cui non possiamo dimenticare.

Lo zucchero è un prodotto che ha rivoluzionato i gusti e le abitudini alimentari sin dal suo arrivo in Europa. La sua storia però è molto lunga e affonda le radici nel dodicesimo secolo. All'epoca, si trattava di un prodotto considerato esotico e di lusso, perciò solo le classi più abbienti potevano permetterselo. Prima delle grandi piantagioni nelle Americhe, vi furono sporadici tentativi di coltivare lo zucchero in varie zone del Mediterraneo. Ma è solo nel Nuovo Mondo che questo dolcificante verrà prodotto in quantità talmente elevate da aprire il suo mercato anche alle masse più povere. Lo zucchero comportò una vera e propria rivoluzione: prima del diciassettesimo secolo, il dolcificante più comune era il miele, il quale però, per via del suo gusto forte, alterava il sapore delle pietanze in cui veniva utilizzato. Lo zucchero invece non aveva questo difetto e il suo effetto dolcificante era notevolmente

superiore. Fu così che in Europa nacque quel gusto per il dolce che portò lo zucchero sulle nostre tavole.

Lo zucchero è protagonista anche nella seconda opera trattata in questa tesi: *Sugar in the Blood* di Andrea Stuart. Nata nelle Barbados, Andrea Stuart ha trascorso la sua infanzia in Giamaica e si è poi trasferita con la sua famiglia in Inghilterra all'età di 14 anni. Nella sua carriera di scrittrice, si è occupata prevalentemente di storia perché crede che sia la chiave di lettura per il presente e il futuro. Nel suo ultimo libro, *Sugar in the Blood,* ha ripercorso l'albero genealogico della sua famiglia materna per ben otto generazioni, scoprendo così di avere un passato estremamente affascinante, ricco di avventure, viaggi ma anche di dolore e sofferenza. L'autrice discende infatti sia da padroni, sia da schiavi.

La storia della famiglia di Andrea Stuart inizia nel lontano diciassettesimo secolo, quando il suo primo antenato conosciuto, George Ashby, lascia l'Inghilterra per tentare la fortuna nelle Barbados. Il libro è diviso in tre parti: la prima racconta del viaggio di George Ashby, il suo arrivo nelle Barbados e la sua dura vita da pioniere. La seconda parte è incentrata su Robert Cooper Ashby, il quarto pronipote di George, che grazie a un matrimonio vantaggioso acquisisce vasti terreni e controlla un'enorme piantagione, di 350 acri, nella quale lavorano più di 200 schiavi. L'autrice ci racconta delle relazioni extramatrimoniali di Robert con diverse sue schiave, dalle quali ebbe almeno sedici figli documentati, uno dei quali avrebbe continuato la sua discendenza fino ad Andrea Stuart. La terza parte si intitola *The Legacy*, l'eredità, e segue gli sviluppi successivi della famiglia Ashby fino ai giorni nostri.

Accanto alla storia della sua famiglia, l'autrice traccia i principali sviluppi storici avvenuti nel corso di quattro secoli. Queste informazioni storiche ampliano e completano il racconto della famiglia Ashby, senza di esse, infatti, a causa delle poche fonti a sua disposizione, l'autrice non sarebbe stata in grado di scrivere una storia così epica e avvincente. Come *The Lamplighter,* anche *Sugar in the Blood* è il prodotto di un lungo lavoro di ricerca storica e d'archivio. Andrea Stuart ha letto lettere, diari,

archivi ufficiali, racconti e altre testimonianze nonché numerosi libri sulla storia dei Caraibi. Alcuni membri della sua famiglia, come Robert Cooper Ashby, erano uomini influenti e perciò hanno lasciato traccia della loro vita. Altri invece, come i suoi antenati schiavi, erano considerati semplice proprietà e la loro esistenza è annotata solo in liste ed elenchi, assieme a bestiame e utensili da lavoro. Tuttavia, l'impossibilità da parte dell'autrice di reperire informazioni sulla parte dei suoi antenati che ha vissuto in schiavitù è un ulteriore prova della natura disumana di un sistema che ha privato gli schiavi della loro storia e identità e li ha trasformati in mere voci di una lista.

Sugar in the Blood, come *The Lamplighter*, combatte la classica rappresentazione della storia, nella quale compaiono solo grandi personaggi. Stuart ha deciso di costruire la sua narrazione attorno ai milioni di sconosciuti che hanno fatto prosperare l'isola. Con il suo libro, l'autrice mira a demistificare la storia, distogliendo la nostra attenzione dai grandi personaggi e portando in primo piano quei volti cancellati e quelle voci inascoltate che costituiscono i pilastri del sistema coloniale, poiché solo grazie al loro lavoro uomini come Robert Ashby hanno prosperato e sono diventati importanti. L'impossibilità di conoscere il loro passato è una delle peggiori conseguenze della schiavitù: quando le persone, ridotte a meri oggetti, vengono cancellate dalla storia. *Sugar in the Blood* restituisce agli schiavi la voce che è stata loro tolta e li salva dalla visione classica della storia che per troppo tempo li ha messi a tacere.

Come suggerisce il titolo stesso, l'opera parla anche di zucchero, di una famiglia che lo zucchero ce l'ha nel sangue. Questo prodotto infatti ha determinato il destino della famiglia dell'autrice: influenzando la sua identità, genealogia, movimenti, colore della pelle e così via. Lo zucchero non ha modellato solo la sua famiglia, ma l'intera società delle Barbados: dall'economia alla struttura sociale. Stuart parla dell'arrivo miracoloso di questo prodotto nel Nuovo Mondo e di come abbia determinato il successo di molte colonie, tra le quali le Barbados, stravolgendo completamente l'economia atlantica. Lo zucchero ha plasmato il mondo intero. Fu infatti questo

prodotto la causa principale delle deportazioni di massa di africani nel Nuovo Mondo, in quanto richiedeva un numero enorme di lavoratori.

Andrea Stuart ci informa che coltivare la canna da zucchero a mano era uno dei lavori più logoranti da svolgere. Gli schiavi che lavoravano lo zucchero erano quelli a cui toccava la sorte peggiore. Infatti, chi lavorava in piantagioni in cui si coltivavano altri prodotti viveva mediamente più a lungo. Per dar prova di ciò, l'autrice descrive meticolosamente come si svolgeva questo lavoro: dal faticoso taglio delle canne, con i vari rischi annessi, tra i quali strappi, distorsioni e tagli da lama, alle distillerie, rese un inferno dai fumi e i calori del processo di distillazione.

Come Jackie Kay con la Scozia, Andrea Stuart accusa la Gran Bretagna di aver convenientemente dimenticato la propria responsabilità nella tratta degli schiavi. Per l'autrice, è importante riconoscere la storia degli schiavi Africani non come qualcosa che riguarda solo la popolazione nera: è la storia di tutti noi ed è fondamentale che l'accettiamo e la riconosciamo come tale. Le parole finali del libro fungono da ponte tra un passato dimenticato e la realtà che viviamo oggi. Stuart denuncia il razzismo che ancora permane e le discriminazioni di cui molti neri sono vittime in tutto il mondo. Oltre 150 anni dopo l'abolizione della schiavitù, gli africani e i discendenti degli africani rimangono notevolmente svantaggiati rispetto ai discendenti di coloro che hanno promosso il loro sfruttamento. Lo stesso razzismo che è stato utilizzato per giustificare la trasgressione delle leggi dell'umanità e per soddisfare la nostra fame di zucchero continua a influenzarci tutti. Perciò è necessario non dimenticare, così che sia possibile lasciarsi alle spalle non solo la schiavitù ma anche e soprattutto le sue conseguenze, tutt'ora esistenti e tangibili.