Black Diggers & The Longest Memory

by Tom Wright & Fred D'Aguiar

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Creative Team 2019

Director  Andrew Blackman
Cast  Leonie Whyman
      Dion Williams
      Cory Saylor-Brunskill
      Andrew Blackman
Set and Costume Design  Claire Mercer
Production Coordinator  Patrick Tucker
Resources  Andrew Blackman

About CWTC’s 2018 Production

CWTC’s 2019 comparative production of Black Diggers & The Longest Memory, is a 90 minute dramatic exploration of both texts, designed specifically, for VCE students. The presentation comprises 70 minute of performance followed by a 20 minute Q & A with the cast.

Staging the play for touring to schools

Script
The script has been edited from two primary sources, Tom Wrights stage play Black Diggers, and the novella, The Longest Memory by Fred D’Aguiar. The scenes and passages we have chosen relate directly to the overarching themes that run through both texts. We have endeavoured to maintain a narrative arc throughout. In some cases scenes from Black Diggers have been condensed and lines of some characters have been reallocated to suit a casting. Scenes presented are to show Indigenous soldiers experience before, during and after WW1. Passages from The Longest Memory have been edited for performance and to support a comparison or contrast with the play. Dramatic devices utilised are a combination of narration, direct address, monologue, naturalistic and non-naturalistic characterisation and transformation.

Actors
All actors play multiple roles that range across race, age and gender.
In *Black Diggers* Leonie Whyman plays a Settler, Ern, Mum, Another White Private, Tommy, Second White Soldier & Mick, in *The Longest Memory* she plays Whitechapel's daughter, Cook & Lydia.

In *Black Diggers* Dion Williams plays a Stockman, Bob, Bertie, Aggressive Private, Ern as the Old Soldier, Archie, & Public Servant and in *The Longest Memory* he plays Chapel.

In *Black Diggers* Corey Saylor-Brunskill plays a Taxidermist, Norm, Grandad, Harry, Cellarman, & Farmer and in *The Longest Memory* she plays Whitechapel.

In *Black Diggers* Andrew Blackman plays a Boundary Rider, Recruiting Sergeant, White private, First White Soldier, Stretcher Bearer, RSL Secretary, Second Farmer & Minister and in *The Longest Memory* he plays Sanders Junior, Mr Whitechapel, Editor of The Virginian & Sanders Senior.

All performers take the role of narrator.

**Set Design**
The Set comprises of four stools that serve multiple functions such wheel chairs, benches and are used to create the sound of bombs and gunfire. Minimal props such as clip boards, and journals are used and also a blanket that transforms into a baby, a stretcher and tons of soil.

**Costume Design**
All performers wear a base costume of black pants, buckskin coloured tops and boots over which other costume elements are added e.g. a vest, army greens & slouch hats.

**Scenes and Passages**

*Note: Page numbers denote the start of passages from both texts that are used in the comparative performance. The first few words of scenes are quoted.*


*Note: The page numbers referred to in *Black Diggers* come from the 2015 edition of the play published by Playlab, ISBN: 978 1 92130 81 4


*Note: Comparative Link denotes linking narration used in CWTC's live comparative presentation.
Key Themes

While all ideas and issues in both texts overlap we frame our presentation around four key ideas, that run through both texts -

Race Relations
- Prejudice, Equality and Discrimination, Identity and belonging

The effect of trauma
- how Pain, Loss and Death effect Individuals and Groups.

The Power of Class and Control
- Loyalty, Obedience and Authority

Memory and Ageing
- also Youth and Naivety

The Texts

Black Diggers is a play that dramatizes the experience of Indigenous Australian soldiers on their journey before, during and after World War I. Through a series of short scenes linked by song the story depicts the desire of many young aboriginal men to join up in order to participate in, and receive recognition from, a community which otherwise considers them second-class. It also shows the common experience of a return to a position of disadvantage and dispossession after the war.

The play doesn't follow a linear narrative but jumps through both time and space to present a multidimensional story of many varied experiences.

The Longest Memory is a novella that examines the cruel treatment of slaves in Virginia, USA between 1790 and 1810. It chronicles the final years in the life of Whitechapel, the oldest slave on the Whitechapel plantation. The central event is the whipping and subsequent death Whitechapel’s only son, Chapel. The novel encompasses the narrative perspectives of several characters connected to this event and is told using several modes including verse and diary entries.

What separates these two types of texts is that a novel builds a world in the readers mind through lot of detail and insight into how characters think and feel; whereas a play presents character’s words and actions (in a live theatrical setting) and allows the viewer to interpret for themselves.
**Compare and Contrast**

**Comparative Link Introduction:**
When approaching a text for the first time, we identify what we call ‘the world of the story’ - the time it’s set, the place it’s set, and also the historical context in which the story sits.

Both texts present multiple perspectives on race and racial inequality. The overarching theme in each is that discrimination limits the ability of individuals to achieve in all areas of life – financially, materially, socially and personally.

Which bring us to our first comparison. Let’s look at a series of scenes from Act 1 from Black Diggers to get us started.

See if you can locate where prejudice and discrimination arises in each scene.

- **Black Diggers**: Act 1, Scene 1 (pp. 13 – 14)
  Settler: The rest have gone, bugger it.

**Setting and characters:** 1887. Bellenden Ker, Queensland, Baby Nigel, Settler, Boundary Rider, Stockman, Taxidermist

The first scene in the play is also the earliest in chronological setting, thus providing not only an introduction to the world of the play but also some of its social and historical background. It is based on historical events near the Bellenden Ker ranges, where a massacre, in which the parents of Douglas Grant (the real-life counterpart of Nigel) were killed, took place. Wright leaves events unclear, but the violence and the lack of empathy displayed by the settlers suggest that Nigel's people were massacred.

**Question:**
Why do you think the play begins in darkness with sound effects, and what you think right means by the 'sounds of Australia'? (p.13).

- **Black Diggers**: Act 1, Scene 6 (pp. 23 – 25)
  Ern: 'Deficient Physique'. What does that mean?

**Setting and characters:** 1915. Petrie Terrace, Brisbane. Ern, Bob, Norm and Recruiting Officer

For the first time the chronology shoots backwards, to when Ern, Bob and Norm are enlisting. This scene demonstrates a lack of understanding (at least in regional recruiting
halls) of the regulations and procedures of enlisting indigenous men. Although soldiers are supposed to be of 'substantially European' heritage (p.23), nobody really knows how to evaluate this, nor do they particularly care. The boys, rejected on the grounds of race on their first effort to enrolled, quickly see through the administrative bluster, and show how easy it is to get past the rules. The names and dates of birth they provide on their second attempt (p. 24) are comically unconcealed lies, and they are welcomed into the Army straightaway. Some of the recruiting officers even help in the deception - 'your father was white, wasn't he? Let's say 'yes' (p. 25). After all, as the clerk quips, 'if they're willing to get up off their backsides' (p. 24) and fight for their country, why turn them away?

- **Black Diggers**: Act1, Scene 8 (p. 27)
  Ern: Hey, you've got to stay still.

*Setting and characters*: 1915. *Queen St, Brisbane*. Ern, Bob, Norm pose proudly.

The boys pose for a photograph on leaving Australia. As with Scene 5, this scene ends with an incomplete statement about indigenous identity. In their army uniforms, Ern, Bob and Norm begin to feel part of a larger group, and no longer defined by race. This feeling is stated explicitly ('they look at you different, don't they?') And also communicated implicitly, by their indigenous identity being left unspoken, almost as if it has ceased to be identifiable.

- **Black Diggers**: Act1, Scene 17 (pp. 30 - 40)
  Mum: And what good would that do?

*Setting and characters*: 1915. *Frying Pan Creek, NSW*. Bertie, Mum & Grandad.

This long scene in Australia offers a contrast to the series of short, sharp scenes set on the Western front. This provides a rhythmic contrast, and also emphasises the difference in pace between life at war and life in rural Australia. Young Bertie is desperate to get into the army, begging his mother to lie about his age. He hopes to be accepted by his nonindigenous peers, and to contribute to a more unified Australia; he wants to fight not just for his own people but also 'for a bigger world' (p. 39). Representing generational differences, Grandad argues but there is a longer and more personal war that's been going on for sometime. Their dialogue plays on the two connotations of 'country': the British idea of King and country, based on ownership; and the Indigenous concept of country, which includes a fundamental relationship with place and has a strong spiritual dimension.
- **Black Diggers**: Act1, Scene 11 (pp. 30 - 31)
  Aggressive Private: What do you think you're doing?
  Song: The World's Turned Upside Down

**Setting and characters**: 1916. *Indian Ocean, a ship on the way over. Harry, Aggressive Private, White Private, Another White Private.*

**Note.** In the play this scene is placed before the previous scene, *Scene 17 1915. Frying Pan Creek, NSW.* We have chosen to place it after to help with more of a linear narrative.

This scene provides an example of the discrimination experienced by Indigenous men, when the Aggressive Private objects to Harry - a fellow soldier - dining with him. However, the other soldiers support Harry, wilfully misinterpreting the Aggressive Private's statement that there is someone who 'needs to be shown what what', and attacking him rather than Harry. This illustrates one of the underlying ideas of the play: that although Indigenous men were discriminated against at home, in the Army many found an acceptance and comradeship they had never before experienced with non-indigenous men.

**Song 2** (p. 31) 'The World's Turned Upside Down' reiterates the central idea of the previous scene: that Indigenous men are being accepted in a new way during the war. The image of the world being upside down refers not just to the 'white man' suddenly having a need 'or the 'coloured boys', but also to the Australians being on the other side of the world, and even indigenous men 'invading' a country in Europe.

**Comparative link:**
So, there are the first few scenes from Act 1 of **Black Diggers**. Let's pause now to make some observations about what we have just seen.

The arrival of the first Fleet caused the decimation of indigenous Australians. Disease, land clearance and the frontier wars all contributed to the annihilation of traditional life, as the violence in the opening scene shows. The White Australia policy helped perpetuate the idea of white superiority and exclusion of nonwhite members of the community.

Norm, Bob and Ern are rejected at the recruitment station; for various reasons, but in reality it's because of their race. The racist assumption that the colour of their skin, and their cultural heritage, make them somehow less able to fight for their country, is shown here.

The disillusionment that accompanies growing up is powerfully illustrated by Mum’s empty Showground analogy. Naive and idealistic, young Bertie believes in a future his family can’t even conceive, and feels that in the Army he can contribute to society. But his mother is
more cautious and argues that going to war will end the joys of his youth, that he will return to a life as empty as the show grounds after the show has packed up and gone.

And while we see a typically racist attitude from the Aggressive Private on the way to war we start to see the bonds of mateship between soldiers as they stand up for Harry.

Let’s move on to some early passages from The Longest Memory

Slavery manifests itself in all facets of the society: economically, socially, politically, religiously and more. Race relations are justified on the grounds that slaves are considered to be inferior. Whitechapel is the embodiment of the ‘good slave’, who willingly accepts his position and has no intention of disrupting the social order. His son Chapel, is the antithesis of this. Chapel’s education and love for Lydia broaden his expectations.

- **The Longest Memory**: Prologue, Remembering (pp. 1 - 2) & Chapter 1, Whitechapel (pp. 3 - 27)
  Whitechapel: There are two types of slave . . .

**Summary:** Prologue: The brief, poetic prologue narrated by Whitechapel establishes the style and tone of the novel (descriptive, lyrical, troubled, full of pain and grief) and introduces several of it’s themes. It is preceded by two epigraphs which similarly set the tone: the first prepares us for the novel’s great sorrow, while the second invites us to differentiate between dreams and reality.

Chapter 1: Whitechapel. Whitechapel describes Chapel's punishment and the events that led to it: his wife's death, Chapel's escape, and a visit to Mr Whitechapel.

The first chapter continues in the tone of grief established by the epitaphs and the prologue, providing further reasons for Whitechapel's sorrows. D'Aguiar uses a key event in Whitechapel's life - the death of his only son, chapel - to introduce many important elements of the plot. These include Whitechapel's outlook on the world (such as his belief that 'a slave could live a good, long life if he worked hard', p.13), his position as a senior slave on the plantation, his relationships with his family (such as a lack of respect from many of his grandchildren) and his sense of responsibility for his son's death.

**Comparative Link**
This edited passage is from early on in the novel, Chapter 1. Whitechapel is used in the presentation. Are you read, look for how the key ideas are expressed.
Whitechapel: There are two types of slave: the slave who must experience everything for himself before coming to an understanding of anything and he who learns through observation. The slave in the first category behaves as if he is the only slave in the world and is visited by the worst luck on earth. That type of slave is agitated, brings much trouble on his head and he makes the lot of every slave ten times worse. It is generally accepted that the slave in the second category is brighter, lives longer, causes everyone around him a minimum of worries and earns the small kindness of the overseer and the master. I realized my son was in the first, troublesome category, the day he walked away from my advice. A bolt of lightning shot through my heart. My heart rattled like the start of rain on a roof before steadying again with the rhythm of a downpour.

To my mind a simple lesson in obedience was all that the boy required. He needed to know his station sooner rather than too late. I believed some punishment would do him good because it would keep him alive by driving from his wild head, once and for all, any notion of freedom from responsibility. He was born owned by another man, like his father before him, and like his son would be born. This sounds straight-forward enough, but from the increasing number of runaways you wouldn’t think so.

Whitechapel: Where do runaways go when they don’t get caught?

Chapel: Paradise.

Whitechapel: Paradise. Damn right! When you are captured by the trackers they’ll consign to paradise. You’ll be sent there forthwith. Free at last but not free to tell us anything about it. Run from here and you die.

My boy listened to my careful reasoning, shook his head negatively but had the grace to keep quite and walk away. I knew he put my argument down to old age or cowardice or both.

I resolved to save Chapel, not to abandon him to the horrible fate he might bring on himself.
Whitechapel: Sir, I know where my son is.

Mr Whitechapel: Where? Where? Where, man? Speak up! Hurry up, man. I haven't all day!

Whitechapel: Sir, my son believes there is a place called, "Paradise," on earth. He has gone to find it. He has done what the young reason to be their prerogative because they are blessed with youth, that is, to be impetuous and be damned. He is only my son.

Mr Whitechapel: Where in hell’s name is he, Whitechapel?

Whitechapel: He has taken the river path. I beg for leniency. He is grieving for his mother.

Mr Whitechapel: The river? But the trackers have gone north.

Actor 2: Dusk crept up on the plantation and stole into the halls and rooms of the buildings and under the canopy of trees.

Overseer: My only reason for bringing him back that young nigger is because the boss said he would be made an example of to discourage further runaways. My foot is cut. I'm tired and hungry. There is no way this nigger is not going to face the usual punishment for his crime. An example must be set. Not to punish now in the appropriate way would be an outrage against the entire plantation. I am the overseer. In the absence of the Master I do what is best for the plantation. I do not take orders from a nigger. I don't care if you are 100 years old. You are a slave. Now get out of my way, or as God is my witness I will slap you up next to your son and give you as many lashes for your insolence.
Whitechapel: The first lash ripped a hole in my head and I screamed for my son, who fell silent as the grass and trees. The boys 200 lashes lasted no more than twenty minutes but he was gone halfway into it all.

The whip ate into him, but like all gluttons who have gorged themselves to their fill, it bit and chewed without swallowing and simply bit and chewed some more, until its mouth was so full that foods seek out its corners to make room for more. The whip fed on him until the count reached 200.

My two remaining daughters cried with their children and grandchildren and begged Mr Sanders for leniency.

Actor 2: We begged and cried. The night was torn to ribbons by our grief.

Actor 4: Now, when he hears insects at dusk each click, clatter, and croak is the voice of his blood asking for mercy. None was granted. His son, the last fruit of his wife’s womb, her joy, was granted none.

Whitechapel: I, who have worked my life for one estate under one family was shown no respect. I was granted none. I killed my son because I wanted him next to me when I died. Just as he had held his heavy mother weighted by death for me to listen to her last breath, he would hold my head to help my last words out.

Actor 4: Everyone, without exception, blames him for his son’s death.

Whitechapel: Run into me and kill me. Bludgeon me with a stick, Overseer, I am a common slave. There is no blood on my conscience. My memory is longer than time. I want to forget. I don’t want to remember. Memory hurts. Like crying. But still and deep. Memory rises to the skin and I can’t be touched. I hurt all over, my bones ache, my teeth loosening the gums, my nosebleeds. Don’t make me remember. I forget as hard as I can.
Comparative Link
As the oldest Person the on the plantation, Whitechapel is the communities living memory. Memory links the past and present and, in many ways, is the common thread that intertwines all of the characters in the story. As a symbol of slavery, for Whitechapel, memory keeps him subdued. He believes that because he has been a ‘good slave’ that he is immune from the worst excesses of subjugation. In fact, he learns that ‘memory hurts’ because of the grief he recalls: the death of his loved ones and, specifically, the murder of Chapel. The trauma is deep and lasting.

Repressed memories are memories that have been unconsciously blocked due to the memory being associated with a high level of stress or trauma. When the Old Soldier, late in Black Diggers, has finally found some sense of peace, memory rises as a physical manifestation when the Iron Harvest makes its way out his body.

- **Black Diggers**: Act2, Scene 48 (pp. 91 - 93)
  Old Soldier (Ern): I was a kid...

**Setting and characters**: 1956. *An Old Soldier, in a chair, downstage.*

In the plays' third and final monologue, Ern constructs a multilayered analogy illustrating the lasting damage of the war. There are two concrete meanings of the 'Iron Artist': the scrap metal of the war turning up for many years in the battlefields, and the shrapnel similarly working its way out of his body, and the wounds. On a figurative level, these images represent the emotional pain, memory and legacy of the war slowly working its way out of society. As with the other two long monologues, the language in this scene is more figurative - rich with description and imagery - than in other dialogue.

Comparative Link
All the Soldiers manage their grief and trauma in different ways, Ern the Old Soldier eventually returns to Anzac Day and his old mates, Laurie finds solace in working for the church on his return preferring not to speak about the war ever again, and others turn to the oblivion of alcoholism.

In both texts the use and abuse of power propels the action of both the oppressors and the oppressed. The white, male, Christian view of the world is represented as the dominant discourse that negates equality. Those who aren’t the oppressor are generally represented as being powerless.
African slaves are owned like livestock, and owners can meter out physical punishment without any due process.

The views and values of the time allow slavery to exist. These views are continually expressed throughout the whole text. Many are touched on in this edited passage from Mr Whitechapel.

- **The Longest Memory**: Chapter 2, Mr Whitechapel (pp. 28 - 35)

Mr Whitechapel: I leave the plantation for one night and a day, one night and a day, that's all, and I return to virtual chaos. Overseer, you are supposed to supervise. Deputy you are paid to work for me and do as I say on my plantation. Whitechapel you may be the most senior man on this plantation but you have overstepped the mark in your recent antics. Your son, God rest his agitated soul, has brought calamity on my head. He is dead through his own design. Thank God my wife and daughter were not present to witness the debacle. His action was rebellion of the most heinous kind. Had he survived, his life on this plantation would have been finished. You yourself have said that a slave who has tasted liberty can never be a proper slave again. You, Whitechapel, agreed with me to contain your sons anarchic spirit. We agreed in this very dining to protect him from himself by driving from his mind the foolish notions of freedom. Whitechapel, you failed. I trusted you and you disappointed me.

Tell me, what am I to do with a plantation of disgruntled slaves? Sell every last man, woman and child if you ask me. That's my inclination. Give you all up to the four quarters of these States and see how you fare. My acquaintances tell me I am too lenient. They tell me I fatten up slaves too much with large, regular meals and decent quarters and I work them too little. No, I argue back, on the contrary, a satisfied slave is a happy slave and a more productive worker. Treat them like equals and they respond with nobility. Instead, what do I get, Whitechapel? Reassurances from you and this effrontery from your son. I say his punishment was just, however ramshackle its execution might have been.

Leave us now Whitechapel, we have much to discuss, and let me hear that you have done everything in your power to influence your fellows to comply with the affairs of this plantation. Your son's death is a matter of deepest regret to us all, but in our view he brought it upon himself. He may as well have taken his own life with his own hands. You should have saved him from
himself, Whitechapel. You were his guardian. Leave us. Remember, were it not for your seniority, there would be charges of insubordination brought against you for your behaviour towards Mr Sanders. You owe him an apology. There. Close the door behind you like a good man.

It’s not him I have to watch, it’s you two. Whitechapel is a good man. It’s not him I have to watch, it’s you two. He has seen enough death without you taking his only son from him. He deserved better treatment. He knew our fathers for God sake. He instructed you in the responsibilities of your post. What we are thinking about when you struck him and had his son whipped to death before his eyes? Is that the kind of man you take me for? That I would be pleased with this brutal form of management.

There is simply too much history between us all to justify what you did last night. Too much. What began as a single thread has, over the generations, woven itself into a prodigious carpet that cannot be unwoven. There is no good in pretending that a single thread of cause and effect exists now when in actual fact the carpet is before us with many beginnings and no end in sight. The only logical solution is to continue with this woven complexity and behave responsibly, that or we discard the entire fabric and begin again. Down that road lies chaos.

The human spirit is passive in some but nature shows us that it is rebellious in most. Africans may be our inferiors, but they exhibit the same qualities we possess, even if they are merely imitating us. Their management is best exemplified by an approach that treats them first and foremost as subjects of God, though blessed with lesser faculties, and therefore suited to the trade of slavery.

But we must not allow this trade to turn us into savages. We are Christians. God should guide us in our dealings with slaves as he counsels us in everything else. Join me in a little prayer. Let us ask for advice and strength. We will pray and return to our affairs with God’s grace by our side.

**Comparative Link**
The entire economic and social structure of the community in The Longest Memory is based on the racist assumption that African people are inferior. This idea is used to justify slavery and to reinforce the mistreatment of slaves.
As modern readers we are invited to criticise and condemn the views and values of the time and see how repulsive and unjust they really are.

Religion is used to both endorse and challenge slavery in society. Some characters have to establish elaborate justifications in order to reconcile their faith with their slavery practice. The promise of salvation is also adopted by the slaves as a mantra.

Mr Whitechapel is regarded by his peers to be a lenient slave owner, but we can see the hypocrisy in his praying with Mr Sanders to ask for advice and strength. To us the brutality of slavery is obvious and we are challenged to question: How can Christianity is used to support slavery?

Let’s head back to Black Diggers. Bertie, far from home, is caught between two worlds. His present reality is what he desperately sought.

- **Black Diggers**: Act 1, Scene 20 (pp. 44 - 45)
  Bertie: Bring him here! Quick!

**Setting and characters**: 1916. Pozieres. Bertie, Tommy, Stretcher Bearer

**Comparative Link**

Once faced with an Indigenous man’s death in a strange land, Bertie realizes he has none of the traditional knowledge he needs to conduct ceremony to properly bury and farewell the soldier. He is distressed that he can’t do what he believes to be the right thing. The only comfort he can turn to is Christian prayer.

- **Black Diggers**: Act 1, Scene 22 (pp. 49 - 50)
  Bertie: I shouldn't be here...

**Setting and characters**: 1916. Pozieres. A hole somewhere. Bertie, Tommy,

There are really two scenes here, as the focus shifts from Mick killing the German soldiers Tommy and Bertie 'in a hole somewhere" (p.49), terrified by the fighting seems to so enliven Mick. This is unusual in the play, as most scenes take place in only one time and location. The quick transition between the two locations echoes the transition between life and death such a central part of the soldiers experience of war.
- **Black Diggers**: Scene 26 (p. 57)
  Bertie: Dear Mum...

**Setting and characters**: 1917. A Field hospital in Abbeville, France. Bertie, an Orderly.

Young Bertie, who was so desperate to go to war, now desperate to return home. Once again he tried to beat his mother for assistance. He cleverly extends her own analogy about the show to secretly communicate to her the extent of his distress. This also illustrates his transition from the innocence of a 15-year-old to the knowledge of one has ‘see what the grown-up world is like’.

**Question**: How does the language of this scene reveal the change in Bertie?

**Comparative Link**
Letters are used as a mode of storytelling in both texts. Archie and Bertie write home and Norm writes to the editor of a newspaper. In The Longest Memory the arc of the story is plotted through a series of editorials in The Virginian.

**The Virginian, editorial, February 4, 1810.**

If slaves are stock should we be concerned about the sale of a woman and her children that might very well result in their separation? This good question raises a philosophical enquiry into the degree of humanity we should accord slaves. Are we to attribute to slaves all the qualities we credit to ourselves as human beings? I think not.

The premise of the buying and selling of Africans is built upon precepts concerning their differences from our good selves. They are, quite literally, not like us. They do not feel what we feel. They do not value what we value. They will exhibit habits of attachment not unlike those observed among other kinds of stock on the plantation: a cows to its newborn calf; and mare’s to its foal.

It is wise not to confuse such displays of attachment with habit or love. At the auction block get the best price for your investment even if it means breaking up the capital into smaller holdings and selling each holding separately.

**The Virginian, editorial May 5, 1810**
An intriguing question was put to me by a reader who requested that her identity be kept a secret. So I shall use the initial of her first name, L. Miss L wondered if it would not be more profitable to pay blacks for their work instead of keeping them as slaves and having to provide for all their needs in exchange for labour. This seems laughable to many upon first hearing of it. But it does merit further consideration. - An intelligent question from a lady.

**The Virginian, editorial June 23, 1810**

Miss L wrote and called my thinking on last weeks’ issue concerning the perfidy of liaisons between white women (they are not ladies) and black men unconstitutional. Miss L is a previous correspondent who has brought reason to this column in the past. I credited her at the time with intelligence. I see now I was grossly mistaken. She exhibits a love for Blacks that clouds her ability to reason about any subject involving them. Her thinking puts her in that bracket of females who end up in the North walking arm in arm down a dingy street with a black man. Should this occur, at least she will have been the mistress of her own fate, which is, I will allow, as constitutional as a person can get.

**Comparative Link**

Previously the editor has encouraged Lydia’s correspondence as an intelligent woman but when she expresses the view that all blacks be allowed education and the right to work for pay their views completely diverge.

There is a dehumanising tone that runs through the editorials, Slaves are referred to as livestock – to be owned or possessed. It was asserted that African slaves were lower forms of life, they were considered a different species and therefore powerful white slave owners could abuse slaves in the same way as mistreating an animal.

Though the series of editorials we clearly see the conservative views and values of the society but also the the liberal views of the abolitionist movement fighting for an end to slavery.

Another example that cruelty towards slaves was common and were traded as livestock come from Sanders Senior’s diary entries -

**March 8**

Rations of slaves to be increased along with one extra break in the afternoon following an inspection by the Master of the Whitechapel plantation. Cock-a-
doodle-do. He said they looked thin. What good is a fat slave to anyone but himself. Mr Whitechapel you are wrong, Sir. Cattle need fattening, not slaves.

March 25

Two of the older women slaves died from fever. I am only the chief overseer here but I think it is the overfeeding did it. They will have to be replaced with at least one new girl. Mr Whitechapel is in complete agreement, for once. Market day next Tuesday. Will choose a girl of about fifteen.

Comparative narration
Those in power could practically behave with immunity - Chapter 4, Cook

Cook

After he lay hands on me I wanted to die. I planned to find a way to the river who’s banks were swollen and hurl myself into its strong currents. Whitechapel saved me. The second time I had to tell someone or surely die. There was no one to tell but my husband. Whitechapel saved my life. A child not his. A pure wife no longer pure. Any other man would have thrown me away. He is no ordinary man. His master respects him. I see it whenever they meet. My Whitechapel got that hound of an overseer fined. Fined! He made him apologise. And to make sure it never we occurred he got him married. My Whitechapel did all that. Another man would have seen my pregnancy with Sanders’s forced seed as adequate cause to abandon me. Not Whitechapel. I will be him many sons. He will die contented. I will grow old with my sons, alone, and happy to have met my Whitechapel.

Comparative narration
Cook dreams for a brighter future with her Whitechapel, while Lydia and Chapel, forbidden to see each again, push the boundaries of her father’s authority.

Lydia and Chapel

Chapel: Do I think stars really wink?
Lydia: Of course they wink.
Chapel: When a star shoots where does it land?
Lydia: I don’t know that they land at all. I want one to shoot now so that I can make a wish.

Chapel: The stars put out their lights to avoid disturbing people when they land. The sound of a star landing was just like a felled tree hitting the ground.

Lydia: What would you wish, Chapel?

Chapel: If I tell you it will surely not be granted.

Lydia: How so?

Chapel: My father told me it spoils a wish if you tell it to the person who is a part of that wish.

Lydia: Your father is right.

Chapel: My father is always right. How is the reading, Lydia?

Lydia: Not good without you.

Chapel: Memorise something for me when we meet next time.

Lydia: And what will you do?

Chapel: I will compose something in my head.

Lydia: I’ll bring you books and paper.

Chapel: No. Be my eyes and read for me. Be my pen and write down what I say you.

Lydia: I’ll memorise my father’s library for you. I will leave room for your words because my head is as big as the heavens.

Chapel: Have become one and blurred.

Lydia: Yes.

(Lydia wants to turn to see him)

Chapel: Don't turn around. I cannot disobey your father. I love you, Lydia.

Lydia: I love you, Chapel.’
Lydia

Lydia: A marriage is to be arranged for me. Like my mother before me I am expected to get married and bring up children. It is my duty.

I am visited by every eligible bachelor from all the right families. When it comes to the rights of slaves I part company with every one of them without exception. One even argued that my pretty head should not be preoccupied with the business of men, and improving the lot of slaves who in their transportation from Africa are plucked from unutterable displays of savagery and barbarism.

Chapel, Chapel, I wish you could waltz into my house and hold forth in my company before my family, the way you do with me. I wish you were white. I wish I were black.

I see Chapel and me walking arm in arm down one the dirty streets of the North. Free. Chapel and I under the same roof. Chapel and I in the same bed.

Comparative Link
There is a comparison here to the story of Romeo and Juliet - forbidden love from opposing families. The romantic Lydia, full of idealism, encourages Chapel to flee to the north where their relationship and ideals can be tolerated. Hopeful, optimistic, young and naive, they dream of a brighter future, of children and of Chapel becoming a poet. But we know that they can’t possibly be together.

We’ll leave The Longest Memory now and rejoin Black Diggers in Act 2.

The soldiers hope for a peaceful and unified future at home after the war. They recognise that on the battlefield, for the most part, they gain equality.

- **Black Diggers**: Act 1 Scene 18 (p. 41)
  Second White Soldier: What are you going to do when you get home Stan? ...

- **Black Diggers: Act2, Scene 34 (p. 69)**
  Mick: Well they really rolled out the red carpet didn’t they? . . .

**Setting and characters: 1919. Arriving Home. Mick and Arch on the gangway. They look around, no-one there.**

After the war and away from the trenches, Mick automatically begins to identify as Indigenous again - Mick feels alienated from the non-indigenous people who are there to greet the boat. Nevertheless he asserts that Indigenous soldiers to try to hold onto the positives they gained in the war and not let their position return to how it was before the war. The suggestion that there is no hero's welcome for them confirms Bertie’s mothers prediction: after the Show, there is nothing left to see.

- **Black Diggers: Act2, Scene 35 (p. 70)**
  Mum: Bertie! You da boy . . .

**Setting and characters: 1919. Bertie Arrives home. Bertie and Mum**

Continuing the tone and events of the previous scene, various characters return home from war to little celebration. Bertie is even more traumatised, not responding to his mother's gushing welcome. These scenes contrast with the scenes in the trenches: although battle is violent and home should be a safe place, in fact the trenches are where many men experienced companionship, while home feels empty and lonely.

**Comparative Link**

There is some social division in the Armed Forces based on rank but war appears to be a great leveler as it places soldiers on equal footing. Class division appears determined by race. Exclusions from social activities and events are due to a racial divide.

Promises forged on the battlefield prove to be illusive on the return home. It is only for the years of the war that racism is put to the side.

- **Black Diggers: Act2, Scene 36 (p. 71 - 72)**

**Setting and characters: 1932. A country pub in rural Australia. Archie, A Digger, Cellarman, RSL Secretary.**

Some, like the Cellarman, still regard the indigenous soldiers as lesser human beings. Others, like be the RSL secretary, value the men's contributions to the Army therefore the
community, and treat them with more respect than before the war: 'we don’t see the skin, we see the service' (p.72)

**Comparative Link**

After the war, some white soldiers *did* continue to treat their Indigenous peers as mates rather than the non-citizens they’d been at home before it. They learned that society had not progressed at all and that their hopes for a more inclusive community were an illusion. Old prejudices resume and the social norms are restored. Their dreams are shattered.

For the Indigenous Australian soldiers, this is a cruel blow. Being denied the rights of other returned servicemen, they are reminded that their sacrifices were not worth it and that the respect that experienced on the battlefield has not continued.

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**Black Diggers:** Act2, Scene 37 (pp. 73 - 75)

Public servant: Please, please, May I be heard?...

**Setting and characters:** 1922. Western Districts, Victoria. A Public meeting. Public Servant, Mick, Farmers, Police Constable.

Further inequality in the treatment of returned servicemen is revealed when land is taken away from farmers, some of whom are indigenous, as indicated by the statement 'this is our land. It was a mission and then our community' (p. 73). The land is then allocated as 'soldier settlement plots' (p. 73), but not for Indigenous soldiers. Mick articulates his experience, realising that he sacrificed his country will not be valued as it deserves to be.

**Comparative Link**

Attempts by the soldiers to achieve parity with their comrades fails because the exceptional circumstances of the war have ended, and the social structures are reinstated. Mick’s pleas for land equality and reimbursement show that he feels he has risked his life for a ‘better Australia’ and he is disillusioned when he is denied fundamental rights because he’s indigenous.

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**Black Diggers:** Act2, Scene 39 (pp. 78 - 79)

Norm: I remember a sergeant saying to me . . .

**Setting and characters:** 1939. Cherbourg Mission, Queensland. Norm as an old soldier.

Norm experiences the familiar difficulties of ex-servicemen of any nationality: the physical and psychological legacies of war. His suffering is heightened by the additional trauma of
returning to a life of discrimination. In the Army they were listened to and 'no one said a bloody word' about their skin colour (p. 79). Back home at Cherbourg Aboriginal Mission, 'nothing has felt as good' as the equality achieved during the war and he no longer feels he really belongs. (p. 79)

**Comparative Link**

Without a network of support and opportunities being made available to them, the soldiers invariably fall on hard times; perhaps most tragically is the case of Tommy, whose homelessness and alcoholism sees him permanently ostracized.

- **Black Diggers**: Act2, Scene 40 (p. 81)
  Minister: We knew him as Tank Stand Tommy . . .

**Setting and characters**: 1935. *A cemetery in rural Australia. Minister*

The minister's eulogy for Tommy reiterate how to respect and indigenous returned servicemen might have received. On Tommy's return from serving his country, that country was unable to serve him, and he became a homeless alcoholic. Like Ern and Norm, Tommy was unable to fit into society after army life and instead died alone and unknown.

- **Black Diggers**: Act2, Scene 43 (p. 85)
  Grandad: I remember when all that was scrub... . .

**Setting and characters**: 1927. *On the Murrumbidgee River, NSW. Mum, Grandad, Bertie.*

Bertie's stillness and silence in this scene contrasts with the chaos of the war that left him so damaged. As Granddad mourns the land and environment he remembers, the nostalgic tone of the scene reminds us that just as Bertie can never return from 'the world grown-ups' to a childhood innocence (p. 85), so too the land can never return to how it once was.

**Question**: How would you describe the language used by Granddad in this scene? How does it differ from the language used by other indigenous characters in the play?
**Conclusion**

Grandad: You know, even when the fires had been through, the little green shoots came up everywhere. Little tiny tender shoots, from the bones. But all that's a while ago now.

Whitechapel: I don't want to remember. Memory hurts. Like crying. But still and deep. Memory rises to the skin and I can't be touched. I hurt all over, my bones ache, my teeth loosening the gums, my nosebleeds. Don't make me remember. I forget as hard as I can. Forget. Memory is pain trying to resurrect itself

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