Black Diggers and The Longest Memory both suggest that loyalty brings no rewards. Discuss.

Although faced with abrasive social norms and extreme discrimination both minorities presented in both Tom Wright’s Black Diggers and Fred D’Aguiar’s The Longest Memory, are rewarded for their loyalty. However, both author’s clear representation of the idea of loyalty are permeated with the harsh realities of both eras that despite this sustained loyalty, the black diggers and slaves ultimately struggle to be considered equal to their white counterparts, and thus are not only unrewarded but severely punished. Both texts present this core human value in an attempt to shed light on the tragic reality that discrimination against these minorities is still far too prevalent in today’s respective societies.

Wright and D’Aguiar similarly question the effectiveness of the heedless obedience and conformity adopted by the characters in the text. Most notably is Whitechapel’s loyalty to the institution of slavery in The Longest Memory. He is respected for is long service and acquiescence to the Whitechapel plantation and is condemned posthumously for knowing his “place” in the plantation, and he believes that “a slave can live a good, long life if he worked hard”. While he is esteemed for this quality, D’Aguiar’s representation of such obedience to authority is not simple. For Whitechapel, it is his very loyalty that leads to his son’s death, as he feels compelled to tell Mr. Whitechapel of Chapel’s escape, who subsequently requests punishment in order to dampen Chapel’s spirit of resistance. This sense of blind loyalty and conformity is evidenced in the character of Sanders Junior, when he unknowingly kills his half-brother, as a result of following the rules absolutely. Through these events, the text suggests that blind loyalty is not an ideal quality because of the lack of rewards it brings. This is somewhat akin to Wright’s approach in writing the play, Black Diggers. A significant context for this text is the military in which loyalty is fundamental to success and survival. Although several are seen not knowing “what it’s about” and the recruiting offices have “no bloody idea” according to Harry, the call to fight for a cause is strong among them. The fifteen-year-old Bertie urges his mother to write a letter authorising his age to be older than it is, so that he can “be a fighter, too. For us but not just for us. For Australia” and is thrilled beyond that “they need [him] … for the first time.” This ubiquitous excitement and mystery surrounding war is to no avail in the Indigenous community’s plight to be recognised equally. Consequently, despite their loyalty, they are left without rewards, parallel to Whitechapel’s experience as both minorities were led astray and oblivious to the traumatic events that were to follow.

In spite of the bleak narratives in both texts, Wright and D’Aguiar also see it fit to illustrate that loyalty is full of rewards. This glimpse of hope contrasts the normal occurrence of such barbarity displayed by the white majorities, who according to Sanders Senior, are “different from the slaves in intelligence and human standing before God.” D’Aguiar presents this contrasting mood through the loyalty between Chapel and Lydia. Through his relentless loyalty and intense love for Lydia, Chapel is rewarded with literacy thus granting him an education he is doomed to experience and the power to write history, which encompasses D’Aguiar’s intention of writing The Longest Memory. The deprivation of education for black people meant that white people were the only people with the ability to record history, and the purpose of Chapel’s character is to give a voice to those whose ability to express their opinion was stripped from them. Lydia is also rewarded for her loyalty to Chapel and the emerging social value of abolitionism with a heartfelt relationship. Although she realises this
will “bring calamity and shame tumbling through the roof” and defame her family name, the blossoming romance of these “star-crossed lovers” grants Lydia with exciting dreams of heading North with Chapel, where discrimination against black people is not so severe. Despite the use of romantic love in The Longest Memory, love and mateship is the most significant form of loyalty presented in Black Diggers. Harry is loyal to his mates, most notably Stan, who assists him with money after noticing that Harry has become a vagrant. Stan is keen to improve Harry’s way of life and “Get [him] on [his] feet”.

Wright emphasises the power of loyalty and mateship but is more concerned with the loyalty and devotion to religion. Christianity belongs to the text’s wider social and cultural contexts that help shape identities the kaleidoscopic chaos of war. The reward for one’s loyalty for religion comes with a sense of comfort and nostalgia for the soldiers, most of whom are away from home for the first time. In the first scene of combat, Laurie, one of the black diggers, prays (Job 10:22 and Psalms 23:33) isolated away from the action of the play, a tactic employed by Wright to highlight its significance and influence on the characters. Furthermore, he is overwhelmed to find himself in the holy land, when in Beersheba in 191, and is thrilled to be looking at “the same stars that he [The Lord] would have looked at.” Again, Wright’s structure is critical to the audience understanding of the behemoth that is Christianity for these soldiers, with his choice to capitalise “He” when referring to the Lord, as is seen in scripture. But Laurie’s reward for his loyalty to Christianity is not comprehensively understood until the conclusion of the play when he seeks solace in the Church as an usher at Sunday service, using it as an escape and mechanism to avoid his traumatic experiences at war. If it was not for his staunch devotion for religious ideologies, Laurie may not have found peace and may have ended up never being able to overcome his horrific memories and agonising past. Moreover, in The Longest Memory, the rulers of the plantation are somewhat rewarded with power and dominance for their loyalty to religious ideas. Mr. Whitechapel is able to gain support from Sanders Junior by referencing Christianity, a common ground shared between the two authoritative figures. He expresses confidence that “God should guide us in our dealings with slaves as he counsels us in everything else”, safely assuming that his audience will share his religious values. Even Sanders Senior, who is not presented admirably, indicates his religious beliefs. Nevertheless, this is done in the attempt to teach his son about slaves by referring to a religious hierarchy of human values, purporting that “we are different from slaves in intelligence and human standing before God”. The two texts differ here as Black Diggers shows one’s loyalty to religion to be rewarding as it comforts those who have battled through troublesome times whereas The Longest Memory aims to emphasise that one’s loyalty and devotion to Christian values is rewarding as it grants them authority and the ability to persuade opinions.

Loyalty is a complex and nuanced idea in both Black Diggers and The Longest Memory. This core human value is ultimately imperative to both minorities reaping the rewards and achieving some sort of solace, when the chance of positivity is unlikely. This is evidenced through loyalty to mates, lovers and Christianity in both texts yet very differently as well. Both authors also find it necessary to bring attention to the harsh reality, that in these oppressive societies, even loyalty cannot be guaranteed to provide rewards.