Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro

Centro de Educação e Humanidades

Instituto de Letras

Paulo Henrique de Sá Júnior

Rewriting black British history and preserving cultural memory: Bernardine Evaristo's novels of transformation

Rio de Janeiro

2024

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Tese apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Doutor, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Estudos de Literatura.

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Leila Assumpção Harris

Rio de Janeiro

2024

CATALOGAÇÃO NA FONTE

UERJ/REDE SIRIUS/BIBLIOTECA CEH/B

S111 Sá Júnior, Paulo Henrique de.
Rewriting black British history and preserving cultural memory: Bernardine Evaristo's novels of transformation/ Paulo Henrique de Sá Júnior. – 2024.
167 f.

Orientador: Leila Assumpção Harris.
Tese (doutorado) – Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Letras.

1. Evaristo, Bernardine, 1959- – Crítica e interpretação - Teses. 2. Evaristo, Bernardine, 1959- .Lara– Teses. 3. Evaristo, Bernardine, 1959-. Soul Tourists – Teses. 4. Evaristo, Bernardine, 1959-. Girl, Woman, Other – Teses .5.Escritoras negras – Grã-Bretanha – Teses. I. Harris, Leila Assumpção . II. Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Instituto de Letras. III. Título.

CDU 820-95

Bibliotecária: Mirna Lindenbaum. CRB7 4916

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Assinatura Data

Paulo Henrique de Sá Júnior

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Aprovada em 20 de março de 2024.

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Rio de Janeiro

2024

DEDICATION

to my People, to my Lady...

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my adviser Prof. Dr. Leila Assumpção Harris for the continuous support of my PhD study and research, for her patience, motivation, enthusiasm, and immense knowledge. I could not have imagined having a better adviser and mentor over this long journey of transformation I have taken. Thank you!

Besides my adviser, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Maria Aparecida Ferreira de Andrade Salgueiro for the participation and suggestions made in my doctoral qualification, for her generosity and affection, and for the entire journey taken between my master's degree and doctorate. Several of her articles about Afro-diasporic studies were a source of inspiration for this work.

My sincere thanks to Prof. Dr. Liane Schneider for her participation, valuable suggestions and criticism during my doctoral qualification. I hope I have made good use of everything mentioned and pointed out in her contributions.

I am thankful to Prof. Dr. Davi Pinho for his availability and for accepting to join my Doctoral Defense Board.

My special thanks to my dear friend Prof. Dr. Luiz Manoel da Silva Oliveira who has encouraged me to come back to my academic studies and been with me in this very important moment of my personal journey.

I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Priscilla da Silva Figueiredo and Prof. Dr. Juliana Borges Oliveira de Morais for kindly and generously accepting to join my Doctoral Defense Board as Substitutes.

Particular thanks to all the professors I have taken courses with during my doctoral studies, namely, Carmen Negreiros, Cida Salgueiro, Henrique Samyn and Leila Harris. I am grateful that I have had such wonderful minds to think with and guide me in the building up of my ideas.

I would also like to thank everyone who gave me support during this long path, especially my friend Egle Silva and my partner, Leandro Rosa.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Cristina Burton and my friend Linda Impey for helping me with my application as researcher at the University of Cambridge (July 2022).

Esono onipa biara ne ne nkrabea.
Everybody has their own distinct destiny.
Adinkra Proverb

RESUMO

SÁ JÚNIOR, Paulo Henrique de. *Rewriting black British history and preserving cultural memory*: Bernardine Evaristo's novels of transformation. 2024. 167 f. Tese (Doutorado em Letras) - Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2024.

Esta tese tem como objetivo investigar as formas experimentais engendradas pela escrita criativa de Bernardine Evaristo em *Lara* (2019 [1997]), *Soul Tourists* (2020 [2005]) e *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), levando em consideração os desenvolvimentos recentes mais importantes no estudo da escrita negra na Grã-Bretanha. Em primeiro lugar, enquanto questões claramente políticas e de representação figurem nos romances, preocupações poéticas e estéticas tornam-se proeminentes nas narrativas. Ao criar um novo espaço ficcional, Evaristo consegue preencher a lacuna entre os estudos culturais negros, por um lado, e a teoria literária, pelo outro. Os conceitos de Mark Stein (2004) sobre funções performativas do romance negro britânico de transformação, juntamente com suas ideias sobre perpetuação e refração, serão fundamentais para esta análise. Em segundo lugar, há uma ênfase na reescrita da história negra britânica e na preservação da memória cultural, temas intimamente ligados ao debate canônico em curso. As estruturas em rede dos romances expõem padrões transtemporais e transnacionais de diversidade, conectividade e relacionalidade, bem como uma genealogia das mulheres negras britânicas e o seu empoderamento. Ao abordar o conceito de transformação assim como a poética e a política da complexa realidade da cultura africana, duas questões estarão no centro da discussão: O que está em jogo na restauração e renovação do passado nos últimos tempos na escrita negra britânica? Será que os romances de transformação fornecem um veículo para criticar e estabelecer continuidades entre as fronteiras racializadas de então e de agora? Como esta pesquisa se enquadra na área de estudos literários, o método adotado é o exploratório, que envolve o mapeamento de fontes teóricas para análise do corpus ficcional.

Palavras-chave: Bernardine Evarist;. ficcção britânica negra contemporânea; reescrevendo a história; romances de transformação; cosmologia africana.

ABSTRACT

SÁ JÚNIOR, Paulo Henrique de. *Reescrevendo a história negra britânica e preservando a memória cultural*: os romances de transformação de Bernardine Evaristo. 2024. 167 f. Tese (Doutorado em Letras) - Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2024.

This thesis aims to investigate the experimental forms engendered by Bernardine Evaristo's creative writing in *Lara* (2019 [1997]), *Soul Tourists* (2020 [2005]), and *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), taking into account the most important recent developments in the study of black writing in Britain. Firstly, while overtly political matters and issues of representation figure in the novels, poetic and aesthetic concerns become prominent in the narrative. Creating a new fictional space, Evaristo succeeds in bridging the gap between black cultural studies on the one hand, and literary theory on the other. Mark Stein's (2004) concepts of performative functions of the black British novel of transformation together with his ideas on perpetuation and refraction will be fundamental for this analysis. Secondly, there is an emphasis on the rewriting of black history and preserving cultural memory, topics closely connected to the ongoing canon debate. The novels' networked structures expose transtemporal and transnational patterns of diversity, connectedness, and relationality, as well as a genealogy of black British women and their empowerment. By means of addressing the concept of transformation, and the poetics and politics of the complex reality of the African culture, the two following questions will be at the core of the discussion: What is at stake in the restoration and renovation of the past in recent black British writing? Do the novels of transformation provide a vehicle with which to criticize and establish continuities between the racialized boundaries of then and now? As this research is in the area of literary studies, the adopted method is the exploratory one, which involves mapping theoretical sources in order to analyse the fictional corpus.

Keywords: Bernardine Evarist;. contemporary black; british Fiction; rewriting history; novels of transformation; african cosmology.

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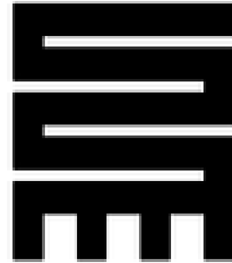
INTRODUCTION



Nkyinkyim[1]

A confluence of communities lost and found
dispersed and displaced
are meeting through
maps of my veins.
Bubbling and stumbling
over language and accent,
building new canals of identity.
A city-scape of sediments
of homeland and citizenship
are flowing over this bedrock I call home.
Can you hear this river roar,
as it runs through me?

Jyotsana Saha[2]

The tortuous nature of life's journey

It had never crossed my mind that the tortuous nature of life's journey would lead me into my PhD thesis after almost 20 years from the completion of my Master's dissertation. I took many different routes in-between. Yet my roots have always been UERJ and I have not forgotten the professors that were and still are the foundation stones of my career: Dr. Eliane Borges Berutti, Dr. Leila Assumpção Harris, Dr. Maria Aparecida Ferreira de Andrade Salgueiro and Dr. Peonia Vianna Guedes.

Fortunately, I have had the chance to travel widely, mostly to England, the place I call my second home. I took four post-graduation courses about language teaching at the University of Cambridge and Hilderstone College. While in Cambridge, I had the opportunity

[1] This is an Adinkra symbol which stands for the tortuous nature of life's journey. These symbols encapsulate the worldviews and keen observations of human behaviour and their interaction between nature and humanity. For more of Adinkra Symbols see: OWUSU, Philip. Adinkra Symbols as "Multivocal" Pedagogical/Socialization Tool. *Contemporary Journal of African Studies*, vol. 6 (1), p. 46-58, 2019.

[2] SAHA, Jyotsana. *The river runs through me*. Unpublished work, 2017.

to meet people from different places in the world and have long conversations about their problems in relation to immigration to that country.

At the time I was studying and working in the UK, I met Jess, an African descent teacher from Studio Cambridge, and we used to talk about the “place we call home”. Later, back to Brazil, and attending Flip 2020, I came to know Bernardine Evaristo, who was interviewed by Stephanie Borges about her most recent novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019a). Evaristo talked about writing, her Afro-Brazilian descendance and gender issues. Both Evaristo and Jess raised my curiosity about the (re)construction of the black British identity and its always-already-hybrid sense of the self. Then, I met Dr. Harris by chance, asked her whether she would take me as her advisee and told her my area of interest. I was elated when she said yes. After this, I started to go deep into Evaristo’s background.

In 2022, I came across Dr. Cristina Burton, who has an honours in English History, via my friend Linda Impey. Dr. Burton helped me to apply for the University of Cambridge Research Department. With the assistance of my adviser, Dr. Harris, who wrote me a letter of recommendation, I was able to get a year permission to develop my PhD research about Bernardine Evaristo and Black British Literature at the University. So, I was pleased to spend my winter holidays, summer in the UK, at the city I had lived and studied.

I was flabbergasted when I realized that Bernardine Evaristo, one of the young black British writers, who entered the literary scene in the mid-nineties, is the author of ten books and numerous writings that span the genres of fiction, verse fiction, short fiction, non-fiction, poetry, essays, literary criticism, journalism, radio and theatre drama. She is a British author and academic, born on May 28, 1959, in Eltham, south-east London, and christened Bernardine Anne Mobolaji Evaristo. She was raised in Woolwich, the fourth of eight children born to an English mother, Jacqueline M. Brinkworth, a schoolteacher, of English, Irish and German heritage, and a Nigerian father, Julius Taiwo Bayomi Evaristo, born in British Cameroon, raised in Nigeria, who migrated to Britain in 1949 and became a welder and the first black councillor in the Borough of Greenwich for the Labour Party. Her paternal grandfather, Gregorio Bankole Evaristo, was a Yoruba Aguda[3] who sailed from Brazil to Nigeria. Her paternal grandmother, Zenobia Evaristo, was from Abeokuta in Nigeria. Her mother’s paternal great-grandfather, Christoph Heinrich Louis Wilkening, arrived in London from Germany in the 1860s and settled in Woolwich, while her mother’s maternal grandmother, Mary Jane Robbins, arrived in London, from Birr, County Offaly, Ireland, in

[3] A Yoruba Aguda is an Afro-Brazilian Yoruba who was sold into slavery and upon being freed returned to Nigeria.

the 1880s and settled in Islington. She was educated at Greenwich Young People's Theatre, now Tramshed, in Woolwich, Eltham Hill Grammar School for Girls, the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama, and Goldsmiths College, University of London, receiving her doctorate in creative writing in 2013. In the 1980s, together with Paulette Randall and Patricia Hilaire, she founded Theatre of Black Women, the first theatre company in Britain of its kind. In the 1990s, she organised Britain's first black British writing conference, held at the Museum of London, and also Britain's first black British theatre conference, held at the Royal Festival Hall. In 1995 she co-founded and directed Spread the Word, London's writer development agency. In 2019 she was appointed Woolwich Laureate by the Greenwich and Docklands International Festival, reconnecting to and writing about her hometown.

Evaristo is the author of two non-fiction books, and eight books of fiction and verse fiction that explore aspects of the African diaspora: *Island of Abraham* (1994), *Lara* (1997), *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), *Soul Tourists* (2005), *Blonde Roots* (2008), *Lara* (2009, new, expanded edition), *Hello Mum* (2010), *Mr Loverman* (2013), *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), *Manifesto* (2021) and *Look Again Series: Feminism* (2021).

Her most recent novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019a) made the Booker Prize shortlist, announced on 3 September 2019, alongside books by Margaret Atwood, Lucy Ellmann, Chigozie Obioma, Salman Rushdie and Elif Shafak, and on 14 October, it won the prize jointly with Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019). The win made her the first black woman and first black British author to win the prize; the book was also shortlisted for the 2020 Women's Prize for Fiction. In the same year, she won the British Book Awards: Fiction Book of the Year and Author of the Year, the Indie Book Award for Fiction as well as many other awards. Also in 2020, Evaristo became the first woman of colour and the first black British writer to reach number one in the UK paperback fiction charts, where she held the top spot for five weeks and spent 44 weeks in the Top 10. In 2022, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019a) was included on the "Big Jubilee Read" list of 70 books by Commonwealth authors chosen to celebrate the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. The novel has been translated into many languages, including Portuguese (2020).

Evaristo has written novels that celebrate the resilience and creative power of black British people. Gender issues also figure prominently in her writing. She is aware that women across the globe have been caught in a web of cultural, political, economic and religious shackles. In *On Decoloniality* (2018), Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh chronicle pathway to women's submission and the imposition of prescribed gender roles.

> Dispensable women invented by Human/Man were witches; necessary women were wives whose function was to secure the regeneration of the species. […] If the inhabitants of *Indias Occidentales* became Indians; enslaved Africans became Black and, therefore, lesser beings in relation to the prototype of the (White) human. While in Europe racism manifested itself in the sphere of religion, in the New World (*Indias Occidentales*, and then America) racism was established in the secular realm, with people, who, according to the Christians, had no religion.
> Racism in the New World impinged upon sexism already established among Western Christians. *Racism and sexism are inseparable and constitutive of the Colonial Matrix of Power*. (Mignolo; Walsh, 2018, p. 157-158, my emphasis)

In order to break sexist and racist barriers, women have articulated their resistance against the existing dominant structures through different ways, e.g.: theatre, music, sports, films and writing. Their fundamental motivation to fight against male-domination, or patriarchal traditions, is both individual and collective, compelling them to claim their individual identity and to fight against the disparities in society. Black English writers have made use of literature to engage their readers and followers to react against inequality and injustice in societies, to struggle against the menace of racism and intolerance. Bernardine Evaristo has largely contributed to the English language literature portraying resistance while voicing issues women of colour have faced in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Diasporas and journeys: Black British Literature

Diaspora is elusive by design due to its fluidity. In its traditional biblical usage, this phenomenon described the specific dispersal of the Jewish people. Since then, diaspora has been expanded and abstracted by artists, community groups, scholars and others who have used the term to describe countless movements across and within geographical borders. In contemporary discourse, it has also been used interchangeably with immigration and/or ascribed to entire groups of people who have ancestral ties to one nation-state and currently inhabit a geographical boundary.

Literature, among other manifestations, plays a critical role in providing people with a platform from which to make sense of, construct and express their diasporic identifications with ample space for reinterpretation. For some critics, diasporic writers' practice and works are invaluable tools. They offer insight into the ways that the silenced groups negotiate and interpret their own diasporic identities, serving as a lens through which to examine the broader social relations and practices which constitute their lives. Diasporic writers developed different ways to express and represent diasporic themes. Besides, many of the early cultural theorists who shaped the direction of diaspora studies made use of the arts to inform their

analysis and develop their theoretical frameworks (Gilroy, 1993a; Gilroy, 1993b; Hall, 1990; Said, 1990).

One may argue that the stance of diasporic writers as insiders/outsiders places in the best position to see things that others take for granted, describing them critically with plenty of details and meanings. As such, diasporas and literature have had a longstanding and important relationship, helping to inform and constitute the other. Diasporic writers may be able to communicate themes which are both specific to their diasporic experience and common to the human condition.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the experimental forms engendered by Bernardine Evaristo's creative writing in *Lara* (2019 [1997]), *Soul Tourists* (2020 [2005]) and *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019a). This work also aims at theorizing the most important recent developments in the study of black writing in Britain. Firstly, there is the shift from thematic and overtly political concerns, with a focus on issues of representation, to poetics and aesthetics, bridging the gap between black cultural studies on the one hand, and literary theory on the other. Mark Stein's (2004, p. 36-54, 101) concepts of performative functions of the Black British novel of transformation together with his ideas on perpetuation and refraction or what he calls *Literature of Belonging*, will be fundamental for this discussion. Secondly, there is an emphasis on the rewriting of black literary history and preserving cultural memory which is closely connected to the emerging canon debate. Both developments will help to establish the objects and objectives as well as the theoretical and methodological frameworks of European and transatlantic Black British literary studies, all associated with postcolonial studies, African American studies and, of course, Black British Literature.

Unfortunately, there has been a clear neglect of the aesthetic dimension of Black British Literature. Critics often seem to read black British novels as basically concerned with socio-political issues, including diasporic identity formation, rather than imaginative works of narrative art themselves. Several interrelated aspects of black British aesthetics, among them social engagement, representational character, a moral stance, negotiations between tradition and change, elements of satire and even different kinds of realisms are mentioned in Arana's *Black British Aesthetics Today* (2007, p. 4). Her definition of a black aesthetics, building on what she considers to be a dominant feature in contemporary art and writing in postcolonial Britain, is precisely this quality of provisionality which prevents the new code from turning into a normative prescription.

Reading through the works of Bernardine Evaristo, one comes to realize not only that a critical discourse focusing on black aesthetics is long overdue but also that the literary scene

itself faces a similar dilemma. Black British novels have been frequently characterized by the search for realistic representations of black experience, leaving little for scholars interested in formal innovation. In her works, Evaristo experiments with form and narrative perspective. She uses long sentences, eschews punctuation and paragraphing. She often merges the past with the present, fiction with poetry, the factual with the speculative, and reality with alternate realities. It is important to remark that her experimentation with form has implications beyond aesthetics. While inserting free verses amidst passages in prose, for instance, she enhances typical attributes of the novel genre and highlights contemporary issues regarding gender, sexuality and race.

Yet another important development in the study of black writing in Britain is the focus on the rewriting of black (literary) history and on the preservation of cultural memory. In *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Post-Colonial Britain* (2007), professor, writer and activist Ashley Dawson takes a historical approach to black or postcolonial Britain. He emphasizes that "resistance to homogenous notions of white Englishness was never exclusively reactive [but] created dynamic new aesthetic and political constellations whose transforming truth exceeded that struggle immediately at hand" (Dawson, 2007, p. 7). His book is not a history of postcolonial Britain, but a survey of the history of the United Kingdom's African, Asian and Caribbean population from 1948 to present, working at the turning point of cultural studies, literary criticism and postcolonial theory. He chooses the arrival of *SS Windrush*, in 1948, as a starting point for his forays into culture, focusing on the counterhegemonic blend of aesthetics and politics which characterizes postcolonialism.

The fifty-year anniversary of the *Windrush* generation was followed by a historical turn in black British literary studies. A lot of publications on the subject came to the fore, helping to turn the anniversary into a media event; furthermore, it initiated a process of canon formation, which is not merely concerned with establishing the key authors and most important literary works.

Contemporary black British writers are concerned with the rewriting of black literary history. They view memories as active, shaping texts such as autobiographies and novels. Evaristo's rewritings have been emphasizing connections between individual memories and what is called collective, social or cultural memory. Her novels demonstrate ways in which individual memories are shaped by the social groups to which her characters belong. Cultural memory, on the other hand, emphasizes the repertoire of stories that help shape individual memories.

What is important is the observation that the canon serves the most basic and indispensable function of turning the plenitude of what has survived into a usable past. Canons, as the result of processes of evaluation, are self-evidently objectifications of values, which are shared and promoted by groups within a culture over a certain span of time. This political dimension becomes evident when one realizes that the primary function of cultural memory is to co-establish and stabilize group identity and to form the basis of the system of shared values and collective action.

"The maps of my veins"

This thesis will explore how resistance as a strategy of survival in Bernardine Evaristo's narratives highlights women's struggle in the backdrop of their specific culture and how constructing resistance in fiction empowers and emancipates relations between individuals and society.

The first chapter, entitled "The Poetics and Politics of Black British Literature", is devoted to the theoretical foundations of the core argument in this thesis, that is, the rewriting of black British history and the preservation of its cultural memory. Works by intellectuals such as Paul Gilroy, Alastair Niven, James Procter, Fred D'Aguiar, Anne Walmsley, Hanif Kureishi and Margaret Butcher, among others, have helped me to develop my understanding of this confluence of ideas to devise a method to read the black British literary production.

In chapter two, entitled "*Lara*: the cartography of a sentimental journey", I will present a quest for identity through Astrid Erll's processes of remembering and forgetting together with Stein's idea of the *rite de passage*. The concept of *AfroChristianity* will also be instrumental for the analysis of Lara's transformation, since in black fiction African spirituality helps shape narratives of resistance and acceptance.

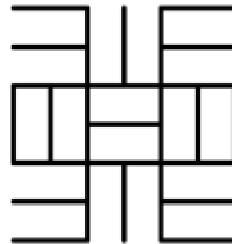
In the third chapter, "*Soul Tourists* on the road", I will put into question a gendered reconstruction of European history, since *Afrorealism* will help to tell the story as a means of resistance and struggle against the erasure of the past. Besides Mark Stein's, I will also use other scholars and their ideas, including John MacLeod's plurality in culture and Quince Duncan's *Afrorealism*.

In chapter four, which is entitled "*Girl, Woman, Other*: a trajectory of hyphen-ated *id*-entities", I will focus mainly on Amma's and Dominique's journeys, because it is Amma who starts and closes the narrative, bringing to the fore Evaristo's past connections with the theatre. Rosa Maria Rodrígues Magda's transmodern narratives and Erving Goffman's

concept of stigma will dialogue with Stein's studies of novels of transformation, problematizing the self and the other within their journeys.

Evaristo raises significant and urgent questions regarding women's lives, leaving to her readers the task of answering them. Setting, tone and style of the selected novels vary from one to another. However, the purpose is to oppose oppression and the implied message is to resist oppression in its own ways. The three selected narratives for this study claim women empowerment and emancipation, illustrating similar conditions catching women around the world in a patriarchal hang-up.

1 THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF BLACK BRITISH LITERATURE



Nea onnim no sua a ohu.[4]

walking by the waters,
down where an honest river
shakes hands with the sea,
a woman passed round me
in a slow, watchful circle,
as if I were a superstition;

or the worst dregs of her imagination,
so when she finally spoke
her words spliced into bars
of an old wheel. A segment of air.
Where do you come from?
'Here', I said. 'Here. These parts.'

Jackie Kay[5]

1.1 Opening remarks

Olaudah Equiano[6], known for most of his life as Gustavus Vassa, was a writer and abolitionist from the region of the Kingdom of Benin (today southern Nigeria). After being

[4] This is an Akan Proverb, which means "When he who does not know learns, he gets to know". The Akans of Ghana are Adinkra symbols which are ideological representations of proverbs, philosophies and thoughts.

[5] KAY, Jackie. "In My Country". 1993. Source: https://poetryarchive.org/poem/my-country/. Accessed in: 15/03/2023.

[6] Equiano (1745-1797) was born around 1745 in the Igbo village of Essaka in what is today southeast Nigeria. He claimed his home was in the Kingdom of Benin, but this was likely a geographical error. When about eleven years old, he was kidnapped, taken first to the West Indies and then to Virginia, where he was sold as a planter. Equiano has a questioned autobiographical information, because the literary scholar Vincent Carretta argued in his 2005 biography of Equiano that the activist could have been born in colonial South Carolina rather than Africa, based on a 1759 parish baptismal record that lists Equiano's place of birth as Carolina and a 1773 ship's muster that indicates South Carolina. Carretta's conclusion is disputed by other scholars who believe the weight of evidence supports Equiano's account of coming from Africa. There is evidence that he was taken to London

enslaved as a child in Africa, Equiano was taken to the Caribbean and sold as a slave to a Royal Navy officer. Sold two more times, he was able to purchase his freedom in 1766; today he is considered one of the major ancestors of black British literature (Equiano, 1995 [1789], p. 58). It is important to mention that by the time he was firstly sold, he could not reach the shore where the law would have protected him. The river could be considered an extension of the oceans and of the British Empire which reached into London, or that emanated from it, a question that *Heart of Darkness*[7] (Conrad, 2021 [1899]) leaves pending. Members of the three *Windrush* generations[8] are all writing simultaneously and the appearance of a successor does not entail the silence of those succeeded. We can say that black British writers do not share the same historical and cultural moment, but they partake of and contribute to different cultural moments.

In 1988, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the *SS Windrush*, a big celebration took place at the Royal Festival Hall. Several black British writers were celebrated on this occasion, including pioneers such as E. R. Braithwaite, Beryl Gilroy and George Lamming, Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Mike Phillips read from their work in later sessions. There was, however, the striking absence of a third generation, the sort of exclusion that Diran Adebayo has in mind when he distinguishes between his peers and the kind of people who wrote books before his time: "The whole vibe of London has changed in the past 20 or so years – and a lot of that has to do with the black presence here. Huge things have been happening in language, style, culture, but just below the level of the kind of people who

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and renamed Gustavus Vassa, a name he continued to use even after he was able to buy his freedom. He served as a seaman and worked as a buyer and overseer of slaves, resigning from this position after becoming an abolitionist. (Equiano, 1995 [1789])

[7] *Heart of Darkness, novella* by Joseph Conrad that was first published in 1899, examines the horrors of Western Colonialism, depicting it as a phenomenon that tarnishes not only the lands and peoples it exploits but also those in the West who advance it. Although garnering an initially lacklustre reception, Conrad's semiautobiographical tale has gone on to become one of the most widely analysed works of English literature. Critics have not always treated *Heart of Darkness* favourably, rebuking its dehumanizing representation of colonized peoples and its dismissive treatment of women. Nonetheless, *Heart of Darkness* has endured, and today it stands as a Modernist masterpiece directly engaged with postcolonial realities. Source: www.britannica.com. Accessed in: 31/01/2023.

[8] In the Anglophone world, a West Indian literary renaissance came about in the 1950s because of the immigration of writers-to-be Britain. Those writers were part of the "*Windrush* generation," a popular designation for postwar immigration to the UK that derives from the name of a converted troopship, *Empire Windrush*, which began carrying West Indians and other emigrants to England in June, 1948. The *Empire Windrush* and the immigrant surge symbolize the beginning of contemporary multiracial and multicultural Britain, and a consequent reshaping of national identity. There are three *Windrush* generations: 1st or Postwar Generation (1948 – 1970s), 2nd Generation (1970s – 1980s), and 3rd Generation (1990s onwards). The literature of both 1st and 2nd Generations is distinct from the later one because it is marked by inter-racial hostility. The 3rd Generation gives emphasis to autobiographical experiences and the struggles for recognition. For more information on "The Windrush Generation" see WEISS, Timothy. The Windrush Generation. *In*: *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel*. Cambridge: CUP, 2009. p. 163-175.

wrote books" (Adebayo, 1996, p. 27). He points to the unfolding of a vigorous scene of popular black British literature, which is a recent development and is characterized by a marked nationalism which stresses difference without pursuing a particular cause, breaking up with the atomization of black British writing. Kwame Dawes, in his article "Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction" (1999, p. 21-23), criticizes several young black British writers, such as Diran Adebayo and Courttia Newland, for not writing in the tradition of black British literature, ignoring the traditions they have inherited, and for being too concerned with the American market. Bernardine Evaristo has been accused of missing her chance of writing something relevant by refusing to forge new black British myths.

The (im)possibility of returning, the theme chosen by Evaristo for her debut novel *Lara*, for instance, indicates the concern with being black in Britain. But what would happen if Lara did not have this concern, would that make up a flaw? This would unnecessarily increase the burden of representation. The protagonist's quest may take the notion of a burdenless sense of belonging to a crossing out, but at the same time, the condition of unbelonging is not accepted but contested. While colonial history may indeed be frequently allocated to its victims, as Paul Gilroy (1993a) has suggested, *Lara* supplants a clear line between victim/perpetrator. While travelling to Nigeria with her parents, she finds that

> [the Agudas have] been back a long time.
> Shades style skins, stories colour sins: burnt almond,
> caramel, umber, ivory, rust – antiquities now, long dark
> weals form striped designs across some backs, others
> have the stamp of ownership burnt into baby flesh.
> All were marked for life. Ships sailing sugar canes,
> slave legacy surnames: Salvador, Cardoso, Damazio,
> Carrena, Roberta, da Souza, da Silva, and da Costa.
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 111)

Lara is travelling the triangular route herself, while reading surnames and skin tones as signs of history. But in view of what is referred here to as colour sins, clear distinctions between historical protagonists are not easily made. Her travels indicate that there is no straightforward belonging for her; the multiple links and connections she forges through her travels do not merge into one large strand. Instead, they show up the fallacy of notions of original belonging and undoubted origin, highlighting the condition of diaspora.

The black British novel of transformation as a diasporic *Bildungsroman* is a means of describing the condition of diaspora. It is also a means of combating alienation, unbelonging and all those silences muffled by centuries because of the Colonial Matrix of Power (Mignolo; Walsh, 2018, p. 4-5). By depicting racism, breaking up with those silences,

Evaristo's novels demand social, political, and cultural transformation. Caryl Phillips, in a review to the *Observer* (2000), asserts that "The 'mongrel' nation that is Britain is still struggling to find a way to stare into the mirror and accept the ebb and flow of history that has produced this fortuitously diverse condition and its concomitant pain" (Phillips, 2000, p. 11). Bernardine Evaristo's protagonists and the problematic they pursue can be seen as part of the process Phillips describes and requests. Her protagonists' genesis of consciousness, while embarking on prolonged literal and symbolical journeys of discovery, have equipped them well upon their return to London and their formation allows them to combat alienation.

1.2 Continuities and new beginnings

The concept of the Black Atlantic brought by Paul Gilroy (1993a) connects in theory Africa, the Americas, Europe and the Jewish diaspora. According to the sociologist,

> the contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations […] - black and white. (Gilroy, 1993a, p. 1)

The positioning of black people in the West entails Gilroy's premise that striving "to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness" (Gilroy, 1993a, p. 1). Nevertheless, in the face of racism, nationalism, and ethnic absolutism, filling in the space between is a provocative and dangerous practice. He is also convinced of the inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas and defines his Black Atlantic as the space of the "stereophonic, bilingual, of bifocal cultural form" (Gilroy, 1993a, p. 3). His work criticises cultural nationalism, ethnic absolutism, and integrated concepts of culture claiming positions against creolisation, *métissage*, *mestizage*, and hybridity. The black British novel of transformation is clearly marked by the connections with other cultural territories to which his work points at.

Peter Fryer, in *Staying Power* (1984), affirms that "there were Africans in Britain before the English came here" (Fryer, 1984, p. 12). Moreover, from the middle of the sixteenth century onward, and particularly in the following centuries, during British expansionism and the so-called triangular trade, millions of Africans were captured, enslaved and transported across the Atlantic to the Americas. Eventually, some of them and their descendants reached Europe and the "literary testimonies to this are well known", states Mark

Stein, in *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004, p. 4). The scholar also provides examples of these testimonies, such as Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (1995 [1789]) in the eighteenth century, and Mary Seacole[9]'s *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1984 [1857]) in the nineteenth. What these narratives have in common with the texts under scrutiny in this research is that the authors record both a confrontation between their protagonists and Britain, its institutions, its people and some of the strategies that were employed in this situation.

After World War II, Britain's need of workers promoted immigration from its colonial possessions. Britain recruited labour in the West Indies for the National Health Service, London Transport, and factories in the North. In the wake of the *Windrush*, which carried Jamaican, Guyanese, and Trinidadian migrants, half a million people arrived in Britain. The passenger list for the *SS Empire Windrush* that docked at Tilbury in June 1948 included 1024 passengers. Its content hints at a network of migrant workers not only from the Caribbean (Stein, 2004, p. 4, 202, 203) but also from other oversea lands. Although the arrival of the *Windrush* is crucial in that it marks the start of large-scale postwar migration, there had obviously been an influx of migrants in the years before then, as Stein highlights.

During WWII, before the independence of Britain's West Indian colonies, there had been West Indian soldiers in the British army, but with the end of the war and the influx of larger numbers of migrants, these migrants became less and less welcome, despite their British passports and their record of fighting for Britain. This population movement was initially viewed as a return to the mother country. Soon, this changed, however, as xenophobic responses were matched by the passing of increasingly restrictive laws to the point where immigration for black Commonwealth citizens has become nearly impossible. As the recently published oral history of this period, *Windrush: The irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* indicates, the *Windrushers* were asked time and again: "When are you going back to your country?" (Phillips & Phillips, 1998, p. 81).

The literature from this period of postwar reconstruction and interracial hostility is distinct from the later writings of the so-called second generation – authors who started writing in the 1970s and 1980s – a period also marked by racial hostility, and also from writers of the third generation who started writing in the 1990s. Bernardine Evaristo belongs to the third generation, a term which needs to be problematized, like the term *literary history*,

[9] Seacole (1805-1884) was born a free black woman in Jamaica, the daughter of a Scottish army officer and a free black woman. She worked as a doctor and nurse, and also as a hotelier in Jamaica, Panama and Colombia. During the Crimean War, she worked as a nurse and was recognized alongside Florence Nightingale. (Seacole, 1984 [1857])

which suggests neat separations and an idea of organic growth which does not accurately describe the literary texts in question. Between the passing of the Nationality Act in 1948, which created a composite UK citizenship for UK and colonial citizens, and the Immigration Act of 1971, which virtually ended all primary immigration, more than one generation arrived. According to Stein (2004, p. 6, 7), the term generation needs to be problematized because writers and texts cannot be taxonomized according to their age or the date of the authors' arrival in their country of residence, or better, writers may be a product of their times, metaphorically bringing their time with them, or partly out of synchrony with those around them as a result.

Edward Said, in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), differentiates between filial relationships and affiliative ones, stressing the worldliness of texts and their relationships to each other: "To recreate the affiliative network is therefore to make visible, to give materiality back to, the strands holding the text to society, author, and culture" (Said, 1983, p. 175). Without denying the usefulness of differentiation according to distinct generations, one should not be convinced that the linearity it implies is helpful. Intertextual relations are not easily expressed in family terms. Moreover, this system of cultural kinship is not sufficient to situate the novels discussed in this thesis, *Lara*, *Soul Tourists*, and *Girl, Woman, Other*: "It aint where you're from, it's where you're at", concludes Paul Gilroy in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (1993b, p. 120).

The post *Windrush* novelists on which this thesis is focused, or writers who did not migrate to Britain as adults but arrived as young persons or were born there, including Bernardine Evaristo, find themselves in a particular situation. Their attachment to Britain is not only symbolized by the British passport they hold, but by the fact their birthplace is Britain, highlighting the importance of British culture during their formative years. Mark Stein (2004, p. 7) calls attention to the idea that the homelands left behind by their parents are less available to this later group of writers. There are no direct memories, excepting those of journeys to these countries. Their parents' homeland may be present through their parents' accounts and memories.

1.3 Black British literature and its rival terms

An efficient way to map the growth of Black writing in twentieth-century literary history would be to point to the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*, June 1948, and align it to the

now well-known metanarrative of postwar immigration. Susheila Nasta, in "1940s-1970s", affirms that

> there is no doubt that the docking of this boatload of 492 West Indian islanders – whose passengers were bound on a journey not to a welcoming 'motherland' but an 'illusion' – represents an iconic moment in post-war immigrant history, a moment, as Jamaican Louise Bennett famously observes, when Britain began to be 'colonized in reverse'. *Windrush* has become part of the belated mythology of Britain's public face as a multicultural nation, a conveniently distant and palatable signifier of a cultural diverse past. (Nasta, 2016, p. 25)

Louise Bennett sees the ironic reversal of the colonisation process, whereby the British who once exploited overseas lands and resources became dependent in turn on the descendants of slaves to sustain their postwar economy. While the tone is humorous, the poet is fully aware that economic gains that the British enjoyed in the previous century were based on a cruel and brutal system, as her verses below indicate:

> Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie,
> I feel like me heart gwine burs
> Jamaica people colonizin
> Englan in Reverse
>
> Be the hundred, be de tousan
> Fro country and from town,
> By de ship-load, be the plane load
> Jamaica is Englan boun.
>
> […]
>
> Jane says de dole is not too bad
> Because dey paying she
> Two pounds a week fe seek a job
> dat suit her dignity
>
> me say Jane will never fine work
> At de rate how she dah look,
> For all day she stay popn Aunt Fan couch
> An read love-story book.
>
> Wat a devilment a Englan!
> Dem face war an brave de worse,
> But me wondering how dem gwine stan
> Colonizin in reverse.
> (Bennett, 1983, p. 106, 107)

In line with Bennett, there is the poem "You called… and we came", written by Professor Laura Serrant[10], displayed at The National Windrush Monument[11], created by Basil

[10] Laura Serrant, the Chief Nursing Officer for England's annual Officer of the British Empire Conference, wrote this poem in October 2017. It was written to reflect, recognize and celebrate the contributions made by black

Watson on June 22, 2022, in Waterloo Train Station, Central London, to mark the turning-point in Britain's multicultural memory. It magnifies the importance of an attachment not to be broken. The poem is found at the Monument illustrated in Figure 1, which I was able to photograph by chance.

> You called… and we came.
> In ships bigger than anything we had seen,
> dwarfing our islands and covering them
> in the shadows of smoke and noise.
> Crowded, excited voices filled the air,
> travelling to the 'motherland'.
> Driven by a wish, a call to save, to rebuild
> and support efforts to establish 'health for all'
> in the aftermath of war.
>
> You called… and we came.
> A new millennium – new hopes spread across this land.
> New populations, engaging and reflecting
> the varied, diverse and vibrant nature of these shores.
> Challenging and reflecting on leadership for health.
> Moves to melt the 'snow' at the peaks of our profession.
> Recognising the richness of our kaleidoscope nation.
> Where compassion, courage and diversity are reflected
> in our presence and our contribution:
> Not only the hopes and dreams of our ancestors.
> Human values needed to truly lead change… and add value.
> Remember… you called.
> Remember… you called.
> You called.
>
> Remember, it was us, who came.
> (Serrant, 2017)

Figure 1 - *The National Windrush Monument*

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nurses to the health system of England. It also shone a light on the hardships, prejudice and challenges faced by the brave men and women who responded to the call from England to leave their island nations which formed the British Commonwealth to help rebuild their "motherland" after WW II.

[11] For more information about The National Windrush Monument see https://windrush-monument.levellingup.gov.uk.

Source: Paulo H Sá Jr, Waterloo Train Station. London.

These verses produce a fruitful tension, which is reciprocal in that “blackness” redefines “Britishness” and “Britishness” redefines “blackness” (Stein, 2004, p. 8). Enoch Powel (1969, p. 281- 290), one of the foremost and most influential postwar racist politicians in Britain, expressed his opinion that while black immigrants might receive or have British citizenship they would never truly become British, let alone English. But what does it mean to be a black writer? In the British context, the adjective still refers to a rather wider group than in the American context. According to a concept of political colour, black refers to people of colour, people with an African, African Caribbean, or South Asian background. In *Black British Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (1986), Prahbu Guptara offered a straightforward definition of being black.

> Being ‘black’ is a matter of visibility, with social and political consequences […] In my view, therefore, ‘black Britons’ are those people of non-European origin who are now, or were in the past, entitled to hold a British passport and displayed a substantial commitment to Britain […]. (Guptara, 1986, p. 14)

David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe, in *A Reader’s Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (1998 [1987]), proposed a somewhat more specific definition: “Black British literature refers to that created and published in Britain, largely for a British audience, by black writers either born in Britain or who have spent a major portion of their lives in Britain” (Dabydeen; Wilson-Tagoe, 1998 [1987], p. 10). But what does the term black mean?

Does black denote colour of skin or quality of mind? The question of the character of the relationship between blackness and cultural production needs to be addressed without recurring to an essentialist definition of blackness. What is more, by stressing the aesthetic quality of texts, writers insist on categorizing texts according to textual properties rather than by authors.

Black British literature is accountable in two ways: what holds the writing together, and "where does this body of writing stand in relation to other bodies of writing?" (Stein, 2004, p. 9). Grouping texts together as black texts, or women's writing, as postcolonial, is an act in history, an intervention, that conditions the significance and the meaning that texts will attain in a reading.

1.4 The struggle for recognition

The English literary scholar and author, Alastair Niven, in "Black British Writing: The Struggle for Recognition" (1988), states the case that "writing produced in Britain by writers of non-European immigrant origin or descent, is being under-recognised both internationally and at home" (Niven, 1988, p. 326). He uses black British writing in its overarching sense. It is ironic that today the terms of its reception still remain largely undefined. Much more work on black British writing has been done recently, yet the field still requires more specific approaches that takes into consideration on which terms black British literature exists.

Whereas the so-called New Literatures in English were initially considered part of English Literature, e.g., the English language literatures, those which developed in Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, and in the Pacific were categorized regionally or nationally. Apart from studies of subnational groups, e.g., Maori writing; supernational regions, e.g., East African writing; anglophone Caribbean writing, or superregional, e.g., Postcolonial or Black Women's writing; there is some research on individual groups of authors for whom the questions of national, regional and cultural contexts are obviously important. On the other hand, James Procter, in "Recalibrating the Past: The Rise of Black British Historical Fiction" (2016, p. 133), claims that in some instances, as in Bernardine Evaristo's fiction, all the issues raised are mingled and have their own recognition. These issues have been given varied treatment in fictions that portray the distinctive experience of being black and British-born. Evaristo's works are examples of polygeneric novels that constitute rich resources in rethinking history.

Black British literature does not pertain exclusively to one geographical region. Stein affirms that “black British literature does have its own space, its own nation, even if it is an imaginary space” (Stein, 2004, p. 10). It is only through the imagination that the multi-layered connections to numerous traditions of writing, to cultures, to histories, and to numerous nation-states across the continents can be conceived. Black British literature derives from its own space, an imagined experimental field of overlapping territories and because of that, there is an important debate between Fred D’Aguiar and David Dabydeen that will take us into the problematization of the term black British literature.

In “On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today” (1989), Dabydeen asserts that “he feels sufficiently different for him [D’Aguiar] to want to contemplate that which is other in [him], that which owes its life to particular rituals of ancestry” (Dabydeen, 1989, p. 134). Dabydeen also speaks of rituals of ancestry, or better, connections which are forged through practice. They are neither essentialist, nor are they purely constructed: blackness is something in between these two extremes for him. The critic also accuses positions like the one proposed by D’Aguiar of aspiring to universalism and stresses that he himself is unwilling to drop the epithet of ‘black’ in order to be considered a writer (Dabydeen, 1989, p. 134).

D’Aguiar argues that “there is no Black British literature, there is only literature with its usual variants of class, sex, race, time and place” (D’Aguiar, 1989, p. 106). He criticizes the term for falsely suggesting homogeneity in that it may trigger the assumption that all black British literature is similar rather than variegated. He adds that a text “by a white author is white” (D’Aguiar, 1989, p. 106).

One may argue that a black British text is no less black that a text by a white writer is white. An author’s experience and structural position do influence his/her texts, whether the author be black or white. It is fallacious, however, to take for granted that the experience of a white person in a predominantly white society is strictly analogous to that of a person of a minority background within the same society and also that the experiences of people with a minority background do not differ widely.

The term black British does not signify a homogenous social group which shares a common ethnic, cultural, regional or national background. It can rather be understood as a collective term. Although black British refers to a heterogeneous group, writes Stuart Hall, in “New Ethnicities” (1996), the members of this group share the experiences of marginalization, experiences which induce a process of *diasporization* (Hall, 1996, p. 157-189). Thus, the social position as an immigrant or as a descendant entails commonalities

without disseminating cultural or ethnic homogeneity. Hall's stance contrasts with the one offered by D'Aguiar, who states his point of view as follows:

> Colour as a main indicator has come about by racism and the response to it.
> It seems an anathema to give blackness special status in the imagination when the basis for its stress is racially motivated […] creativity is not confined to experience alone […] Blackness, at the level of the vexed and overrated question of identity, must be evaluated independently of assaults from racists. (D'Aguiar, 1989, p. 110)

D'Aguiar defends that it is possible to speak of black experience and black language in Britain which corresponds to Dabydeen's notion of *rituals of ancestry*. Nevertheless, D'Aguiar calls attention to the fact that this is so partly in view of an underlying racism, a social differentiation and discrimination on the grounds of phenotypical differences. He also points at the idea that what he calls a black experience comes about in a racist or at least a racialist society. For him, labelling texts as black is a response to a racist society, or better, labelling texts as black, or black British by extension, is embroiled in racism or racialism and its consequences.

1.5 New Ethnicities

The term black British is older than the references made here by D'Aguiar and Dabydeen. It was deployed by the Caribbean Artists Movement[12] in the late 1960s, a movement which, according to Anne Walmsley, in *The Caribbean Artists Movement* (1992), "bridged the transformation of Britain's West Indian Community from one of exiles and immigrants to black British" (Walmsley, 1992, p. xiii). The term black British was used in an overarching sense, referring to distinct groups of West Indian migrants from Trinidad, Jamaica, Guyana, Barbados, etc… with distinct backgrounds. Later, the concept was used to include migrant groups from other parts of the world.

Stuart Hall noted that the term black was coined "as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalisation in Britain" (Hall, 1996, p. 157). He tries to account for the shift in the terminology by speaking of two phases. In the first, the concept implies

[12] The Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) was born with the aim of celebrating a sense of shared Caribbean 'nationhood', exchanging ideas and forging a new Caribbean aesthetic in the arts. It began in London, England, in 1966 and was active until about 1972. It focused on the works being produced by Caribbean writers, visual artists, poets, dramatists, film makers, actors, and musicians. The movement had an enormous impact on Caribbean arts in Britain. In its intense five-year existence it set the dominant artistic trends, at the same time forging a bridge between West Indian migrants and those who came to be known as black Britons. For more information on the CAM see *Windrush Stories* in the British Library: https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/caribbean-artists-movement-1966-1972.

that "the Black experience, as a singular and unifying framework […] became 'hegemonic' over other ethnic/racial identities" (Hall, 1996, p. 157). This phase of black British cultural politics has seen an ongoing shift toward "engaging rather than suppressing difference" (Hall, 1996, p. 159).

The second phase suggests an understanding of ethnicity that is not tied to nation, race or even culturalism, but to a positive understanding of the margin as a space of productive negotiation, centeredness and cultural, social political change. Hall (1996, p. 159) makes reference to the "politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity" as a move toward strengthening the political concept of black British identities in the plural, making it more pluralistic. Both phases account for the process of contesting and dissolving the hegemonic ethnicity of Englishness by its confrontation with an ideally unified black British counter-ethnicity "giving way to the construction of new ethnic identities" (Stein, 2004, p. 13).

Which of the "new British"[13] groups come into representation and gain recognition through the category black British? If the syntagm black British implies the experience solely of people with a Caribbean or African Caribbean background, it will rightly be considered hegemonic by those groups with a dissimilar background. If, however, heterogeneity and difference become recognized features of black British identities, more of the different groups' experience can be considered part of a variegated black British experience (Stein, 2004, p. 13). In broader terms, black British literature rests on a political understanding of blackness, the concept of political colour. This denomination has been used to forge political alliances between culturally distinct groups from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean while stressing commonalities they face in Britain.

Throughout black British literature, there is a necessary confrontation with attributed minority status that comes directly from what Paul Gilroy has described as "the experience of migration and our post-colonial position" (Gilroy, 1993b, p. 54). The webs which connect economically and culturally peripheric spaces of the former empire have acted as impetuses to see black Britons as outsiders within the collapsed borders of the modern British state. Eva Ulrike Pirker, in *Narrative Projections of a Black British History* (2011, p. 29-30), highlights the fact that most historiographical accounts, including those published since the turn of the last century, present black Britons as background rather than actors in the development of the

[13] This idea of the "new British" seeks to stress the ongoing process of negotiation as to who is and what is British, a process which of course dates back farther than migration from the former colonies to Britain.

country. The post *Windrush* novelists, Andrea Levy, Bernardine Evaristo and David Dabydeen, for example, do just the opposite. Their novels place black Britons in the foreground of the story, not as victims, but as protagonists who criticize and look for a better understanding of their historical systematic marginalisation, a process which, according to James Procter, represents their quest for "recalibrating the past" (Procter, 2016, p. 129). The following extracts taken from Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), Evaristo's *Lara* (2019 [1997]) and Dabydeen's *The Intended* (1991) show black Britons in the foreground of the action:

> The country where I live, *among people so unaware of our shared past* that all they could see if they were staring at my aunt would be a black woman acting silly.
> Let those bully boys walk behind me in the playground […] I am the great-grandchildren of Cecelia Hilton. I am descended form Katherine whose mother was a slave. I am the cousin of Africa […] Let them say what they like. Because I am the bastard child of Empire and I will have my day. (Levy, 1999, p. 326-327, my emphasis)

> *Home. I searched but could not find myself*,
> not on the screen, billboards, books, magazines,
> and first and last not in the mirror, my demon, my love
> which faded my brownness into a Bardot likeness.
>
> […]
>
> […] up three flights to the roof
> where in the silence of the sky I longed for an image,
> a story, to speak me, describe me, birth me whole.
> Living in my skin, I was, but which one?
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 69, 97, my emphasis)

> I suddenly longed to be white, to be clean, to write with grace and clarity, to make words which have status, to shape them into the craftsmanship of English china, coaches, period furniture, harpsichords, wigs, English anything, for whatever they put their hands and minds to worked wonderfully […] *We are mud, they the chiselled stone of Oxford that has survived centuries and will always be here*. (Dabydeen, 1991, p. 197-198, my emphasis)

Their protagonists, Britons of African or Caribbean heritage, confront, interact with and challenge colonial-era prejudices predicated on ideas of ethnic and cultural superiority. They are chronologically postcolonial, emerging "in their present form out of the experience of colonization" (Ashcroft; Griffiths; Tiffin, 1989, p. 2). They are also imbricated in a conceptual "after", "after being worked over by colonization", argues Gyan Prakash, in "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography" (1992, p. 8). As a result, the post *Windrush* characters are engaged in a process of stressing their current location in an "after", as a "post", as subjects marked, but not defined by colonial-era relationships.

By dubbing black Britons postcolonial subjects, I present them under an umbrella term contested by some critics. The Sierra Leonean British literary activist Kadija Sesay, in her Introduction to *Write Black, Write White: From Post-Colonial to Black British Literature* (2005), considers it an inappropriate designation for black people born in the British Isles because their "take" on Britain is viewed through glasses different from those of people born elsewhere. They are always reminded they are "not of here" (Sesay, 2005, p. 16), even though they believe and feel that they are in ways different from their migrant predecessors. Agreeing with D'Aguiar and Rushdie's dismissals of Black British and Commonwealth literature, many other critics have attacked the lack of attention to local character within postcolonial literary studies; in particular, they have challenged its advocates' eschewal of the *specific* for the *singular* (Hallward, 2011, p. 20). Moreover, they have also challenged their presentation of migrant intellectuals' preoccupations as the worries of the entire formerly colonized world (Dirlik, 1994, p. 339), and their "undifferentiating disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a corresponding exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multi-culturality" (Lazarus, 2011, p. 21). Both observations, Dirlik's and Lazarus', reflect a perennial challenge aimed at the ideas of postcoloniality which derive from an understanding of diasporic peoples and, in Dirlik's case, a diasporic elite. Concerning migrancy, Lazarus observes that most postcolonial critics seek the same few things in their studies: "instability and indeterminacy of social identity, the volatility and perspectivalism of truth, the narratorial constructedness of history, the ineluctable subjectivism of memory and experience, the violence implicit in the universalist discourse of the nation" (Lazarus, 2011, p. 22).

Notwithstanding, the last generation of black British writers' fictions comes across as obvious products of the shared black British experience of social and historical exclusion. This is a kind of experience for many writers that needed a contestation of the assumptions of the British state, claiming a rightful place on British soil and their connections to other places. This idea can be aligned with Homi Bhabha's model of a "Third Space" of *hybridity* where the concepts of Sameness/Difference combine, revealing their components and their independence (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211).

Bhabha's concept of *hybridity* has proved to be one of the most influential theoretical models in reading migrant writing in Britain. To capture his particular sense of the term, it is useful to see how he questions the notion of cultural diversity, which is central to the model of multiculturalism still valid in Great Britain today. For Bhabha, cultural diversity functions as a concept to demarcate homogeneous cultural formations and to insist on their isolation from one another, as well as their self-sustaining purity. To speak of cultural difference, however,

is to recognise that every instance of culture is ambivalent, enacting the legacies of multiple traditions and not satisfactorily contained within any, except perhaps temporarily or strategically (Bhabha, 1994, p. 31–38). It is culture at this point of non-containable difference, outside of any controlling labelling or limiting of a cultural whole, which is this site of *hybridity*. The concept does not refer to the coming together of two distinct, separate cultures but, rather, indicates that all culture is in fact forged in the "Third Space": a place outside of nationalistic understanding of fixed culture that Bhabha sees as replicated in the diversity model, firing most multiculturalist ideals.

The critic also argues that we can see the possibility of "new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211). Following this thought, the interaction of a sense of place and displacement in black British writing can be taken both as an expression of a dialectic and as a way of negotiating and working through the latent possibilities within British identity.

1.6 The black British novel of transformation and the *Rite de Passage* or *Bildungsroman*

Hanif Kureishi, in "The Rainbow Sign" (1986), speaks of a transformation of culture as the quote below highlights:

> It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time. (Kureishi, 1986, p. 38)

Kureishi's claims towards inclusion voiced in this essay reinforce the notion that cultures are constantly being made and remade, permitting the insertion of new elements. This insertion focuses on the vengeance of young "black Britishers" who like himself find a new space at the centre.

Lara (*Lara*), Stanley and Jessie (*Soul Tourists*), Amma, Dominique and Yazz (*Girl, Woman, Other*), among other protagonists of recent black British novels, exemplify Kureishi's ideas, once they seek a new space in the centre. It is no accident that all these three novels can be read as novels of transformation, describing and entailing subject formation under the influence of social, educational, familial, and other major forces. The black British novel of transformation has a dual function, as I understand: it is about the formation of its protagonists as well as the transformation of British society and cultural institutions. The

quotes below from *Soul Tourists* and *Girl, Woman, Other*, respectively, depict clearly this process of (trans)formation:

> As he explored the past, he became aware that the past was exploring him too, in its own spooky way. Life on earth was just the beginning, he now understood. He craved another visitation. Like an addict, he needed his fix.
> In Granada he went to visit the Alhambra – *Al Qal'a al Hamra*. He wandered around its reconstructed palaces, its lavish landscape gardens, its courtyards, its lily ponds. (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 155)

> aged sixteen, aspiring to become an actress, she headed for London where people proudly proclaimed their outsider identities on badges
> she slept rough under the Embankment arches and in shops door-ways along the Strand, was interviewed by a black housing association where she lied and cried about escaping a father who'd beaten her
> (Evaristo, 2019, p. 7-8)

The black British novel of transformation is related to those writers born in Britain. Bernardine Evaristo is adamant as to where she belongs, as the quotation by Hanif Kureishi indicates. Stein (2004, p. 22) claims that the post-*Windrush* writers pursue the project of their inscription into a literary tradition and of rewriting Britain, and that is a project encompassing not only the novel of transformation but also writers like Kureishi and Evaristo.

One cannot help but associate novels of transformation with the genre *Rite de Passage* or *Bildungsroman.* Both terms apply to a novel of education for life through life, focusing on an individual protagonist that goes through the process of character formation which takes him or her out of familial or educational institutions and through a crisis (Abrams, 1993 [1957], p. 132). During this process, the complex relationships between individual and community are scrutinized, hardship and evil are laid bare and generally, overcome. What is more, the *Bildungsroman* depicts the recognition of the protagonist's identity and his/her role in the world. The genre has been strategically "adopted" for a particular purpose by feminist writers and black British literature makes use of it for different reasons, including political ones. "And why run the risk of inflicting yet another Eurocentric body of thought onto postcolonial texts?" (Stein, 2004, p. 23). Black British novels and their ideological contents not only portray but also induce change to bring about newness, which can be gauged when employing the general concept of novels of transformation. The black British novel of transformation, according to Ellen Morgen is "the most salient form of literature influenced by neo-feminism" (Morgen, 1972, p. 183). Some years later, Margaret Butcher argued that the history of the Commonwealth novel is very much a history of female *Bildungsromane*

(Butcher, 1980, p. 254-262). She also argued that the novel of transformation is a central genre in black British literature.

According to Stein (2004, p. 30-33; 95-96), the novel of transformation implies generational conflict; in many cases this is a conflict between a generation that migrated to Britain and one that was born there. It is this distinction between the parental generation's experience of diaspora and the cultural "diaspora-ization" of their descendants, that the generational conflict which is central to the novel of formation can be formalized as a cultural tension between distinct generations for the black British novel of transformation.

The process of formation brings about the construction of an identity and the efficacy of the novel of transformation is directed inward at the protagonists of the texts (Stein, 2004, p. 65). However, the protagonists in Bernardine Evaristo's narratives distance themselves from their hometown (London), making it seem distant and strange. It is to this "strange" London that they eventually return, being able to make it their own. These alienation effects[14] allow the protagonists to claim London, to make it their own Evaristo's protagonists/narrators stage a fluid, migratory identity. Their journeys are representative of their quests for self-formation and turning to familial homelands is what motivates them to question the ground on which they stand, the structures which fail to reflect and house their identities symbolically.

Evaristo's novels feature narrators "on the move", staging a migratory and fluid identity. Their journeys are representative of their search, which involves leaving "England" for *a quest of identity*, compelling these narrators/protagonists to question the ground they inhabit. In their refusal of their role as colonial subjects, her protagonists come to question the boundaries they encounter through journeys of self-recognition. These journeys require Evaristo's characters, for instance, to find their place, to cut their groove and to superimpose their map (construction of identity). They also need to find their place in a Britain which is not theirs.

The three narratives analysed travel back in time as if searching for lost origins. Personal history is intertwined with *family* and *collective history*. Separation, exile, and return are three key words which tie in with the quest motif and it is her characters' own efforts which allow them to construct connections and claim affiliations, "recuperating histories" (Stein, 2004, p. 93). The quest for origins in Evaristo's texts does not seek to reestablish a

[14] Alienation effects are directly related to the strategies of annihilation of the being. One can say that eurocentrism has kept invisibilities throughout the last five hundred years, what different critics, such as Abdias do Nascimento (Nascimento, 1980), Sueli Carneiro (Carneiro, 2005), De Souza Santos (De Souza Santos, *et al* 2008) and Myriam Chancy (Chancy, 2020) named epistemicide: the killing of knowledge systems.

mythical Golden Age preceding European conquest and slavery. Her characters live a *diasporic Bildungsroman* which makes them aware of the condition of diaspora and their own specific history. Their journeys entail the genesis of consciousness, and a renewed assuredness in one's historical origin and in one's ability to position oneself and, to construct cultural identities. According to Stuart Hall, identity construction "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Evaristo's characters learn to position themselves in narratives of the past without being overdetermined by them. They also expose themselves to the play of history, culture and power, learning to use these discourses productively.

As already said, Evaristo uses history and memory in her novels what allows her to chart the development of her protagonists, exploring the problems of cultural identity. Their experience of diaspora is constituted by the rift between their location of residence and their location of belonging. Besides, her protagonists are directed to different locations of belonging by their parents, friends, peers and others; undergoing a "process of cultural *diaspora-ization*" (Hall, 1996, p. 188).

1.7 Breaking the mould: the recalibration of the past

"[T]he black diaspora culture currently being articulated in post-colonial Britain is concerned to struggle for different ways to be 'British,'" writes the anthropologist James Clifford (1997, p. 251), and according to him, "to be British and something else is complexly related to Africa and the Americas, to shared histories of enslavement, racist subordination, cultural survival, hybridization, resistance, and political rebellion" (Clifford, 1997, p. 251-252). His definition of the term diaspora gives emphasis to the political nature of diaspora positionalities and stresses the tension between transnational connections on the one hand and struggles to define the local on the other. The diaspora experience is multilocated and transcends the nation space. The three multilocated novels which I am about to discuss bear out such transnational affiliations, having their protagonists draw upon and actively weave a complex web of attachments, seeking also to address a local situation, that of black British, with a wish to redress it.

We will explore the ways in which Bernardine Evaristo's writings repeatedly break the mould and question the label "black British", revealing the inherent restrictions of the term. Evaristo also engages with themes including femininity, sexual identities, and the commodification of identity in the contemporary world. Her work challenges the term "black

British" literature which sets limits to her discussion of race and nationhood. In consonance with Evaristo, the playwright, novelist and critic Jackie Kay, born to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father, suggests that the problem of personal experience makes one aware of the limitations and expectations that black female writers face. Kay demonstrates the problems involved in determining one's own identity as she draws attention to the shifts of power which are included in this definition:

> It's liberating to define yourself if you're the one that's doing the defining but when other people are constantly doing the defining and when all they ever do is define *the Other* in society, the black person, the gay person, the woman, then they assume the white heterosexual man is the norm and everybody else deviates from that. You don't get the likes of Ted Hughes and Andrew Motion being described as white, male, middle class and heterosexual. And if every time they were written about they had to face these terms it would be a pain in the arse for them, so why should I have to put up with it? (Kay, 1994, p. 238, my emphasis)

Kay makes explicit the empowerment of "doing the defining" and she foregrounds the ways in which this is a process that is normally undertaken from an external position. She demonstrates the way in which the entire process is built upon an understanding of "norms", which she identifies as "male, middle class and heterosexual". In this case, anyone who cannot be easily located within this category, "doing the defining" is a process of identifying difference. Kay draws attention to racial categorisation but does not mention regionality or nationality. It is interesting how Bernardine Evaristo's and Jackie Kay's writings call attention to the problematic of nationality and race. As previously mentioned, Evaristo's creative writing discusses femininity, sexuality and racial heritage, confounding easy notions of blackness. Like the novels discussed in this thesis, her book of poems, *Island of Abraham* (Evaristo, 1994b), disrupts notions of race and nationality. The poems feature a series of voyages which locate late twentieth century Britain in terms of international experiences, including history myths. In "Father, My Father", the speaker explores her father's and her Yoruba heritage:

> Your secrets loom like the discovery
> of rare old gems. My inheritance of
> principles, struggle and a story
> to be unravelled like gossamer.
>
> Daddy, I cannot read your eyes
> those brown orbs of Yoruba history, but
> I can study your step, recoup years lost, and search
> into your past with belated enquiry.
> (Evaristo, 1994b, p. 15)

These verses juxtapose the ordinariness of British identity with the wealth of history which lies outside the nation, but has a bearing on it. Like the "rare old gems" of the speaker's family history, this is represented as both an enrichment and a complication of contemporary British identity. In this poem, international history is figured in terms of the speaker's personal response. The verse "I cannot read your eyes" still articulates the divisions in family relationships that here become a more general signifier of the division between the speaker and the Yoruba history that is her heritage. As such, the story of her identity cannot be fully comprehended until it is "unravelled like gossamer" in a reworking of her own genealogy that is constructed upon a very specific sense on race and nation, both of which push the limits of the term "black British" in many ways.

Likewise, racial identities are often featured as part of a wider notion of social otherness and her construction of Britishness is inherently transnational. Like Kay, Evaristo questions the aptness of literary categorisation and refutes easy ways of "doing the defining": "I think that what happens in this country is that people can't see beyond race. If you are a black writer you are deemed to be writing about black subjects and that is generally perceived to be for a black audience" (Evaristo, 1994a, p. 287).

Evaristo highlights the prejudices that a black writer faces from the mainstream and again; she foregrounds the perception that this kind of writing is linked to a single experience of Britain and Britishness. The term black is commonly used in reference to people of African descent, thus circumscribing its context even further. Born from an African descent father, Evaristo has an identity which is much more complex and hybrid than the term black British can adequately reflect.

It is notable how Mark Stein understands the term black British literature. For him, "*black British literature* does not necessarily claim to represent a singular experience" (Stein, 2004, p. 17). While foregrounding a broad understanding of the term that includes the myriad experiences of people living in the black diaspora in the UK, he argues that black British literature is not the limited and limiting category that is so problematic for Evaristo and her contemporaries. For Procter (2006, p. 44), like Stein (2004, p. 17), the term indicates a category of British writers who complicate and undermine the traditional divisions of race, nation and question important notions like "postcolonial transnationalism", and naturally, Evaristo fits into this category. However, as she has repeatedly discussed, the term is much less enabling when it is being applied to her work. She calls attention to the ways in which "racial labelling ghettoizes you" (Evaristo, 1994a, p. 287), and is outspoken in her discussion of the limitations and limiting effect of the imposition of literary labels. For Evaristo, to be

racially determined as a writer carries further implications for her subject matter and her readership. Her contention that this "ghettoizes you" suggests that this mode of identification is not just limiting; it is actually marginalising: "black British" becomes a separate and singular identity, independent of the racial and national determinations that the term implies.

The complication of this "black British" identity through the engagement with histories that occur outside the nation is an important facet of Evaristo's work. She demonstrates the interlocutions between histories and reveals the pasts of British people, particularly those living in a diaspora community, by means of the different journeys her characters undergo.

Paul Gilroy, writing to *The Guardian* in 2013, has argued that within our neo-liberal times, race has become a "way to mark out the boundaries between then and now" to the extent that racism itself appears "anachronistic, nothing more than a flimsy impediment to the machinery of colourless, managerial meritocracy" (Gilroy, 2013). If, as the sociologist suggests, we are increasingly invited to imagine ourselves within a world where race has been banished to history, what is at stake in the restoration and renovation of the past in so many recent writings? Does the emergence of a historical imagination within black British literature since the 1980s represent a form of retreat from the pressing racial politics of an earlier period? Or do the novels of (trans)formation provide a vehicle with which to criticize and establish continuities across what Paul Gilroy suggests are the racialized boundaries between then and now? Or better, do the novels of (trans)formation contest the cultural logic of late neo-liberalism?

1.8 Black women's contemporary fiction and its *avant-garde* technique: the Paratactic Narrative Mode

Black British female writing has been largely concerned with, "but in no sense limited to, social issues, and this writing frequently features urban locations and is marked by innovative uses of spoken forms that reference parental place of origin and black subcultures" affirms Chris Weedon, in "British Black and Asian Writing since 1980" (2016, p. 45). In *Rewriting the Nation* (2011, p. 53-54), Aleks Sierz suggests that black writers not only report language but also mint it. He uses a good metaphor to describe it: their skateboarding linguistic diversity. This stands for the way they employ literary forms in their writing, forms that venture beyond social and historical realism, drawing on fantasy, hallucinatory and

surreal elements, oral traditions and fairy tales to produce urban fiction that includes "dreams, visions, myths and the supernatural". This is the case of Bernardine Evaristo's *Soul Tourists*.

Black British contemporary writing also displays a range of traditional forms, *avant-garde* techniques and linguistic experimentation, which serves as barometers of cultural and political issues and forms of resistance (Weedon, 2016, p. 46). Bernardine Evaristo and many other British-born black writers have traversed more than one genre across their creative careers and have been influential in developing *trans-* or *polygeneric* forms in contemporary literature. Her writing carves out a new space that is simultaneously female and British Black, and that recalls the colonial ancestry she possesses.

Perhaps one of the first questions that comes to the fore as someone goes through some of the black British contemporary writings, such as the ones written by Evaristo, could be about the classificatory paradigm and the *borderless identity* of the text. Emmanuel Adeniyi, Professor of African Diaspora Studies at the Federal University of Ibadan, names it *borderless* because a lot of "confusion can arise leading to whether the text should be read as a book of poetry punctuated by prosaic elements or a prose work laden with poetic properties" (2020, p. 157). Her novels not only raise ontological questions on the canonical modes to which literary texts are often taxonomized but also reveal the presence of a postmodernist *Zeitgeist*[15], projecting "norm shifts known in literary intellectualization as verse fiction, novel-in-verse, fuse fiction, free verse novel, or prose poetry" (Adeniyi, 2020, p. 157). Verse fiction breaks paradigms, because it does not neatly fit into the "poem" or "prose" taxonomy. Catherine Addison says that the genre is "hybrid texts that very openly participate in two ostensible mutually exclusive genres at the same time" (Addison, 2009, p. 539). She states that rather than labelling the genre as being contradictory, it should be viewed as a postmodern fixation that subverts the hidebound literary tradition that frowns at hybridity.

In Evaristo's writings, the verse novel is conceived as an experimental literary form that appreciates *borderlessness* of literary genres and borrows largely from postmodern critical models to (re)define literature so as to make it embrace postmodernist "creative experimentation and innovation" (Barry, 1995, p. 82). This is what James Sire calls "pluralism of perspectives" and "plethora of philosophical possibilities" (Sire, 2004, p. 212), which open literature to new theorizations and/or hermeneutics. Writers such as Oscar Wilde,

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[15] *Zeitgeist* can be used in the discussion of the current moment, a narrow period of time in the past, or a broader period or era. Literature and other media are sometimes said to express the *Zeitgeist* of the time they were created in or of a past period of time. The word is capitalized in its original language, German, and is sometimes capitalized in English (*Zeitgeist*). Source: Dictionary.com unabridged, Random House, Inc. 2023. Accessed in: 09/02/2023.

William Carlos Williams, Margaret Atwood, Derek Walcott and Fred D'Aguiar, among other well-known names, are some of the noticeable literary writers who wrote *prose poetry*. They deployed their fecundity to produce fictions which removed cocooning walls separating the three traditional modes of literature, creating aleatory texts that fused poetic and prosaic elements into one (Cadden, 2011, p. 21).

There is a synergy between postmodernisms and parataxis. The reciprocity is underscored by the use of the stream of consciousness and interior monologues by postmodern writers as narrative techniques to document the interiority of their characters. Although stream of consciousness and interior monologue are modernist narrative techniques, postmodern writers often use them to present the *simulacrum* of their characters' numerous thoughts which flow through their characters' minds without any recourse to grammatical or linguistic correctness. Black British female contemporary writers, such as Bernardine Evaristo, do the same in their narratives. Her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* demonstrates that:

> Sylvester always shows up on first nights, if only for the free booze at the after-party even though a few days ago he accused her of selling out when he cornered her outside Brixton tube station on her way home from rehearsal
> and persuaded her to have a drink with him at the Ritzy where they sat in the upstairs bar surrounded by posters of the independent
> films like *Pink Flamingo*, starring the great drag queen, Divine, *Born in Flames*, *Daughters of the Dust*, *Farewell My Concubine*, Pratibha Parmar's *A Place of Rage* and *Handsworth Songs* by the Black Audio Film Collective
> films that inspired her own aesthetics as a theatre-maker
> although she's never admitted her equally lowbrow tastes to Sylvester, who's too much of a political purist to understand
> such as her addictions to *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, the original series and their recent incarnations
> or *American's Top Model* or *Millionaire Matchmaker* or *Big Brother*
> and the rest…
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 30-31, author's emphasis)

While parataxis is a syntactic and stylistic category in which clauses and phrases are juxtaposed without the use of coordination and subordination elements, postmodernism advocates a change of perspectives and suggests we view things in new ways, since the world's nature we live in is constantly changing. Bernardine Evaristo is fond of using paratactic sentences in her narratives as a means of indicating shifts in the thoughts of her characters or to challenge the totalizing spirit of traditional literary canon. Her continuous attempt to create antihierarchical structures reveal a paratactical mode of writing, pinpointing a certain "missing linearity, causality, coherence, and chronology", as Andrea Kunne states, in "Cultural Identity and Postmodern Writing in Australian Literature" (2006, p. 107). Evaristo's novels depict and consider to a certain extent her intentionality in using the paratactic

narrative technique to "reify her *mulatez*, transnational, and transracial identity, as well as the social evils of racism or white essentialism" (Adeniyi, 2020, p. 159) described in her texts.

Evaristo's paratactic language and narrative mode turns into a functional tool with which she navigates the sinuous trail of thoughts in her mind, creating protagonists who carry the burdens of their repressed pasts and the inaccessibility pasts of their forebears. However, the implications of using paratactic style in her texts reify a hermeneutic cycle which creates a circularity of interpretative processes by enabling reductionisms in which meanings are known through the understanding of their constituent parts.

Being a Creative Writing professor may be one of the tools which contribute to her talent, "a luminous new talent and a writer who has stretched the linguistic elastic of the novel form to the great effect" (Evaristo, 2003). Almost all her novels de-canonize or transgress conventional writing tradition. Her *trans-* or *polygeneric* novels have helped to establish her as a prodigious postmodern writer, whose literary sensibility is largely informed by the desire to push the boundaries and to venture into new territories. Through them, she employs the paratactic narrative technique to foreground the leitmotifs of slavery, racism, borderless identity, spatio-temporal features, and the intertextuality of the narrative. The paratactic postmodern tone of the prose poetry is made clear and prominent with a reference to a period in the chequered history of the Yoruba people, which according to Basil Davidson, suffered the "fate of Columbus"[16] (Davidson, 1994, p. 234), one of the most prolific popular historians of Africa, long before it became trendy.

The African (Yoruba) cosmology, the paratactic elements used in *Lara*, *Soul Tourists*, and *Girl, Woman, Other* and the postmodern spirit that pervades these three novels flicker out in the structure of the texts, rendering subversive works which are against the traditional literary canon. Ester Gendusa corroborates this fact, by noting that it "pursues a twofold aim" which is to "disrupt traditional Western master narratives by giving a voice to minor historical actors who, otherwise, would remain silent" and to "challenge the canonical logocentric literary matrix by interrupting and fragmenting its traditional flux" (Gendusa, 2010, p. 103). She also notes that

> the deliberate choice of writing a verse-novel allows her to break the fixity of Western traditional literary genres whose boundaries thus undergo a productive cross-fertilization. [...] Evaristo's narrative mode inevitably interrogates and questions Western canonical literary tradition and revisits the past in the light of

[16] Davidson's *Fate of Columbus* is an apparent reference to the capture and enslavement of many Yoruba sons and daughters, and a number of able-bodied men and women from other African ethnic groups in the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. For more information about it, see DAVIDSON, Basil. *The Search for Africa: History, Culture, Politics*. London: Random House, 1994.

> what has been displaced or silenced, so as to insert it into an active process of continuous reappraisal: lost voices and previously unwritten stories related to the colonial past – English and otherwise – are thus brought back to life and accorded a new dignified value as historical evidence. (Gendusa, 2010, p. 103)

Apart from the undisguised dominance of postmodern elements, such as historical metafiction, intertextuality, Afrorealism and the others in her texts, another means through which her novels fit into postmodern literary typology is its use of asyndetic and syndetic parataxis. This is what affords Evaristo the opportunity to explore nuances of creative writing to build up a hybrid of poetic and prosaic elements, experimenting with new writing techniques which punctuate her individualism. Her nonlinearity of syntactic and lexical structures disrupts linguistic norms permissible in canonized literature.

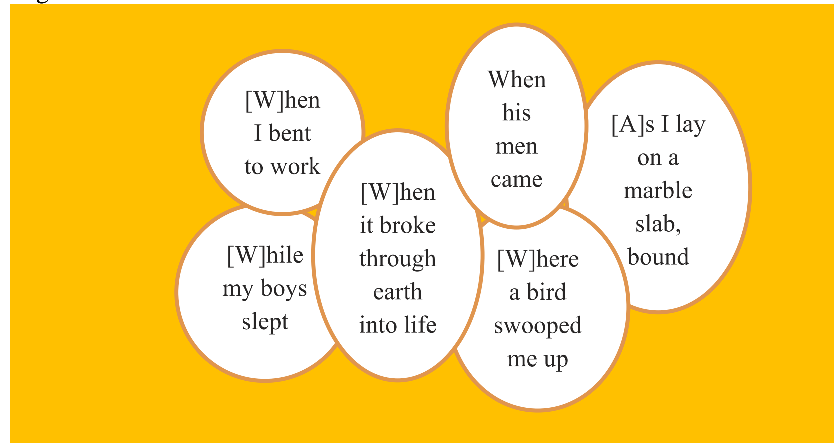
Her interior monologue comprises both independent and dependent clauses which determine the paratactic condition of its narrative mode. The presence of subordinating clauses gives an impression that Evaristo's narrative is also interspersed with hypotactic lines. Breaking them into coordinating, independent clauses, phrases, and sentences will reveal how elements or coordinates are combined in a narrative, leaving readers to use their imagination in the hermeneutics of the story. For example, her monologue is full of independent and subordinate clauses, as shown in the examples extracted from *Lara* (2019 [1997]), in Figures 2 and 3, respectively:

Figure 2 – *Independent clauses*

They took me
I heard my bones jangle like wooden sticks shaking
[I] crept deftly through the warren of cellars into daylight
I imagined vultures clawing my back
My screams ricocheted the walls
I became that bird / circled the fazenda
There he pierced me with a bayonet
Tolulope [is] the scarred
I was carried over the ocean / burst into life/ watched over Baba / he joined us a century after my death
His chamber [is] kept for us women, only
So you have it
I had become the fire of a naked torch / he put me out
My bones had shivered all day / I could barely think
He ejaculated on my ruptured body
Then I jumped a spider
I lived in that tree / grew quickly / saw one of my seeds planted by my stronger son over Antonio's dead body / and so it continued

Source: Evaristo's *Lara* (2019 [1997], p. 17).

Figure 3 – *Subordinate clauses*



Source: Evaristo's *Lara* (2019 [1997], p. 17).

The independent clauses (Figure 2) are paratactic because they are juxtaposed elements which are brought together to form sentences without coordinate conjunctions. Her use of syndetic parataxis is partly to create a sense of urgency and abruptness connected with oral poetry and oral delivery of speeches. Figure 3 demonstrates how a few subordinate clauses are used in the narration. Their presence indicates that the verse novel is partially hypotactic, which means that the temporal, causal, logical and syntactic relations between members and sentences are specified by words (linking devices). Other examples of this technique can also be found in *Soul Tourists* and *Girl, Woman, Other*, as the excerpts below demonstrate:

> A certain Lucy Negro, standing
> in her tumbledown lodgings in Clerken-well,
>
> looking down at the hawkers and dummerers
> whom she knows only too well,
>
> like Eileen 'Evil Eye' Wilson, applying ratsbane
> on to her corpulent chest and flaccid arms,
>
> the better to raise odious sores,
> the better to make herself a pitiful beggar
> (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 60)

> my point is that you are a Nigerian
> no matter how high and mighty you think you are
> no matter how English-English your future husband
> no matter how English-English you yourself pretend to be

> what is more, if you address me as Mother ever again I will beat
> you until you are dripping wet with blood and then I will hang you
> upside down over the balcony with the washing to dry
> I bet your mama
> now and forever
> never forget that, bi?
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 158)

The possible implication of using sparse subordination may be to prioritize clausal information as they pass through the minds of the characters in the verse moments of her hybrid novels. Maybe, "the verse novel, in another perspective, projects the inner promptings and serve as a release of pen-up wounds, pains, and frustrations housed in the unconscious of Evaristo", comments Emmanuel Adeniyi. And he goes on saying that the aboutness of her frustrations reifies "her angst against the negative valence of transatlantic enslavement, and the absurdity of race tension in Britain in the 70s" (Adeniyi, 2020, p. 163). This can also be the thread of a postmodern parameter of historiographical metafiction which helps to weave the narrative together, emphasizing the historical actuality and fictive status of both *Lara* and *Soul Tourists*. According to Linda Hutcheon, historiographical metafiction is "fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past" (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 3). She further says that historiographical metafiction relates to historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. Her position about this postmodern model is that writers of fiction often resort to history, using it as a raw material in their creative writings. Hayden White argues that

> [h]istory is one of the 'others' of literature inasmuch as literature is understood to be identifiable with fiction. Because history wishes to make true statements about the real world, not an imaginary or illusory world. Secondly, history is literature's other inasmuch as literature is understood to be identifiable with figuration, figurative language, and metaphor, rather than with literal speech, unambiguous assertion, and free or poetic (rather than bound) utterance. […] literature – in the modern period – has regarded history not so much as its other as, rather, its complement in the work of identifying and mapping a shared object of interest, a real world which presents itself to reflection under so many different aspects that all of the resources of language – rhetorical, poetical, and symbolic – must be utilized to do it justice. (White, 2006, p. 25)

Histories of autobiography locate individual autobiographies within historical epochs and their thematic concerns which are tied to the historicization of the ontology of the subject. This idea has a straight connection with the *misty area* in which the auto/biographical forms and the black British novels of (trans)formation delineate their borders.

1.9 Final considerations on Bernardine Evaristo's *trans-* or *polygeneric* novels

Evaristo's *trans-* or *polygeneric* novels reject cohesion as a proof of their deliberate transgression of the conventional literary canon. Her texts enrich postmodern literature through their paratactic narrative mode, just as they help to extend the frontiers of postmodern literature by encouraging creativity in literary writing. It is needed to be pointed out that some of the areas in which postmodern critical theory has ruptured literature are in the emergence of the *verse novel genre* and *the paratactic narrative style* of some postmodern writers.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979, p. 27-36), Jean-François Lyotard's observation about traditional literature losing its functions is opposite. Traditional literature is experiencing seismic shifts in narratology, content, structure, and form. An evidence of this change can be seen in the fast pace with which the prose poetry genre is gaining recognition among Western literary writers.

Bernardine Evaristo is a *quintessential* black British female contemporary writer who is fascinated by the use of short, rhythmic lines. She often privileges paratactic over hypotactic constructions, because it gives her liberty to express her mind without having to create sequential plot structures, rounded characters, or even generate conflict and tension, climax and resolution. She experiments with a creative template which allows shifting points of view, circularity or randomness of plot, using paratactic imaginative language that draws attention away from prosaic elements of plot, theme, point of views to its self-reflexive, self-conscious metafictional linguistic structures. Patricia Waugh, in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Consciousness Fiction* (1984), writes that postmodern texts do not "imitate or represent the world but always imitate or represent the discourses which in turn construct that world" (Waugh, 1984, p. 100).

To a large extent, parataxis provides a good template of the world (re)construction, discussing the (im)possibilities of return to those silenced pasts that the black British female contemporary writers interrogate in order to understand the forgotten realities of their diasporic historical trajectories. Bernardine Evaristo shares with her readers the image of *borderlessness* narratives by blending prosaic and poetic elements together in order to present a narratology which requires fecund imagination for a deep and insightful hermeneutics.

2 *LARA*: THE CARTOGRAPHY OF A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

Odo Nnyew Fie Kwan[17]

Oh Lord Take Me Home

Bernardine Evaristo[18]

Twenty-first century black British literature is witnessing a fertile intermingling of tradition and experimentation. While claiming innovation, some contemporary writers seem to play safe by adhering to the reassuring British literary canon. By contrast, there is Bernardine Evaristo, who adopts an unconventional approach to the politics of form and content in her novels. *Lara* (2019 [1997]), for instance, dismantles well-established narrative structures, placing itself critically in relation to the Western canon.

The novel, written in verse, revolves around a mixed-race girl growing up in 1970s Britain, tracing her family history across three continents and two centuries, from Brazil and Nigeria to England. Like Evaristo, Lara is the daughter of a white English mother and a black Nigerian father, growing up in an intolerant society that condemns her for her *difference*. The hybrid aspect is even more complex and multilayered. Her mother's family has nineteenth century roots in both Ireland and Germany and her marriage to a black man puts at risk the upward mobility the family has so long striven for. Lara's father's heritage is also multiple. Taiwo da Costa descends from freed Yoruba slaves in Brazil, who relocated to South Africa. He is raised in the best of English culture and studies at the Imperial College in London. In a sense, he is more English than the English.

Lara's quest takes her on a long journey to her father's and her own roots. She embarks on a voyage of discovery, a voyage that takes her not only to Africa, but also into the regions of Brazil. Her voyage is not only a discovery but also a charting of roots. She seeks to clarify for herself how she relates to her Brazilian and African family history in a journey

[17] This is an Akan Proverb, which means "Love does not lose its way home".

[18] EVARISTO, Bernardine. *Blonde Roots*. London: Penguin Random House, 2020 [2008].

punctuated by the (im)possibility of return and by the dangers of *hybridization*. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986 [1952]), Frantz Fanon writes that

> [t]he Negro, however sincere, is the slave of the past. None the less I am a man. […] In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognised Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future. […] Have I no other purpose on earth, then, but to avenge the Negro of the seventeenth century. […] My life should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values. […] *I am not a prisoner of history*. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. *In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself* […]. (Fanon, 1986 [1952], p. 225-231, my emphasis)

Charting his own future, Fanon gives emphasis to the tension between the desire for restoration and the revenge of the past. At the same time, he posits the non-essentialized human being; black man or white man are seen not as essential characteristics but as created constructions.

Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* shows a wandering protagonist, whose travels evoke the history of the European conquest of South America and the colonization of Africa, calling attention to the forced dislocation of peoples induced by these imperial enterprises. Lara travels backward in time, symbolically reversing the history of her ancestors while retelling it. She returns to Africa before turning to Brazil. Her ancestors sought to travel across the Atlantic in the opposite direction and because they were born in Brazil, they looked for returning to West Africa.

While in South America, Lara works her way upriver to the countryside in the Brazilian rainforest, exploring the limits of her own history and consciousness. Here, Paul Gilroy makes use of the concept of *double consciousness* (1993a, p. 1) created by Du Bois in his autoethnographic work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, p. 1-2). This idea comes to my mind as Lara succeeds in claiming personal and collective pasts and in giving new meaning to her present. She develops from being enthralled by the past to being in a position where the lyrical I is strong enough to be the author of herself. At the end of the narrative, Lara arrives at a crucial understanding of her creative process, vowing to paint the "Daddy People" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 188) out of her thoughts, freeing herself of a recurring "dream".

> I am baptised, resolved to paint slavery out of me,
> The Daddy People onto canvas with colour-rich strokes.
>
> Their songs will guide me in sweaty dreams at night.
> I savour living in the world, planet of growth, of decay,

> think of my island, the 'Great' Tippexed out of it,
> tiny amid massive floating continents, the African one
>
> an embryo within me. I will wing back to Nigeria
> again and again, excitedly swoop over a zigzag
>
> of amber lights signalling the higgledy energy of Lagos.
> It is time to leave.
>
> Back to London, across international time zones.
> I step out of Heathrow and into my future.
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 187-188)

In line with Fanon's thinking, Lara is now determined to work through the memory of slavery, not only acknowledging but also leaving behind ancestral historical experiences. Her journeys to meet her ancestors lead her to (dis)identify herself from them and to emphasize her difference. There is also power here in realizing that Britain is not the beginning and end of the story. Evaristo is able, in this moment of the narrative, to take account of history, yet also to lay it to rest, as her protagonist is now able to "paint slavery out of [her]" and move "into [her] future". The writer also takes a firm stance towards British history, claiming her protagonist's right to be freed rather than trapped by it. The process of travelling reveals Lara's relationship to the African inheritance in all its flexibility and its (im)possibility of returning. This action enables Evaristo to assert a comfortable place for her protagonist in British society, by means of refusing to credit the validity of the notion of *difference*. Lara's position is one of resounding triumph over the exclusionary British hegemony which once told a young girl a story about how she did not belong.

Lara is an innovative text. Although Evaristo's book is often treated as though it were a novel, she "employed blank verse in her prose poem and the layout, comprising an index of first lines, is that of poetry" (Stein, 2004, p. 81). She also approaches "theoretical, narrative or aesthetic paradigms which situate a closedness of received or given structures, and specifically accentuates a desire to transcend the limits of them", writes Leila Kamali, in "Awakening to the Singing: Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*" (2020, p. 219). Evaristo's narrative epitomizes a response to an African American legacy and models a hybrid cultural paradigm which allows for full expression of a *hyphenated* self. *Lara* is written in a ten-syllable line, which is the predominant rhythm of traditional English dramatic and epic poetry. This English verse form, adapted from Greek verse, says something about the hybridity and the cultural debt the so-called pure English form. As Evaristo was an actress, her writing also suffers direct interference from her dramatic tradition, "emphasizing the speaking quality of the text", affirms Kamali (2016, p. 219).

The lyrical form used in *Lara* is well-suited to sharpen Lara's voice to spread her evolving tune, but as in drama, there are lots of voices which either add or incorporate to Lara's story. Stuart Brown, reviewing *Lara* (1999, p. 84), comments that the verses in the novel form "channels and discipline" Evaristo's writing talent. The narrative's flowing rhythm is in accordance with the protagonist's journeys, evoking her moods and experiences. Brown has also celebrated Evaristo's first novel as "enriching the vocabulary of both form and utterance", attributing to it a "multicultural British consciousness" which manifests in new and hybrid aesthetic forms" (Brown, 1999, p. 84).

The narrative is told in a complex manner. It skips in time and space, spanning over one hundred and fifty years of history, together with the protagonist's journeys which are connected to Brazil, Nigeria and England. All the connections which readers need to make from chapter to chapter mirror the bonds which are forged and articulated in the text. While the novel-in-verse narrative recites the links of three continents and generations, it also performs these networked roots.

2.1 The past and its webs

Bernardine Evaristo's fluid dialogism is important because Lara's experience is characterized by a particular discontinuation of speech, a historical amnesia which can be traced to various different historical scenarios of forgetfulness. In *Lara*, Evaristo uses a speaking form of writing as a fluid medium through which common ground can be discovered between cultures, in a manner that suggests their distinctiveness, without insisting upon their difference from each other. This is the "poetics of relation" that Édouard Glissant (1997, p. 142) describes when one comes to know oneself through the relation to the other. Through it, the likelyhood of spirit-possession is established from the possibilities of individual memory itself, and is seen to occur on the African and the English sides of Lara's family, foreshadowing her own later encounter with the "Daddy People" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 188). Lara's relationship with ancestral memory is shown to be constituted by its easily felt presence in her everyday experience, as she is depicted, at a young age:

> Lara kneels, face squashed against the steamy window
> of the playroom, deserted by her siblings who've
>
> tripped, leapt and elbowed down to tea in a whirlwind gallop.
> In the front garden through the blur of splattering rain

> she sees people watching her, young, old, so strange,
> sitting motionless in a semi-circle on the grass,
>
> lips unmoving but eyes alive with singing of a song:
> “Lara kiss, Lara kiss, we love you always, Lara kiss.”
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 103)

Lara understands that her very identity is being made through a communicative connection with her paternal African heritage, as she tells her mother: “Mummy, I saw Daddy People in the garden singing me” (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 103). She observes and realizes that her identity is built up through the discursive, and the potential which can allow for connections with the past. At this very moment, she has an instinctive knowledge of these ancestral spirits, revealed to her in spite of her lack of knowledge of her ancestry. When she “holds her breath, screws her eyes shut then opens” and then, realizes that there is “nothing but bruised grass and a whisper of a tune” (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 103), she understands that a private and unconscious connectedness with a form of memory, which comes to be marginalized or written over, transcends the temporary interruptions that are incurred through individual failures of speech.

In *Speaking in Tongues & Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing* (2014), Mae Henderson claims that “black women writers weave into their work competing and complementary discourses – discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns” (2014, p. 262). Similarly, Evaristo uses narrative itself as a starting point for undoing oppositional binaries. She employs such a process of adjudication so as to make textual links between characters, even as the characters might attempt to escape the dialogic relationship with the past.

In spite of Lara’s determination to distance herself from the past, her English grandmother Peggy is shown, via an allusive figure of language, to remember the voice of Severina, thus dramatizing a perfect fluidity between diverse positions in the novel’s prologue. Peggy’s account of her experience of the Blitz in 1939 reads:

> Thunderous explosions outside made Guy Fawkes Night
>
> Sound like the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party, and I felt as if
> my bones were cracking into pieces like broken crockery.
>
> When the all-clear went I dreaded that No 31 would be
> a pile of bricks, torn wallpaper, bed springs and smoke.
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 55)

This allusion to the quintessentially English figure from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (2000 [1865]) creates an association with Peggy's words recalling Severina's earlier description of her kidnapping: "I heard my bones jangle / like wooden sticks shaking in a bowl" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 17). In *Lara*, relationships which are otherwise inimical can be made meaningful and productive. Besides, Peggy, Lara's grandmother, who is normally so determined to distance herself from the memory of the past, is shown as a child, experiencing a communion with memory that speaks to the form of a *spirit* epitomized by Severina:

> an apparition in front of the front parlour's coal fire,
> come to pull Peggy back to a childhood where Gran
>
> was a shapeless sack of black in front of the hearth:
> black bonnet, rustling skirts, gnarled, brown-spotted
>
> hands knitting blankets. Not talking to anyone – 'living'
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 31)

Lara's both pasts, English and African, are drawn into a powerful dialogic relationship with each other, working to bring together the broad and diasporic family history across its *differences*, "drawing in the most aggressive of narratives, where characters imagine themselves to be altogether different from an African *other*" (Kamali, 2016, p. 222, author's emphasis). Evaristo makes use of fluid verse prose to judge, arbitrate or even to mediate between the most hostile positions. As Peggy and Taiwo meet for the first time, a sense of animosity is depicted in the verses.

> A pyramid of trimmed and quartered sandwiches
>
> Separated Peggy's high-collar from Taiwo's blue-tied
> Adam's apple. Cheddar cheese lay guillotined
>
> on a thin slice of oak tree; exposed lettuce, sliced
> tomatoes and slaughtered carrot were crisis-crossed
>
> with a filigree of Heinz salad cream. Taiwo sipped
> tasteless piss water from a midget's cup, gripped
>
> his back teeth like a pestle grinding corn in a mortar,
> smiled mechanically at the diminutive devil opposite.
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 74)

In this scene, Evaristo is careful to situate Peggy's attitude toward Taiwo. Just as Taiwo seeks to leave his African home behind him, Peggy drives herself toward her goal of escaping the difficulties of her Irish childhood.

When the process of establishing cultural memory occurs in fractured and uneven fashion, the discontinuation of memory is decisive and progressive, so Lara is discouraged by both sides of her family to develop a relationship with her African heritage. Ellen is like Taiwo (Lara's mother and father, respectively). They are the product of a postcolonial diaspora caught in the interstices of the Irish-English relationship.

Dick Hebdige describes the way in which Lara grows up in the 1980s:

> The Thatcher years saw a particular investment in a set of images and myths designed to "put the 'Great' back into Great Britain again" (to quote a 1980s Tory Party campaign slogan). The ideas of British "grit" and rugged island independence, of Britain as a nation of "hardworking, home-loving ordinary people" were regularly invoked to secure popular support for the Thatcherite project of "regressive modernization". (Hebdige, 1996, p. 121)

Ellen and Taiwo are shown to be part of the same British Empire and its postimperial history, that has affected Africans and to a certain extent, the English, "with a sense of the need *to run from the past*" (Kamali, 2016, p. 223, my emphasis). The African cultural memory as an overarching narrative principle makes it clear to the reader that such notions of escape from the past are futile and harmful.

As the novel shows Lara growing up unaware of her family history, she is shown to be powerless to respond to the racist taunts and remarks upon her so-called *difference*:

> '**WHERE'RE'YOU** from, La?' Susie suddenly asked
> one lunch break on the playing fields, 'Woolwich.'
>
> […]
>
> 'My dad says you must be from Jamaica,' Susie insisted.
> 'I'm not Jamaican. I'm English.' / 'Then why are you coloured?'
>
> Lara's heart shuddered, she felt humiliated, so angry.
> 'Look, my father's Nigerian, my mother's English, all right?'
>
> "Oh, so you're half-caste.' Lara tore at the grass in silence.
> 'Where's Nigeria then, is it near Jamaica?' / 'It's in Africa.'
>
> 'Where's Africa exactly?' / 'How should I know, I don't
> Bloody well live there, do I?' / 'Is your Dad from the jungle?'
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 119, author's emphasis)

These examples show cartographic ignorance, about the history of the British Empire, or imperialism, clearly learnt from parental influence. This passage highly contributes to Lara's sense that Britain is a "**HOME**. [She] searched but could not find [her]self" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 123, author's emphasis).

Ester Gendusa (2010, p. 93) argues that *Lara* "subversively intervenes within the traditional circuits via which British national identity is shaped, reproduced and transmitted" and it is located in the "intersection area where feminist critique and postcolonial studies productively conflate". In *Lara*, Evaristo touches the problematic of origins, hybridity and racial issues without one surpassing the other. Besides, it is the narrative focus on Lara's identity crisis that makes her aware that she belongs neither to black nor white society.

Lara grows up in the London of the 1970s and 1980s. It was during this period that the immigration laws of the Commonwealth citizens were tightened. The police adopted harsh repressive measures such as "stop and search" against blacks and other immigrants. Due to this politics, racism casts a shadow over Lara and her family.

Her parent's marriage was considered an unspeakable union. The conversation between Ellen and her mother demonstrates this clearly: "Ellen, you'll not marry him! / Do you think I'm going to let you ruin your life / by marrying a… darkie, a… nigger-man? You silly girl / I have sacrificed *my whole life* for you." (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 69, author's emphasis). Taiwo calls himself Bill, once he believes that African names close doors and says that "they are frightened or angry or cross the road. When we coloured laugh freely they scowl at us" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 21). This shows his *double-consciousness* awareness of related histories and journeys. Racism is shown not only in England but also in Nigeria. Taiwo's mother writes to him that he should marry a Nigerian woman: "So! You choose an England-lady to woo? Eh! Eh! / Son! There are plenty nice Nigerian girls here! Come home soon to look after your poor mama" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 63).

Racism is also an influence which becomes internalized in Lara. She witnesses her father being teased and assailed by racists and this proves a very harsh experience for her. When she objects that "[i]t was bloody embarrassing having a black dad" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 124), it is meaningful that her complaint echoes a racist remark made about herself by her friend's boyfriend: "You never said she was a nig-nog" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 121). The way she rejects having a black dad brings to the fore the traces that a racist society has already left in her. Her growing-up is clearly subject to a whole host of influences, racist ones among others. Lara's assertion can also be read as an indication that she has not yet come to terms with being black in England, once she was given birth into whiteness.

Lara's claim to her Englishness is questioned throughout the novel: her friends, for instance, believe that her skin tone contradicts her citizenship. In a traditional white English school in Woolwich, Southeast London, she does not notice her difference at first, but becomes increasingly self-conscious. Her relationship to her mother Ellen is also inflected by

differences in their bodies, as it becomes clear when Ellen is unable to appreciate Lara's fascination with having a suntan: "'Look, I've a suntan!' / 'Don't be silly dear.' Ellen mumbled, rolling thick pastry" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 114). In fact, Lara wants to be invisible and noticed at the same time. This reveals the desire to be in control of one's representation, of how she is perceived: what becomes noticeable and what remains unseen.

Racism is at the core of Lara's desire to travel, to seek out her origins and to come to terms with the past. It is her need for social and cultural transformation that pushes her into travelling back in time and space as if to reach out her lost and blurred origins.

> **HOME**. I searched but could not find myself.
> Not on the screen, billboards, books, magazines
> and not in the mirror, my demon, my love
> which faded my brownness to a Bardot likeness.
>
> […]
>
> Escape past the lofty Front Room, unused, jumbled, home
> to two broken pianos, a three-legged rocking horse,
> moonshone bay windows, up to three flights
> to the roof where in the silence of the sky, I longed
> for an image, a story, to speak me,
> describe me, birth me whole.
> Living in my skin, I was, but which one?
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 123, author's emphasis)

These lines have to do with representations in all its complexity. Home is seen as "the locus of self-identity, of assured self-knowledge, and of being represented" (Stein, 2004, p. 84). Both gendered and adolescent pressures of looking good, make it even harder for Lara than for her white friends to locate an image which could represent her intact. As this image cannot be retrieved, fragmentation is conveyed in these verses. She longs for feeling unbroken and seeks a rebirth that likens to be represented by an image or a story to speak and describe her entirely.

Lara is aware of the "spicy mix of marinated cultures" she is: "Living in my skin, I was, but which one?" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 123). But what is the meaning of skin here? It means "a dwelling place, a room, a dress; the implication of the plural form is that *there are other skins*, like facets of a personality" (Stein, 2004, p. 84, my emphasis). Stein goes on saying that "[t]he text conveys a nuanced conception of identity as multiply inflected and subject to change" (Stein, 2004, p. 84). Following the concept of the novel of transformation, Evaristo creates a protagonist that tries out different roles, wearing different skins, while she is growing up. She wants both the brownness to fade and to be noticed, not as herself, but to

"a [Brigitte] Bardot likeness" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 123). Lara's alienating experiences of racism together with her pursuit of a story in which to express herself impel her to embark on a voyage of discovery. This is what a novel of transformation is about.

Bernardine Evaristo's novel traces both strands of history of Lara's parents. Since the beginning, the protagonist is interested in her parents' stories. However, her parents do not seem to satisfy her curiosity and that is why she embarks in her quest. To start with, she grows up in a house called *Atlantico*, "no 173 Eglinton Road" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 101), near Woolwich Common. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993a) can be seen here as the text's *arena*. Water is the central metaphor in this novel. From the epigraph which foreshadows the whole narrative: "However far the stream flows, / it never forgets its source" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997]), to her mother's womb that is compared to a sea left behind with grief when the waters break: "I shot into creation as sperm from my father's penis, / slept in my mother's womb for eight months and ten days / then slid out her dilated hole as if on a muddy slide. / My entry to this island was messy, impatient and dramatic". Then, there is her name, which is: "Omalara 'the family are like water'" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 98).

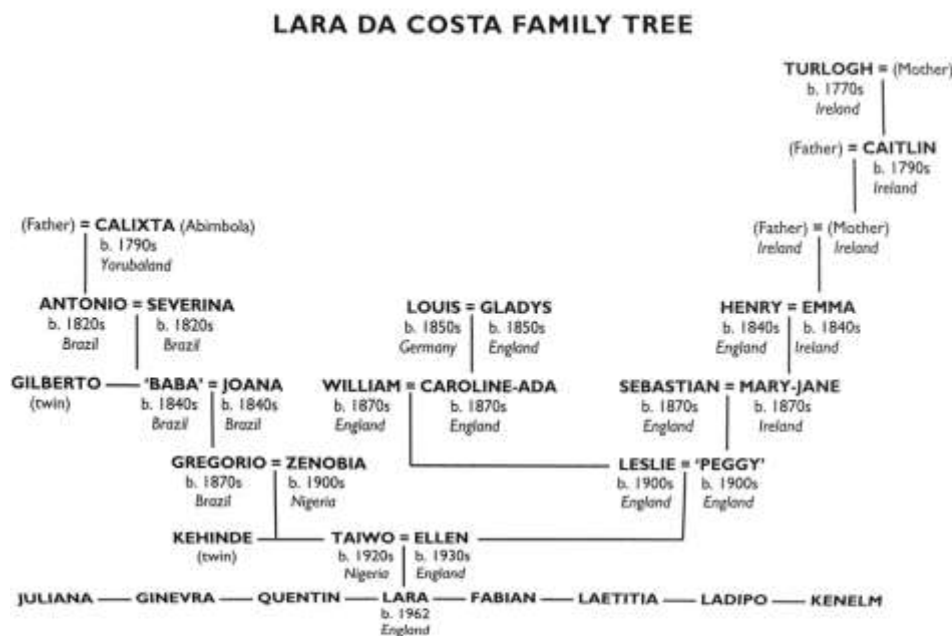
The breaking waters at her birth have conflicting connotations: affiliation and beginning on one hand, severance and ending on the other. Throughout the text, her birth and the cutting of the umbilical cord stand not only for belonging, but also for dislocation, experiences shared by everyone, marking the human condition. Besides that, concurrent states of (un)belonging, association and dissociation are of particular pertinence for Lara. Because she is a mixed-race person, her birth right to live in England is under threat even before her birth. For her, dislocation and alienation are a norm. In the novel, and by her own experience, belonging, location and home are rendered dubious. It is not only her claim to Englishness which is questioned, but also the fact of being Nigerian. Her father says to her: "You would rather be anything than an African" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 135). This is what distinguishes Lara from her father, Taiwo. He equates racism with England, writing to his mother that "Mama, in this country I am coloured. / Back home I was just me." (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 20). It is precisely this experience of being "just me" that seems unobtainable anywhere for Lara.

Alasdair Pettinger, in *Always Elsewhere: Travels of the Black Atlantic* (1998), claims that "the crossing of borders can entail a change in social status and role, and often a change of colour" (Pettinger, 1998, p. xiv-xv). Lara's travels are marked by such shifts and transformations. Like water, she is evolving in flux. She is not one thing: her cultural identity is relational, the principles of constructivism are driven home by her experience. Water

transformation is Omolara's element (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 98); her name designates an affiliation in Yoruba mythology. The waters which separate Europe, Africa, and South America at once connect these continents, the connective medium on which the voyages take place. It is through this triangular route that Lara symbolically lays claim to different parts of her history and ancestry. Stein (2004, p. 86) writes that "[t]he oceans are a realm in their own right, a space in between the continents which *Lara* reinscribes".

One of Lara's ancestors is called Joana, a free black woman who gave birth to Gregorio in Bahia just after slavery had ended in Brazil. For a better understanding of Lara's family tree, see Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 – *Lara da Costa family tree*



Source: Evaristo's *Lara* (2019 [1997]).

The father, Baba, is an *emancipado* who was freed at the death of his master. Baba remembers that in 1862, Salvador, Bahia: "WE WERE EMANCIPADOS, with papers to prove it. […] / and I'd slip to the shore with a free serving girl, Joana," (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 176, author's emphasis). A century before, his ancestors had been sold into slavery. Baba returns and closes a gap, but Joana remains in the New World, opening up a new gap. To her, Bahia is home, whereas Baba has to follow Severina to Lagos from where his grandson Taiwo in turn is to leave for London. Joana claims a home in Brazil, her birthplace, and decides to stay in Bahia, while Baba follows a different route, restoring an earlier condition by "returning" to where he has never been. Baba's choice resembles the options which Lara discovers: she could stay in London, she could visit or return to her parental

origins, or she could (re)turn to London. In fact, Lara has the possibility to travel and to return, while Baba can only return to Africa.

Lara chooses the possibility to travel and return, and this indicates that there is no straightforward *belonging* for her. The multiple *webs* she forges through her voyages do not merge into one larger strand. On the contrary, “they show up the fallacy of notions of original belonging and undoubted origin”, states Stein (2004, p. 88). The complexity of her ancestry and its historical imbrication do not isolate her, they build up the *webs* in which she finds herself trapped into.

2.2 The Thralls of History

Derek Walcott, author of the poem “The Sea is History” (1986), grew up in Saint Lucia, a former Caribbean colony of France and England. Like the colonial history of the island, Walcott had a multi-ethnic background: African, English and Dutch. “The Sea is History” digs into the past and questions the validity that History is the same as tribal memory and only exists when recorded canonically or through monuments. Drawing on references to the Bible, history, and nature, the poet writes about three linked themes. The first theme is the idea of the Bible as a historical document. The second is that the journey of African slaves to the Caribbean has parallels with the journey of the Israelites to the Promised Land. This leads into the third idea: History only exists if memory and events are recorded and accepted as historical. The excerpt below suggests that Caribbean History might be patterned differently from European History.

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
> Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
> in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
> has locked them up. The sea is History.
>
> […]
>
> the lantern of a caravel,
> and that was Genesis.
> Then there were the packed cries,
> the shit, the moaning:
>
> Exodus.
> Bone soldered by coral to bone,
> mosaics
> mantled by the benediction of the shark’s shadow,
>
> that was the Ark of the Covenant.
> (Walcott, 1986, p. 364)

Walcott’s poem contains examples of the remains of many *Middle Passage* deaths as well as Jamaica’s sunken Port Royal[19] and may be associated to Conceição Evaristo’s words when she was interviewed by Maurício Meireles in the *Festa Literária Internacional de Paraty* in 2013: “If there was a monument to the black memory, it must have been built in the depths of the sea, on behalf of all those who perished during the journey”[20] (Evaristo, 2013[21]). Both references recall the sea as a repository of historical material and recollections. This idea can be connected to Lara’s journeys as explorations of History, of her ancestry and also of her own personal memory.

In *Memory in Culture* (2011 [2005]), Astrid Erll argues that “[l]iterature permeates and resonates in memory culture” (2011 [2005], p. 144). She affirms that literature can be both a symbolic form of cultural memory by means of its condensation, narration and genre: the effect of cultural memory rests on “the processes of remembering and forgetting” (Erll, 2011 [2005], p. 145). Condensation involves the compression of several complex ideas, feelings or images into a single and fused object. Narration entails the remembering of past events and experiences. Erll also writes that “[t]he ‘most narrative’ of all our individual memory systems is autobiographical memory. From the mass of disparate lifetime events, we retrospectively select some experiences, and turn them – through the use of narrative structures – into coherent, meaningful life stories” (Erll, 2011 [2005], p. 147).

When it comes to genre, Erll highlights the fact that they are conventionalized formats used to encode events and experiences, which individuals acquire through socialization and enculturation, being an essential component of autobiographical memory (Erll, 2011 [2005], p. 148). She uses the example of the *Bildungsroman* and the *spiritual autobiography*, which provide models of individual development. These genres are also an inherent part of the historical imagination and of a person’s intellectual/social maturation.

Lars Eckstein, in *Remembering the Black Atlantic: On the poetics and politics of literary memory* (2006, p. 10-11), posits the idea that it is hardly possible to address the issue of how personally experienced realities enter the realm of texts without positing the presence of a personal agent who lives through real-life events. This is relevant if the reader tries to

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[19] For more information about Jamaica’s sunken Port Royal, see https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200921-jamaicas-port-royal-the-wickedest-city-on-earth.

[20] In Portuguese: “Se houvesse um monumento à memória negra, deveria ser construído no fundo do mar, em homenagem àqueles que se perderam na travessia”.

[21] All translations, with the exceptions of those included in the bibliographical references, are either mine or my supervisor’s.

understand how factual historical events, such as the Atlantic slave trade and the African diaspora, relate to their material representations or cultural memory. Thus, critics and scholars argue that the postcolonial context and its mnemonic systems of meaning create tensions.

These tensions are clear in Evaristo's *Lara*, when Lara herself has the sensation of a London which is retreating while in fact it is she who is withdrawing: "**DAWN** released London from anonymous night" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 104, author's emphasis). Through such subjectivism it is possible to displace and dislocate the memory of London. It can be not only named and unnamed, but also evoked and revoked. Such a fact plays with memory, facilitating its manipulation and it is also indicative of Lara's agency. "She is less enthralled by London when putting distance between herself and the city, or when she reconsiders her existence there, as this allows her to utilize her newly attained breathing space" (Stein, 2004, p. 88). This retreating London indicates that memory, though immaterial, can in fact be material, and Lara demonstrates her power to reverse memory and work with it, instead of remaining in its thrall.

Salmon Rushdie, in the conference "London: Post-Colonial City" (1999), says that "History is interviews with winners". His idea emphasises the criticized imbalance in the representation of subaltern voices in historiography. His revisionary historiography is only one of the many examples which recall the alternative discourse of the *Subaltern Studies Group* formed by Indian Historian Ranajit Guha. The group, arising in 1980, represents a watershed in postcolonial studies. First used by Guha, the term subaltern stands for a "name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha; Spivak, 1988, p. 35). This group analyses the binary relationship of the subaltern and ruling classes, studying the interplay of dominance and subordination in the colonial system.

Bernardine Evaristo's novel can be read in this context, once it circulates two distinct notions of history and memory, which can be seen as confinement. For Taiwo, memory of his life in Lagos becomes painful after his mother, father and grandfather all died. At this point, "Taiwo's mind backpedals to his mother at the docks" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 62), and he also "did not paint his childhood landscape for Ellen, / did not orate the sequence of births and deaths, her mind / should be kept blank, he decided she need not know" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 65). His need for amnesia turns him into a migrant to the mother country. For Taiwo, London is a place for a new beginning, and he tries to keep it free from his memories, a strategy which will impact upon his daughter Lara: "**MY CHILDREN** will not swim in a

lake of lost dream, / with discipline they will flourish in my new republic." (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 105, author's emphasis).

Lara's journeys through Europe, to Nigeria and to Brazil point out to a desire to reconnect with her ancestors' stories and with her own. If identity construction signifies the process of creating a speaking position, then her journey and her use of memory may be interpreted as such a process. "But this process is not backward-looking for its own sake; rather it is characterized by movement, by flux, and by its calculated recourse of history", affirms Stein (2004, p. 89). Lara hopes that in Salvador "[t]he past is gone, the future means transformation" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 187), and this indicates that she had felt distanced from her history, learning to loosen the thralls of it.

Ironically, all those "former colonial routes are now travelled by postcolonial subjects in a *mythopoetic quest for origins*" (Stein, 2004, p. 89, my emphasis). Lara peregrinates on colonial trade routes through which coffee, sugar, gold and, mainly slaves were once shipped. It is interesting that *Lara*, one of the few books that tell the story of the freed Brazilian slaves returning to Nigeria, can be read as a revisionary project, as its narrative tries to rediscover and remake connections which have been lost in History.

The final leg of Lara's journey, the one before returning to London, is to Brazil's colonial capital, Salvador, once one of the major and largest ports of entry for slaves in South America[22], and on to Manaus, in the north of the country. It is in Salvador that she hopes to come into contact with her past, where "Bahianas in white sizzle acarajé[23] from stools, as if no sea / no history separates them from the traders of Lagos" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 186). Referring back to Derek Walcott's poem (1986, p. 364), one observes that he envisages the Caribbean sea as a receptacle of history where *entries* are kept as in archives. Lara's association of the sea and History, reminiscent of Walcott's poem, is relevant to the protagonist's crossings across time and space. Although the *Bahianas* she meets are inattentive to the History she looks for, the fault lines she is trying to trace cannot be seen from up close; they evade her as she comes close to them.

Being still interested in her family, the *da Costas*, Lara asks the attendant in Salvador: "Any da Costa still around?' […] / 'Of course. Hundreds. Thousands. Hundreds of

[22] It is *The Valongo Wharf* (Portuguese: *Cais do Valongo*), built in 1811, which was the largest port of landing and trading of enslaved Africans in the Americas until 1831. It is an old dock located in the port area of Rio de Janeiro, between the current Coelho e Castro and Sacadura Cabral Streets. During the twenty years of its operation, between 500 thousand and one million slaves landed at Valongo. Brazil received about 4.9 million slaves through the Atlantic trade. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valongo_Wharf. Accessed in: 15/11/2023.

[23] A kind of fried bean cake.

thousands." (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 186). Their presence precisely indicates the history the narrative traces: family history, slavery, and return. In Brazil, *da Costa*, the slavery legacy surname is inscribed by its Portuguese origins, but it does not have the same correspondence in London for Lara. In the final moments of her travels, Lara no longer knows what to seek and because of it, she embarks on a river journey (Stein, 2004, p. 90).

Travelling into the South America hinterland as a literary topos or rhetorical theme goes back to Sir Walter Raleigh[24]. He was the one who first travelled up the Orinoco in 1595 and a second, fatal expedition followed in 1617. Raleigh was attracted by the myth of *El Dorado*. This rhetorical theme is taken up by lots of South American and Caribbean postcolonial writers. Lara partakes of this tradition; she seeks her *El Dorado* in order to understand her *hybridization* or put the pieces together which were once scattered in the Middle Passage. Up the Amazon, she has an epiphany:

> We move on into solitude. My thoughts become free
> of the chaos of the city, uncensored, the river calms me.
>
> I become my parents, my ancestors, my gods. We dock,
> a remote settlement. I stretch my pins, earthed, follow
>
> my singing ears, Catholic hymns hybridised by drums.
> A hilltop church, Indian congregation, holding
>
> palm fronds. It is Palm Sunday. I hum from the door,
> witness to one culture being orchestrated by another.
>
> The past is gone, the future means transformation.
> The boat's horn impatiently calls me. I panic away.
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 187)

Discussing historical memory in *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction: Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris, Édouard Glissant* (1992), Barbara Webb addresses the use of language "[t]o reveal the hidden traces of historical experiences erased from the collective memory of an exploited and oppressed people". She also claims that history can thereby "be reconceived as a future history to be made, *l'historie à faire*[25]" (Webb, 1992, p. 7). Although her book appeared five years before *Lara*'s publication, what Webb says applies to Evaristo's narrative. Lara understands that the future not only means (*trans)formation* but also means

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[24] In 1594, Sir Walter Raleigh heard of a *City of Gold* in South America and sailed to find it, publishing an exaggerated account of his experiences in a book that contributed to the legend of *El Dorado*. After Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, he was again imprisoned in the Tower of London, this time for being involved in the main plot against King James I, who was not favourably disposed towards him. In 1616, he was released to lead a second expedition in search of *El Dorado*. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Raleigh. Accessed in: 26/02/2023.

[25] In English: "history to be made".

(re)connecting with ancestral history. Inasmuch as she manages to reinscribe herself into these histories, and into the history of England too, History also becomes *à faire*.

From Belém, on the mouth of the Amazon, Lara is swallowed up by the river as she travels upward for a fortnight: “I leave the city of passion for the port of Belém, not knowing what to look for anymore. […] I cross the state line into Amazon country at 4 A. M.,” (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 187). She is not terrified at the source of the river she has traced. She does not have a triumphal entry into “Jerusalem”. Instead, Lara undergoes a cathartic transformation. She arrives, she “docks” at a settlement to become parents, ancestors and gods. Her transformation does not end with this return and/or rebirth. Her attention is tuned to a syncretic music which blends Catholic hymns with African drums beaten for an Indian church. She foresees an age characterized not by origin and the past, but by transformation and the future.

The novel’s closing verses, which are sung in Manaus, a city in the north of Brazil, make a clear, deliberate movement toward loosening the thralls of History. They resonate with Evaristo’s latest book, *Manifesto*, published in 2021. It is an autobiographical work, a *memoir* in which she looks at her creativity through the prism of her heritage and life, an intimate and fearless account of how she came to overcome all her obstacles. From a childhood steeped into racism from neighbours and even some white members of her family, to discovering the arts, or literature itself, through her local youth theatre, always on the move between temporary homes, to exploring many romantic partners both toxic and loving ones. In *Manifesto*, Evaristo charts her rebellion against the mainstream and her lifelong commitment to community and creativity. Her life story, like Lara’s, is a *Manifesto* for all the ones who want to make up their history, to go on an identity quest and to understand their *hybridization*:

> As a race, the human one, we all carry our histories of ancestry within us, and I am curious as to how mine helped determine the person and writer I became. I know that I come from generations of people who migrated from one country to another in order to make a better life for themselves, people who married across the artificial constructions of borders and the manmade barriers of culture and race. […] The concept of ‘black British’ was considered a contradiction in terms during my childhood. Brits didn’t recognize people of colour as fellow citizens, and they in turn often aligned themselves with countries of origin. I never had a choice but to consider myself British. This was the country of my birth, my life, even if it was made clear to me that *I didn’t really belong* because I wasn’t white. Yet Nigeria was a faraway concept, a country where my father had originated, about which I knew nothing. […] What I have come to understand is that inequalities of one kind or another will always exist because the human race is tribal and hierarchical, and primarily, historically, patriarchal; and if we choose to advocate for social change, we might as well enjoy the battle. I find activism energizing, productive and

> rewarding, as opposed to whingeing about society's iniquities and waiting for change to happen, which perpetuates a mentality of helplessness. (Evaristo, 2021, p. 5-6, 183-184, my emphasis)

Evaristo expresses a means to an end and a passing phase towards the future which stands for transformation, bringing us to the genre used by black British female contemporary writers: the novels of transformation. As Mark Stein points out, "[n]either erasing memory (which her father attempted) nor wishing to submit herself to memory (as she once did), *Lara frees herself from subscribing to one origin, to one memory, to one history*" (Stein, 2004, p. 91, my emphasis). On the other hand, Lara claims a multitude. In the novel, Evaristo's narrative eventually defies purity, the notion of an uncorrupted source to which a (re)turn may be possible, since histories are inextricably bound up with each other: Bahia-Lagos-London. Lara's journeys have taken her through the past and she has overcome belatedness. The narrative that opened with the scent of "sugar cane" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 17), redolent of the plantation economy, closes with Lara "step[ping] out of Heathrow and into [the] future" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 188).

Fred D'Aguiar, in "Home is always Elsewhere" (2000), explains that "[un]belonging is […] a nervous disposition coupled with a psychic tremulousness or sense of inadequacy in relation to time and space" (D'Aguiar, 2000, p. 199). It is described as loss and captures the problematics of belonging for the black British generations who grew up with experiences of racism in 1970s Britain. He also forges a kind of closeness in the dissimilarity of marginalization and alienation and finds alternatives to belong and to rethink "with whom we may feel that we belong" (Probyn, 2000, p. 35). Bernardine Evaristo articulates this idea of unbelongingness in her novels.

Lara engages with the British-born black generations and their experiences of (un)belonging to the national, racial and generational lines of belonging in the context of the cultural changes in 1970s and late 1980s Britain. The novel explores the effects of unresolved histories of loss, articulating various losses, such as feelings of grief and hurt over racial injustice. Evaristo evokes a kind of melancholia in the narrative or a sentimental journey which explores her engagement with loss. These absences are exemplified when Taiwo receives a letter telling him about his mother's death:

> *A letter arrived this morning from Nigeria.*
> *The sea carried it here. She died May five,*
> *went midday, her last breath, 'Taiwo, Taiwo',*
> *like a mantra she kept calling him, her boy,*
> *she could not get over losing him to England.*

> All gone now – Baba, Papa, Mama, Kehinde.
> How will I survive in this refrigerator?
> I must erase their memory.
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 112, author's emphasis)

Addressing racial melancholia as a complex psychic conflict and ongoing process, Eng and Han, in "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia" (2000), explain such a difficult issue in the context of a cultural idea and "a depathologized structure of feeling" (Eng; Han, 2000, p. 668). They suggest that the melancholic state may not necessarily entail a pathological and passive condition. By examining the relationship between loss and what comes after, they point out how the engagement with loss in melancholia generates sites of memory and history for the rewriting of the past. In *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004), Gilroy argues that the attachments to past greatness have not been worked through and residual elements continue to linger or transform into new forms of racism. He also suggests that critical engagement with colonial and imperial history "represents a store of unlikely connections and complex interpretative resources", offering a better understanding of the "political conflicts which characterize multicultural societies" (Gilroy, 2004, p. 2).

In Evaristo's novels, the idea of (un)belonging figures in her protagonists' negotiations of the ways in which they are positioned by the workings of hegemonic belonging and their own sense. *Lara* questions the term and its "productive" tension, allowing its characters to transform painful experiences of unbelonging into creative counterstrategies. The meaning lies precisely in their melancholic inability to solve cultural and personal conflicts.

In *Lara*, Evaristo explores how her protagonist articulates belonging not only as an issue of personal identity but also of social and cultural invisibility. The idea of a journey as a process of self-formation and resolution of social conflicts is at the core of the black British *Bildungsroman*. Lara, not quite an outsider in the same way as her "migrant" parents, and not directly affected by the experience of migration or diaspora, belongs to a second black British generation. Nevertheless, she is still reminded that she does not fully belong precisely because of her diasporic markers of origins. She goes through a constant crisis of (un)belonging due to the powerful reminders of differences throughout her upbringing. Her school friend's posing the familiar question: "Where're you from?" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 119) is a clear example of a situation which Lara commonly faces. This question suggests that Lara does not belong to "Englishness", which is aligned with whiteness. It also serves as a reminder of her "inauthentic" belonging due to her skin colour, implying that Britain is not her place. Lara's

black skin, pointing back to Nigeria, "demonstrates the general problems of racialized thinking which assumes that race is secure as an origin" (Ahmed, 1999, p. 97).

Evaristo explores the British-born generation's changing relationship to the ancestral homeland of the diaspora. Lara undergoes her imaginary search for roots and a reunification with the African half of her identity: "I'm not black, I'm half-caste, actually" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 128). She knows she does not belong to anywhere, but at the same time to everywhere. Lara knows that she is neither a diaspora's daughter nor a "nationless nomad" (Ifewunigwe, 1999, p. 196).

From diasporic routes to roots in Britain, Bernardine Evaristo explores how the notion of diaspora and Africa as an originary homeland have acquired different meanings over time and generations. As her characters start their journeys in the late 1980s, when fractures appeared within transnational solidarity of *Blackness*, it seems diasporic blackness no longer holds its earlier promise of affiliation and community. To an extent, her characters are privileged subjects who are mobile and can travel to explore their roots, signalling that some of her novels follow the narrative trajectory of the black British *Bildungsroman*. Stein comments that *Lara* has been read as a progressive form of the *Bildungsroman* genre and as a narrative with the potential to bring about "newness" and transformation (Stein, 2004, p. 23), since the idea of a new generation is usually imagined as a symbol of change and promise. Evaristo is careful not to personalize (un)belonging simply as an individual or generational predicament, or to reduce her protagonists' diasporic journeys into simple journeys of self-formation.

The description of Lara's birth as "messy, impatient and dramatic" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 98) may announce her entanglement in both her parents' histories and in the wider histories of race, migration and settlement which complicate her sense of belonging. Lara's father aches with the idea that "in this country I am coloured" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 20). Yet his anger and pain are never expressed, either to his wife or his children. Lara's mother forbids her to talk to her "imaginary" Daddy People. Rather than depicting a simple generational break, the narrative points out to the need to testify to those histories of hurt which account for the Lara's complicated relationship with her pasts and progenitors. In Evaristo's novels, the protagonists' journeys entail a labour of remembrance and productive engagement with the past and its remains.

Bernardine Evaristo's narratives reflect on the unresolved histories of nation, race and empire that still affect the present by constantly going back in time and engaging with it. Her protagonists decide to go on their necessary journeys so as to explore how they are marked by

what they inherit. They revisit histories of loss through metaphorical journeys into memory and the past. It is against racist ideas of origins and boundaries of national belonging that they juxtapose their own provisional “scattered belongings”, affirms Ifewunigwe (1999, p. 204). In this sense, the protagonists’ *navigation of diasporic routes* evoke, according to the British art historian and critic Kobena Mercer, the notion of diaspora as “a reminder and a remainder” of Britain’s unresolved past (Mercer, 1994, p. 7).

Evaristo’s narrative points to many stories still left untold and waiting to be explored; she keeps the past open between the competing notions of remembering and forgetting. In her creative writings, her engagement with the spirits of the past may be read as a stand against the whitewashing of historical memory and the national amnesia. Glissant states that “[t]he past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present” (Glissant, 1989 [1981], p. 63-64). Lara is indeed a melancholic traveller who does not let go of lost stories, memories and histories, and for whom the task of bringing together lost fragments remains unfinished.

Analysing Evaristo’s novels solely as *Bildungsromane* or novels of transformation risks displacing her wider concern with (un)belonging. Her articulation with several losses of ancestral links that affects both migrant and black British generations demonstrates the value of placing her narratives within readings of melancholia. This does not mean that (un)belonging would be resolved if the protagonists were “re-homed” or welcomed into the national embrace.

Evaristo’s narratives open doors for a space for mourning by exposing the residues of past histories of hurt that make belonging contentious for the black British generation. She questions the foundations on which social integration and self-formation are imagined to be achieved. *Lara* may be read both as an individualized narrative of overcoming racial melancholia, and as an attempt to intervene into shifting social processes which continue to produce both racial and national melancholia, thus opening up a critical re-evaluation of unresolved histories of loss towards their meaning in the present.

2. 3 *AfroChristianity*: African and Christian encounters

There is a place for western Christianity in both African American and black British cultures and this has been taken into consideration in the works of many scholars and writers of the postcolonial world. Not only do the *Windrush* third generation writers, such as

Bernardine Evaristo, but also the early black women's writers, such as Phillis Wheatley, do call attention to the survival of the voice of Africanity in literature. This issue would become more submerged in dominant Anglo Christian rhetoric, especially "espoused in spiritual autobiographies", affirms Elizabeth West, in *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory, Community, Nature, and Being* (2011, p. 43). While traditional African rituals and ideologies would remain part of black oral culture, both African American and British writing would portray a world that had given itself over to a Christian cosmology. We can see this manifested in different degrees in the writings of Bernardine Evaristo.

Black women writers have shaped a literary history that reflects African spirituality in black fiction and in it, according to Judylyn Ryan, "[s]pirituality, as depicted in black women's literature […] is recognizably African/Black… [and] its contours are shaped by the core ethical and philosophical values around which several traditions cohere within the African cultural domain" (Ryan, 2005 p. 23). African spirituality in the new world fashioned a worldview that, while informed by pre-Middle Passage cosmology, had to necessarily undergo transformations. These occurred alongside the birth and evolution of African American Christianity. Early in the struggle for freedom, African American and black British writers adopted Christianity in their rhetoric of liberation. This adoption, however, required significant rhetorical negotiations, because it was a doctrine delivered in a discourse that alienated and vilified blackness. "Before the Revolutionary War, Anglo America was shaping a racialized Christian rhetoric which proclaimed the African's subservient relationship to the superior and divinely chosen white race", affirms West (2011, p. 2). Resonating with West's ideas, Mignolo and Walsh write about the rhetoric of modernity and its long-lasting effects:

> Since the Renaissance *the rhetoric of modernity was and continues to be built on the logic of coloniality: the denial and disavowal of non-European local times and spaces and non-European ways of life*. The rhetoric of modernity was built on the opposition between Christians and non-Christians, masculine and feminine, white and nonwhite, progress and stagnation, developed and underdeveloped, First and Second/Third World. (Mignolo; Walsh, 2018, p. 155, author's emphasis)

According to the professor of theology Dwight Nathaniel Hopkins, while the Puritans had come to America to seek religious asylum from Britain's tyranny they sought

> not to break with old Europe, but to bring about the logic and fullest extent of a hegemonic Protestantism and cultural civilization. […] *[T]hose bold pioneers brought the same view of blacks as demonic, evil, inferior, and sinful that their European mother churches had propagated*. […] thus the Pilgrims set in motion a theology – a conscious religious justification – laden with signs of ordained racial hierarchy. (Hopkins, 2000, p. 15, my emphasis)

By the early 1800s, writings of African Americans demonstrated that at least among the literate, blacks identified themselves in biblical terms born out of Anglo racial discourse. Among whites, the Bible became a commonplace reference for justifying colonization and the exploitation of blacks, asserting a racial hierarchy that seated blacks as inferiors. It is ironic to say that in a process which amounted to Africanizing their Christianity, early blacks appropriated Christianity to proclaim their humanity and ultimate divine redemption.

Phillis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (2004 [1773]) shows blacks demonstrating their power of resistance through misrepresented biblical stories:

> 'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
> Taught my benighted soul to understand
> That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
> "Their colour is a diabolic die."
> Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
> May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.
> (Wheatley, 2004 [1773], p. 29)

Wheatley's poem, according to West (2011, p. 4), "is a reminder to whites that blacks are worth of redemption and it undermines both their exclusionary presumptions of divine providence as well as their racialized interpretation of the scripture": "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." Linking blacks to the biblical Cain, Wheatley accepts a myth that had become popular in the eighteenth century Anglo Christian discourse. Proclaiming blacks as descendants from Cain, who was cursed for murdering his brother, Abel, this Anglo Biblical myth maintained that blacks were destined to suffer because they were from the cursed line of Cain. The poet's detractors have been quick to indict her poetry for its presumed silence on slavery and racism.

In the last years of the nineteenth century, the black church had been born and the institutionalization of black Christianity could more readily take root. American's black population was becoming increasingly American born and so was the black British. According to West, "Christianity would emerge in the persisting period as *the dominant religious rhetoric of black written discourse*" (West, 2011, p. 43). It would win out in the public/published discourse on black spirituality, and black British writers would articulate a belief in Christianity predicated on an erasure of their African past.

Increasingly, black British writers published personal accounts on race and slavery, and one of the most utilized literary conventions they adopted was the well-known *conversion*

narrative (West, 2011, p. 43). They integrated this convention into their evolving written tradition to tell their stories and to make the case for their humanity. It must be highlighted that black women writers were particularly drawn to this narrative mode. It is under the presumption of spiritual inspiration that they launched "a literary legacy of voices in search of a language to render African humanity reality" (West, 2011, p. 43). This quest would entail a negotiation with an Anglo Christian discourse that negated blackness, but more often demonized it. Many black British writers responded to this challenge by acquiescing to rhetoric that claimed African religiosity and yet to be civilized.

In the United States, it was not until the surge of civil rights in the 1960s that the black church once again came to the forefront of black activism. The Civil Rights Movement gave rise to a new generation of activists and it gave blacks renewed liberationist momentum. This important movement produced a body of black scholars, men and women, whose explorations of the place of the church in the worldly struggles of African descent people in America and Britain continues to the present. West also notes that these scholars "have turned their attention to the question of how an African-rooted person has influenced the spiritual history of blacks" (West, 2011, p. 6). Thus, recognizing African influence in African American and British cultures as a dynamic defined by transformations, we arrive at a more informed understanding of black culture in Britain, including the understandings of black spirituality and the way black British writers make use of it in their writings.

Many works focusing on traditional African religions have served as the foundation for innumerous studies of African diasporic worldviews. For African peoples, the sacred and the secular are not separate realities. Therefore, African spirituality and its cultural practices are not functionally independent or separate. Mainly when speaking of pre-Middle Passage Africa, one can interchangeably use the terms African spirituality and worldview. For Africans, life is religion and philosophy, expressed in acts and words which are passed on from generation to generation: "Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. *Wherever the African is, there is his religion*" (Mbiti, 1990, p. 2, my emphasis).

Besides the issues of identity and race in Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*, her interesting stance of religion should not be overlooked. In addition to Lara's out-of-body experiences, as in "I saw Daddy People in the garden singing me" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 103), the character's accounts of visitations from the dead further point to Evaristo's belief in the connectedness of the spiritual and the carnal worlds. Just as in traditional African cosmology,

Lara instinctively draws a connectedness between the spirit and the human body as well as the spirit and the natural world. Often in the narrative, Lara reflects on the beauty and awe of nature, finding a spiritual essence in both the animate and inanimate. Such interconnectedness of the spiritual and the natural world is confirmed not only in the transcendence of spirits and humans between these worlds, but it is also evident in nature itself, mainly in the closing verses of the novel when the protagonist proclaims: "I am baptised, resolved to paint slavery out of me, / the Daddy People onto canvas with colour-rich strokes" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 188). Evaristo illustrates early African cosmology emerging from *AfroChristianity*.

Lara has a Catholic inheritance both from her mother Ellen's Irish side and her father Taiwo's Nigerian-South American ancestors. Peggy sends her daughter Ellen to the "pristine convent ladies of Maria Assumpta" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 23). As a result of her religious upbringing, she wants to marry the "Heavenly Bridegroom, / imbued from birth in the sanctity of the Catholic Church, / she worshipped Her Lord in daily prayer, did penance / for man's original sin and her inherent wickedness". As part of the convent teachings, Ellen also desires to be a "teaching missionary enlightening the dark continent". For this reason, as an Assumpta virgin, she buys "black babies from photographs" and pays for their upkeep because "they who were born in the southern wild / (she read) were bereft of light, though their souls were white". The novel's third person narrator ironically adds that Ellen's "divine lover came in the guise of Taiwo / and in His Vivacious Company her heart was elevated / by cherubim and seraphim who thrilled sweetly in her ears / and she was thrilled to be in his Noble Presence" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 24). As a consequence, "Soon, betrothal to The Son was replaced by devotion / to potential husband and dreams of a huge brood / of children so lots of souls could be saved in Heaven" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 25). Ellen points out: "I wanted to help Africa but Africa was brought to me" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 26). Lara's mother's religiosity results in her brood of eight children, which is certainly the cause of strain, fatigue and lower economic means for herself and her family.

In *Fiction Unbound: Bernardine Evaristo* (2011, p. 8), Sebnem Toplu comments that "Evaristo leaves the issue of religion in her ironic attitude in relation to Ellen's religiosity as such and gives a last implication of Catholicism at the symbolic ritual or baptism in the act of Lara's bathing at the waterfall at the Cachoera do Taruma": "When the downpour abates, I head / for the waterfall at Cachoera do Taruma, descend / its slippery slopes, strip off, revitalised by icy cascades. / I am baptised" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 188). Before immersing herself in the waterfall, she discovers a hilltop church and since it is Palm Sunday, she hears "Catholic hymns hybridised by drums. / […] / Indian congregation, holding / palm

fronds" and she "witness[es] to one culture being orchestrated by another" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 187). This passage evokes religious syncretism; therefore, Lara says she is baptised and, ironically adds "resolved to paint slavery out of me" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 188). Water purifies and pacifies Lara's rage symbolically baptizing her. She becomes reconciled with her past and her hybridity. The implication of her Yoruba name and the meaning of water as having a purifying effect indicate that Evaristo does not ignore Lara's Catholic background.

In Bernardine Evaristo's creative writing, we find strategies of discourse that bring to the fore the written and public dismantling of African spirituality. She demonstrates the struggle for the ownership of ideas as well as *ownership of the self*. By means of mingling the African and Christian cosmology, Evaristo was required to relinquish ownership of her beliefs, origins and identities. This fact matches Elizabeth West's ideas when she says that

> [w]hile it may be of little moral consequence whether a people can identify the origins of their beliefs and customs if they are morally upstanding; it is, however, of considerable consequence when the foundations that ground a people are redefined as originating from their oppressors and when those people are in turn told that all that they know as good originates outside themselves. This is the dynamic at work in these early black women's writings. Fundamental African-rooted ideals that informed black life were necessarily reinscribed as Christian and western to be claimed as valid in western discourse. (West, 2011, p. 17)

Consequently, Evaristo struggles to frame such common African ideals as the transformation of the corporeal into the spiritual through death, and the dual gendered nature of the divine into a discourse that would not be identified as African in origin. While blacks were able to keep numerous practices and beliefs from their African past, they could not openly claim ownership. The result, as Elizabeth West explains, "as illustrated in the works of these […] black women writers, is the paradox of affirming oneself in the face of the self-erasing discourse" (West, 2011, p. 18). A discourse which goes against Édouard Glissant, in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (1989 [1981], p. 61), when he writes that

> in certain contemporary situations, while one of the results of global expansion is the presence (and the weight) of an increasingly global historical consciousness, a people can have to confront the problem posed by this consciousness that it feels is "vital", but that it is unable to "bring to light": because the lived circumstances of this daily reality do not form part of a continuum, which means that its relation with its surroundings (what we would call it nature) is in a discontinuous relation to its accumulation of experiences (what we would call it culture). In such a context, history as far it is a discipline and claims to clarify the reality lived by this people, will suffer from a serious epistemological deficiency. (Glissant, 1989 [1981], p. 61)

Bernardine Evaristo is aware of this negative effect of the nonhistory. A concept explained by Glissant as the "dislocation of the continuum", and it is the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb "the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and the explosive forces" (Glissant, 1989 [1981], p. 62) which permeate her protagonists.

Lara can be considered the beginning of a splintered oral/written tradition, also figuring in *Blonde Roots* (Evaristo, 2020 [2008]). In this novel, premised on an ironic racial reversal of the Atlantic slave trade, Evaristo makes a critical engagement with the slave narrative form and highlights its limited and limiting nature. *Blonde Roots* is self-consciously full of narrators and narratives; it contradicts any sense of a fixed historical vision of the Atlantic slavery. Evaristo also disrupts this history in order to demonstrate the myriad ways in which the Atlantic slave trade is relevant to a contemporary context. Although the novel retains the Middle Passage slave trade as its central moment, it is a radical re-vision of its familiar history, and the texts which narrate it. Through these distortions, her novel paradoxically demonstrates both the unreliability of the historical event and the shockwaves that still resound from it, calling into question easy constructions of black British identities which are based on the history of the Colonial Matrix of Power (Mignolo; Walsh, 2018, p. 4-5). *Blonde Roots* challenges the notion of a single history of Atlantic slavery:

> Jane was thirteen. She wept with relief the first time she got to lie down on the shelf and stretch her whole body out. (Little did she know.) A prisoner of war, she had been incarcerated in a fort on the coast for months before being shipped out. Hundreds of slaves had been stuffed into an airless, windowless dungeon. She had expected special treatment on account of her condition – pregnancy. How she prattled on for hours. Maybe her own cabin? A bed? Dress? Basin? Soap? Washrag? Comb? Blanket? Chamber pot? Plate?
>
> Yes, any day now.
>
> Jane had travelled so deeply into fantasy she had lost her way back.
> (Evaristo, 2020 [2008], p. 87)

This passage is shocking in many ways. It highlights the character's youth, her naivety and eventual decline into madness as well as the inhuman conditions under which slaves were kept. The assertion that "Jane had travelled so deeply into fantasy she had lost her way back" also has consequences for the narration of her history, signaling her lack of reliability as a narrator.

Blonde Roots is a polyvocal narrative which counteracts the anonymity of the Middle Passage and draws attention to the myriad experiences of imprisonment and slavery. It explores the ways in which communal and oral histories are constructed and transmitted. In

"*Blonde Roots*, black history: History and the form of the slave narrative in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*" (2012), Katharine Burkitt affirms that "[t]he questioning of the autonomy of black history is a recurrent motif in all Evaristo's works" (Burkitt, 2012, p. 413).

Bernardine Evaristo maintains a clear connection to her African self, revealing the spirit that defines the African worldview. She makes use of the *AfroChristianity* concept in her novels to bring to the fore echoes of Africanity that make their way through the muffling silence imposed by the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality. Her début novel, *Lara*, responds to a hegemonic politics, in which Britishness is equated only with whiteness, and in which British history is regarded as closed and finished. Evaristo excavates the multicultural histories of her own family in ways that accentuate the dialogic quality of language itself.

It is in *Lara* that Evaristo first explores hybridity and cultural dialogism within Britishness, throughout her use of poetic language itself, setting up a dialogue at once intimate and culturally resonant between the diverse strands of her multiethnic family. Regarding biculturalism or multiculturalism, Evaristo calls attention to hyphenated identities that are nothing new in England, a country which absorbed Huguenot[26] elites in the 1680s, long before the term "hyphenated identities" was ever conceived.

In an interview co-edited by Karen McCarthy for the black British issue of *Valparaíso Poetry Review: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (2003), Bernardine Evaristo was asked whether she was tempted to bring Lara "forward in time", once she believes Lara could be herself. She clarifies the issue by saying that

> she is based on me rather than actually being myself. The book is a mixture of fact and fiction, it's semi-autobiographical, a fictionalized family history, so I can't claim that everything Lara is and experiences tallies with my own life. But even so, I've missed out heaps of interesting stuff about my own life. Maybe that will feed into another book some day. For the purposes of the story I wanted to tell in *Lara*, the eponymous Lara's job is done. It begins with her fragile scene of belonging and identity as a mixed race girl/woman, and ends up with her embracing all her selves, no longer divided but multiple. She's travelled all and searched into her family history and returns to England with the realisation that 'this is home'. She's come to a deep understanding of the two sides of her family: the black, white, English, Nigerian, Brazilian, European and she's integrated that and found a sense of peace and completeness. (Evaristo, 2003)

[26] In France during the 16th and 17th centuries the Huguenots were a group of Protestants who followed the teachings of theologian John Calvin. Following persecution in France they fled throughout Europe and beyond; many came to England and became England's first refugees. This passage in history is known as the diaspora of Huguenots. Source: https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/The-Huguenots/. Accessed in: 16/11/2023.

Bringing Lara forward in time would unravel the problem of her identity crisis via (un)belonging issues. This would not make any difference in her lifestyle. Society has remained unchanged in its prejudices. Yet, as Evaristo herself states, Lara's fragile self as a mixed race woman attains a sense of completeness by bringing together her Nigerian and English backgrounds. In *Silêncios Prescritos* (2019, p. 18), Fernanda Miranda observes that "black literature brings discomfort once it deliberately positions the blacks as subject of writing"[27]. Although her assumption was primarily applied to black Brazilian writers, it can also be connected to Stein's novels of transformation. Black British literature, including Evaristo's novels, has a similar effect. One may say that Evaristo, in consonance with writers discussed
by Miranda, is aware that "black literature not only builds up *quilombos*[28] in the discursive order, but always produces a corrosive writing which goes against the so called *casa grande*[29]"[30] (Miranda, 2019, p. 19). Bernardine Evaristo's novels give a new meaning to the word *black*, since she tries to take out all the negative connotation which has been associated with it for centuries, making them "the roots of a cross-cultural history" (Glissant, 1989 [1981], p. 67).

In *Lara*, Evaristo unveils hybridity and cultural dialogism within Britishness through her use of poetic language, establishing a dialogue at once intimate and culturally resonant between the diverse strands of her multiethnic family. *Lara* encapsulates a "hybrid literary form [which] cross [es] boundaries, mix[es] genres, [and] challeng[es] established ways of saying", declares Stewart Brown in a Review for *Wasafiri* (1999, p. 84). Evaristo's use of form corresponds to her uses of imagery, plot and narrative voice to locate a cultural memory of Africa within a proliferation of other cultural memories. Lara is thus enabled to assert her place in a contemporary British society, which is hybrid and polyglot.

Dismissing the role of high-flown theoretical constructs in her expressive process and commenting on Homi Bhabha's work, Bernardine Evaristo remarks that: "hybriditycosmopolitanismculturaltransformationdiscursiveconstructednessauthenticatingiden

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[27] In Portuguese: "a literatura negra causa incômodo e reação porque deliberadamente posiciona o negro como sujeito da escrita".

[28] *Quilombos* are Organized Communities of escaped Africans who lived independently of slavery, usually in the hills.

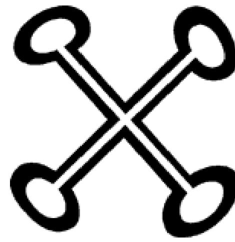
[29] *Casa grande* is the main house or government structure in the colonial system.

[30] In Portuguese: "a literatura negra não apenas cria quilombos na ordem discursiva, ela também produz uma crítica corrosiva às estruturas da casa grande".

titybestowingfunctions – will not be at the back of my mind when writing a poem" (Evaristo, 1999, p. 49). In line with Glissant's description of "[i]dentity as a system of relation" (Glissant, 1997, p. 142), Evaristo's use of language shows a process of changing awareness occurring at the centre of discourse, rather than in some pre-discursive moment that is simply recorded in the text.

Bernardine Evaristo "reveal[s] other ways of knowing that challenge the normative discourse", says Heidi Safia Mirza, in *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (1997). She goes on and identifies her as a "black woman […] see[ing] from the sidelines, from [her] space of unlocation, the unfolding project of domination" (Mirza, 1997, p. 5). Reading *Lara* underscores the key importance of asserting a creolized British space which is mainly *not* alternative, *not* other or *not* Third. It is Evaristo's use of dialogic forms that provides the reader with this specific integration of Blackness into the core of Britishness past and present.

3 *SOUL TOURISTS* ON THE ROAD



Nyame Nnwu Na Mawu[31]

People often ask me where I'm from, even in my own country - I seem to have a whole collection of strange anecdotes of people doing that. I'm going to sit down in a pub on a chair in London and this woman went "You cannae sit in that chair. It's my chair." And me saying to her, "Oh right, you're from Glasgow aren't you?" And she says, "Aye, how did you know that?" And I said, "I'm from Glasgow myself," and she went, "You're not are you? You foreign looking bugger!" So that kind of thing happens a lot, and it happens so often I decided I'd just write a poem about being black and Scottish.

Jackie Kay[32]

Interviewed by Karen Hooper (2006), Bernardine Evaristo gave us an in-depth account of her travels to Brazil and Nigeria to explore her heritage, which inspired her to write *Lara*. She also called attention to the importance of revealing a black presence in England before the 1948 *Windrush* influx, as depicted in her Roman extravaganza *The Emperor's Babe* (2017 [2001]). Her third novel *Soul Tourists* (2020 [2005]) explains the importance of travelling to unveil England's hidden black history through "a journey into the dusty archives of Europe, which uncovers a history of people of colour" (Evaristo, 2006, p. 3).

In both *Lara* and *Soul Tourists*, Evaristo explores the British-born generations changing relationship to the ancestral homeland of the diaspora. When her protagonists attempt to forge links to this homeland, getting closer to Africa (either literally or metaphorically), they feel alienated, as they always do in their British home. When Lara, for instance, undergoes her imaginary search for roots in the African half of her identity in Nigeria, she inquires: "this is the land of my father […] I wonder if I could belong", but the children start shouting "Oyinbo!" at her, which means "Whitey" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p.

[31] This is an Adinkra symbol which stands for God's omnipresence and the perpetual existence of man's spirit. It signifies the immortality of man's soul, believed to be a part of God, because the soul rests with God after death, and it cannot die.

[32] KAY, Jackie. "In My Country". 1993. Source: https://poetryarchive.org/poem/my-country/. Accessed in: 27/03/2023.

156). This means that she does not belong there because of her skin colour, and perhaps also because she is seen as a privileged western traveller who has come to look for her roots.

Soul Tourists' protagonists, Stanley and Jessie, start their journeys in the late 1980's, when rifts appeared within the transnational solidarity of *Blackness*, so it seems that diasporic blackness no longer holds its earlier political promise of affiliation and community. Similar to Lara, Stanley wonders whether to go to Africa. Although his family tree began there, he admits "he knew little of Africa beyond the popular image of starving peasants and corrupt governments" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 153).

Jessie remembers the arrival of the Black Power movement in Britain, reminding her of the slogan "Black is Beautiful" and of her "African culture" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 197). She sadly concludes that she only knows the culture that "wrapped greasy chips in dirty old newspaper / with battered fish and squashed peas" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 198). Jessie, like Stanley, wonders whether "Africa's a continent, not a country, / so which of its cultures, thousands of tribes and languages is [hers], exactly?" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 198). Born in Leeds as one of "the early-born blacks up North. / Before immigration *en masse*" when there was "no fancy Race Relations Department at Council" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 34), and in spite of all her difficult life in children's homes, she is neither really interested to trace her Ghanaian father who was a student in Leeds, nor her African roots.

Stanley's view of Africa meets the assertion by poet and critic Koye Oyedeji "for many of a Black generation born in Britain, knowledge of Africa remains no more than facing The Unexamined River […] across which you can see Africans on the other side" (Oyedeji, 2005, p. 355). Lara, Stanley, and Jessie are highly privileged subjects who are mobile, able to explore their diasporic roots in order to build up their diasporic identities. In *Soul Tourists*, Evaristo opens up a new horizon, in a much closer, and at first unusual locale: Europe.

The narrative dives into a forgotten black European history in a rare attempt to explore belonging primarily to Western Europe by re-imagining and recovering the historical black presence in the old continent. Evaristo calls attention to both Stanley's and Jessie's privileged positions and observations, thus often conflating voyager with voyeur. Throughout Europe, they are able to observe and comment on the presence of immigrant Senegalese men in Spain, historical amnesia in France, or reflect on the history of coffee and sugar as they sit in cafés and *consume* this history.

Interviewed by Sofía Muñoz Valdivieso (2004), Evaristo spoke about the necessity of exploring the roots of Britain, including the black presence in Great Britain. She describes herself confidently as a writer who is black and British. She has developed a special interest in exploring the power relationship between her two cultures of origin in past and present, always questioning the validity of the traditional view, dominant whites and oppressed blacks, for the sake of the current and future generations. Her work fits into the broad cultural context of the third *Windrush* generation, which fancifully reconstructs black history, giving it a positive twist. In her novels, one can see expressions of pride in black cultural achievements, but re-writing history is another far reaching matter. Evaristo accomplishes such a task with her fiction by writing the so-called *revisionist historical novel*. According to Jörg Helbig, this mode of literature deviates from traditional historiography, emphasizing the experiences of people marginalized by the canonical history (Helbig, 1989, p. 392-403). Evaristo, consciously or not, has joined a tradition in women's writing by picking up this mode.

In *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers 1900-2000* (2008 [2005]), Diana Wallace affirms that women writers turned to the historical novel as a favoured genre at the beginning of the twentieth century. Due to the fact they were marginalized by the impressive narratives of historiography, she argues that women have tended to use history for two main purposes: escape or political criticism and intervention:

> A historical setting has frequently been used by women writers [...] as a way of writing about subjects which would otherwise be taboo, or of offering a critique of the present through their treatment of the past. Perhaps even more important for women writers has been the way that the historical novel has allowed them to invent or 're-imagine' the unrecorded lives of marginalised and subordinated people, especially women, but also the working classes, Black people, slaves, and colonised people. (Wallace, 2008 [2005], p. 2)

According to what has been discussed, one can assume that Evaristo's writing belongs to the tradition of political criticism. Wallace comments that

> [i]n both 'history' and 'literature' the historical novel has always been regarded as a hybrid, even a 'bastard' form [...]. In the hands of women writers it [i.e. historical narrative] has been further hybridised, cross-fertilising with romance, fantasy, the Gothic, the adventure story and the detective novel. (Wallace, 2008 [2005], p. 3)

Bernardine Evaristo hybridises her revisionist historical narrative by means of mixing it with other genres and of using *the paratactic narrative mode*. She shares some combinations with other writers, with romance and fantasy, while others are of her own invention, with novels which are always *on the road*, with comedy and even love poetry. It

can also be observed that one of the extra spices in her narratives are strong doses of humour and irony.

There is one circumstance which may have worked as an extra stimulus to her free and inventive use of history: a comparative scarcity of records. Slave history, for instance, is at least known in its rough outline via written documents and there is scarce documentation about the life of blacks in Britain before 1948. As a consequence, Evaristo has felt particularly challenged to mix fact and fiction in her rewritings of history, and she does so in both *Lara* and *Soul Tourists*, replacing the traditional linear narration with experimental narrative techniques. The passage below illustrates this:

> Never seen snow or mountains,
> scorching white or burning cold.
>
> Never seen the scale of them,
> how man's bones could fill with ice,
>
> then, frozen numb, snap off
> like brittle branches, one by one.
>
> I was born Hannibal of Carthage,
> son of Hamilcar 'The Lightning' Barca,
>
> 250 years before your Jesus Christ.
> And it was my life's duty to honour
> (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 176-177)

Her usage of language, the "cheeky mongrel voice" (Muñoz Valdivieso, 2004, p. 17), her own expression, which mixes sociolects and languages from different periods, produces an entertaining hybrid Standard of English, colloquial language, Patois[33], Latin and some other lingoes which fit her stories. The various ways she approaches History may serve as a good introduction to a detailed analysis of her narratives.

Evaristo's innovative style resists the linearity of the historical narrative, questioning the existence of an objective and absolute truth. In "The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact" (2010), the historian and critic Hayden White makes reference to the fictive nature of historical narrative stating that

> [t]he older distinction between fiction and history, in which fiction is conceived as the representation of the imaginable and history as the representation of the actual,

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[33] *Patois* (/ˈpætwɑː/), a vernacular form of English spoken in Jamaica, is a speech or a language that is considered nonstandard, although the term is not formally defined in linguistics. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patois. Accessed in: 18/11/2023.

> must give place to the recognition that we can only know the actual by contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable. (White, 2010, p. 1719)

White's argument appears to align his thinking with that of the literary theorist Roland Barthes, in his essay "The Discourse of History" (1997), which challenges the historian's insistence upon a historical reality. Barthes says that history is a discourse and therefore the assumed objectivity is an illusion. The theorist claims that the absence of the signs of the "I", or "the (illusory) confusion of reference and signified" (Barthes, 1997, p. 121) is what disguises the subjectivity and the unreliability of the truth of the historical narrative. Both theorists Hayden White and Roland Barthes identify an illusory element to the historical narrative and suggest there are as many possible versions of historical events as there are records of those.

Similarly, Bernardine Evaristo recognizes that an ambiguous relationship exists between the representation of histories "in our history books and in our literature" (Evaristo, 2006, p. 10). Her goal to redress the absences of the black person in currently accepted historiographies is aligned with her predominant concern with (re)imagining histories which have disavowed or denied a black presence in Europe. She employs history to portray the realities of life for the mixed-race person in contemporary Britain and at the same time, she exposes a persistent and insidious racism even while problematizing its role as a central issue in *Soul Tourists*.

In the novel, Jessie identifies herself as English despite her mixed-race heritage. When Stanley reacts to the surliness of the young woman serving in the café by muttering "[i]t's because we're black", and Jessie retorts: "You can decide that or you can decide that she's a sad cow and would be that way with anybody" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 43), and "You're just another Englishman, don't kid yourself […] You've spent all your life in England, Stanley, so what does that make you?" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 51). She asks Stanley in response to his statement that "My father always said I was a Jamaican first and foremost" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 51). The novel takes place in the late 1980s, a period of political and social unrest in the United Kingdom when the identity of blackness was being provocatively questioned. Jessie's presence, however, complicates the ideas of national identity and the subjectivity of black Britons of the late twentieth century. She was orphaned and brought up in children's homes and with no knowledge of her mother or Ghanaian father, Jessie is not worried by the racial prejudice which preoccupies Stanley, but by the lack of familial love:

> *Got my own ghouls, Stanley, dear –*
> the nameless mother who shamelessly left me,
> the named father who could have rescued me,
> the son who selfishly deserted me –
>
> getting in my way when I'm walking,
> popping in my head when I'm talking,
> creeping around me, stalking.
> (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 129, author's emphasis)

Jessie's words appear to align Bernardine Evaristo's fictional writing with the thinking of Paul Gilroy and his concept of "conviviality", in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004). The theorist introduces the term to highlight "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere", but he makes sure that "[i]t does not describe an absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance" (Gilroy, 2004, p. xi). By means of displacing and re-assigning the idea of racism to the periphery, Evaristo moves beyond the central concerns of the black British writing of the late decades of the twentieth century and fixes a new fictional space for the contemporary black British writer.

Her narratives have several approaches to History. In *The Emperor's Babe* (2017 [2001]), a novel also in verse, she explores life in Roman Londinium, where in all probability black people from far corners of the Empire constitute part of a multi-cultural population, though there are no records of it. In this extraordinary narrative, Evaristo does not turn History upside down, but simply fills in gaps in a way that is not improbable historically. In her interview with Sofia Muñoz Valdivieso (2004, p. 17), already mentioned, she affirms that the novel articulates an imaginative history of a moment about which the official history has no record.

Soul Tourists can be called *a road novel*, or a novel *on the road*, which is set in 1989, but interspersed with apparitions of black and mixed-race figures from the forgotten European History. Likewise, *Blonde Roots* (2020 [2008]), a novel totally in prose, reverses the factual. Slave history is turned on its head with its slave traders and owners being black, while the slaves are white Europeans. It is interesting to observe in the narrative that cartography is rewritten. Europe, a cold and damp place, lies beneath the Equator, and together with it, the hot and tropical United Kingdom of Ambossa, home of slave owners whose capital is Londolo. Evaristo's experimental narrative approaches to black history go hand in hand with a widening of the geographical scope in which the black presence is traced. In *Soul Tourists*,

the protagonists who are always *on the road* start to understand their hybridization, while they travel to different countries, such as France, Spain, Italy, Turkey, Iraq and Kuwait.

Stanley and Jessie, a modern black British couple in their late thirties, differ in almost all aspects, including their attitude to history. Stanley, son of an Afro-Caribbean immigrant, driven by his father's ambition into a successful career, first in education, then as a City analyst, a "city-slicker-banker-boy" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 39) as he calls himself, meets Jessie, also black, who was "an entertainer, an artiste, even some would say a diva" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 25), and now a barmaid. She persuades Stanley into leaving his job and travelling with her in her old Matilda across Europe, heading to Australia, where she thinks her son lives.

Their love begins passionately but deteriorates during their travels as a consequence of their different outlooks on life. She enjoys the pleasure of moment, while Stanley feels a strong urge to visit and get to know the historical landmarks of European culture. Her reaction to Versailles is: "I'm not interested in dead things or touristic things like great big fuck-off Rococo palaces" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 94). Stanley, on the other hand, is fascinated by "the most spectacular place he had ever visited" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 91). His interest in history is so intense that he has encounters with historical personages, all of them black or mixed-race, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

3.1 *Afrorealism* as a revindication of a symbolic memory

Bernardine Evaristo demonstrates in *Soul Tourists* a polycultural consciousness and a new European or global sensibility. The contemporary black British writings, including Evaristo's, represent a significant shift away from the predominant concerns with the ideas of nation, belonging and race. These issues are traditionally associated with the black British literature of the last decades of the twentieth century. Even while these concerns still figure in the fiction of contemporary writers, they express a determination to create a new fictional space for themselves. Many of the writers belonging to this new generation are predominantly female, and they have employed Magical Realism, Animist Realism and the new concept of *Afrorealism,* an aesthetic-literary aspect or modality typical of African literatures.

In "Transcontinental Shifts: Afroeurope and the Fiction of Bernardine Evaristo" (2011), John MacLeod identifies a "distinctly continental sense of cultural plurality" (MacLeod, 2011, p. 168) in her fiction. According to the professor of postcolonial and diaspora literatures, there is a "significant emergent attention to the space of Europe"

(MacLeod, 2011, p. 169) evident in the writing of the contemporary black British novelist. The appropriation of different realist tropes by black British female writers affords the expression of a twenty-first century multi-ethnic sensibility to create a new fictional space for the contemporary black writer of Britain. MacLeod focuses his analysis of Evaristo's novels to the plot and experimental form but does not discuss the narrative mode.

Despite the pessimism expressed by Maggie Ann Bowers, in *Magic(al) Realism: The New Critical Idiom* (2004), the first decades of the twenty-first century have not experienced the demise of Magical Realism. Her concerns about "the problems […] inherent in its contradictory and multi-perspectival form" (Bowers, 2004, p. 128) seem unfounded, as Magical Realism continues to be popular among writers. However, given the diversity of fictional writing labelled as such, a comprehensive definition of this narrative mode still occupies and eludes literary critics. In *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004), Wendy Faris highlights the difficulty created by the present-day global popularity of the form: "the attempt to define the general characteristics and significance of Magical Realism as a worldwide trend will necessarily involve the neglect of many local particularities" (Faris, 2004, p. 40). It is because of its universality and theoretical non-specificity that the term is often used to represent expanding worlds, a characteristic that attracts the twenty-first century black British (female) writers even though many of them prefer to stay away from the term.

Theoretically, it was the German critic Franz Roh who coined the term Magical Realism in his seminal work *Nach-Expressionismus – Magischer Realismus. Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (1925). Roh's intention was to show that both the expressionist and post-expressionist painters' representation of reality was not depicted in our world, but in an oneiric one. Later on, the critic abandoned his idea because he did not believe in the way his concept emanated: "[s]o if Roh's definition explicitly rules out magic in the religious-psychological sense of ethnology, and yet the defining work of current usage of the term readily incorporates this, it would seem that there is then a contradiction", claims G. S. Evans, in "Magical Realism and its meanings: a not so necessary confusion" (2009, s.p.).

The concept of this kind of Realism should encompass realities in which the notion of "magic" was directly associated with an ethnologic psycho-religious idea. According to Alejo Carpentier, in *O Reino deste Mundo* (2009 [1994]), the magical fact must be taken as "real" (2009 [1994], preface) and this must also bring together all the narrative mode in use. Faith is related to the enunciative *locus* or the author's place of speech as well as the narrator's and the characters'. In *Soul Tourists*, a novel whose starting point is the religious afro-diasporic

thought, wherever Stanley and Jessie encounter African spirits on the road, there is the symbolic animist memory.

In *Lueji: O Nascimento de um império* (1989), Pepetela coined the term Animist Realism. Brenda Cooper (2004) affirms that animist thinking is the bedrock of African reality; writers incorporate spirits and animals to their stories, legends and folklore so as to express their passion, their aesthetic and their politics (Cooper, 2004, p. 4). Differently from the Magical Realism, which has become widely used, Cooper's studies about Animist Realism have not attracted much attention. Still, Kwame Anthony Appiah, in "Spiritual Realism" (1992), writes that

> [m]y own sense is that there is a difference between the ways in which Latin America writers draw on the supernatural and the way that Okri [*Windrush* third generation writer] does: For Okri, in a curious way, the world of spirits is not metaphorical or imaginary; rather, it is more real than the world of the everyday. (Appiah, 1992, p. 147)

What Appiah says of Okri also applies to Evaristo. In *Soul Tourists*, her narrative bases itself on the animist mentality present in her protagonists' African imaginary. Like the Nigerian-born British poet and novelist Ben Okri, Evaristo is particularly difficult to categorize, because her novels intimate that there is something ahistorical or transcendental conferring legitimacy on some truth-claims. Both writers' works suggest an allegiance to Yoruba folklore, magical realism, spiritual realism, and animist thinking. The two writers refuse to label their works as magical realism, claiming that critics often do so out of laziness. Similar to Evaristo, Okri insists that his fiction is often preoccupied with the philosophical conundrum: what is reality?

> I grew up in a tradition where there are simply more dimensions to reality: legends and myths and ancestors and spirits and death [...]. Which brings the question: what is reality? Everyone's reality is different. For different perceptions of reality we need a different language. We like to think that the world is rational and precise and exactly how we see it, but something erupts in our reality which makes us sense that there's more to the fabric of life. I'm fascinated by the mysterious element that runs through our lives. Everyone is looking out of the world through their emotion and history. Nobody has an absolute reality. (Okri, 2011)

Okri's statement that everyone's reality is different and that there are different dimensions to reality resonates with the concept of Animism, which was developed by Georg Ernst Stahl, in 1720 and anthropologically interpreted by Sir Edward B. Tylor, in *Primitive Culture* (2016 [1871]), who defined the term as a general belief that all beings have got a soul.

Animist thinking is an aesthetic literary mode proper from African literatures that considers the narrative *locus* in constant communication with the psycho-religious African thought. Thus, Animist Realism together with an intense political engagement points not only at an African religious culture but also at a socio-political engagement of postcolonial writers. Evaristo makes use of these devices and is in consonance with Harry Garuba's ideas that they

> subvert the authority of Western science by reinscribing the authority of magic within the interstices of the rational/secular/modern. Animist culture thus opens a whole new world of poaching possibilities, *prepossessing the future*, as it were, by laying claim to what in the present is yet to be invented. It is on account of this ability to prepossess the future that continual reenchantment becomes possible. (Garuba, 2003, p. 271, author's emphasis)

From this perspective, not only *Soul Tourists* but also *Lara*, which includes encounters between the protagonist and the "Daddy People" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 103, 188), illustrate several moments based on the Yoruba imaginary and its animist aesthetic. Bernardine Evaristo makes use of the *òrikís*[34] of *òrisás*[35] and the poems of Ifá, a religious *corpus* in which the contact with spirits, ancestry, deities, complex rituals, experiences in parallel worlds all contribute to her narrative mode.

In "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture and Society" (2003), Harry Garuba argues that animism is not a religion, but a philosophic mode to see the world (Garuba, 2003, p. 261-285). He affirms that only Animist Realism explains the African world, highlighting the fact that African people have their own cosmology and their distinctive way of seeing and being. He focuses on the need of a unique African concept which will take the African reality as a core basis for the literary representation of its writers, allowing them a new representation of the African "I" which is a kind of anxiety of postcolonial African literatures.

> Animist realism […] is a much more encompassing concept, of which magical realism may be said to be a subgenre, with its own connecting characteristics and its formal difference. By repetition and difference, magical realism at once signals its dependence on the enabling code of animist discourse and its representational 'realism' and also marks its difference. (Garuba, 2003, p. 274-275)

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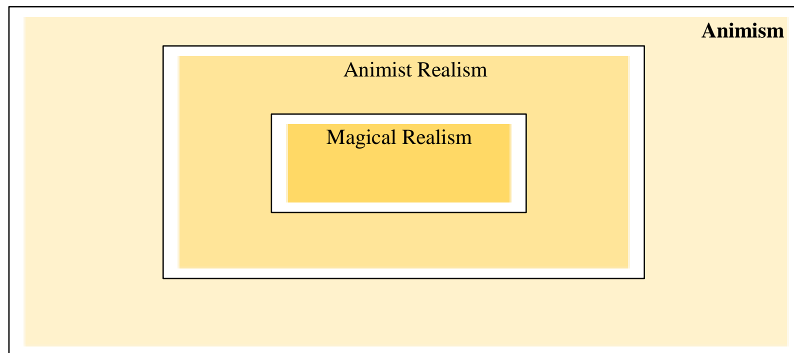
[34] *Òrikí* is an important and cultural, but unwritten (oral) genre of Yoruba literature that is usually used in praise singing. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Or%C3%ADkì. Accessed in: 01/05/2023.

[35] *Òrisás* are spirits that play a key role in the Yoruba religion of West Africa and several religions of the African diaspora that derive from it, such as Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican Santería, Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda. The preferred spelling varies depending on the language in question: *òrisá* is the spelling in the Yoruba language, *orixá* in Portuguese, and *orisha*, *oricha*, *orichá* or *orixá* in Spanish-speaking countries. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orisha. Accessed in: 01/05/2023.

The varied ways which black British writers use these realist tropes are determined by and reflect the differing experiences of the writers' specific cultural heritages and family histories. For a better understanding of these cosmologies, see Figure 5.

Figure 5: *Magical Realism x Animist Realism*



In *Teoria da Literatura. Criatividade e Estrutura* (2007), the assertion by literary critic Francisco Soares that animism works as a mimetic strategy, bringing both historical and social engagement to new models of reading the African reality and the forgotten pasts (Soares, 2007, p. 129-132) certainly applies to Bernardine Evaristo's fiction. The presence of animism in her creative writing is not simply folklore; on the contrary, it is an aesthetic strategy which converges a religious and a traditional philosophical culture into a postcolonial political apparatus.

Evaristo "very often adhere[s] to this animism, incorporate[s] spirits, ancestors […] in order to express [her] passions, [her] *aesthetics* and [her] *politics*" (Cooper, 2004, p. 40, my emphasis). Her interests and concerns in re-visiting European histories to address the truth of the black presence turns her fictional writings into well-documented texts. Her unconventional and innovative narrative mode constitutes an essential element of her novels' writing. As MacLeod remarks, "The form of Evaristo's novels needs to be understood as […] part of a wider literary project to break beyond the conventional parameters of black British writing and its predominant critical modes" (2011, p. 173). Evaristo's reinvention of the novel form represents a moving forward from the received definitions of black British writing of the final decades of the twentieth century, together with its predominant worries with race and prejudice. She does challenge the conventional boundaries between verse and prose, and she chooses to write her narratives as a novel-in-verse or prose interjected with passages of verse, suggesting a resistance to the limitations, both actual and metaphorical, of late twentieth century black British writing. It is notable the way she refuses to distinguish

between the literary forms which reflect the blurring of cultural boundaries experienced by the mixed race individual. The challenge to traditional boundaries suggests that an innovative form is necessary to represent a new British identity, allowing for a "shift in focus from the national to the continental, from Britain to Europe" (MacLeod, 2011, p. 175). Still according to MacLeod, her use of Animist Realism and its capacity to portray expanding worlds and fluid identities contribute to "the evolution of a distinctly European rather that British consciousness in black writing of Britain, [re-imagining] histories from the perspective of a new European consciousness" (2011, p. 169). The exemplary use of animist realist devices in *Soul Tourists* does make the novel quite innovative. Stanley's dreamlike visitations by the spirits of black characters from European histories are identified as not being dreams or hallucinations. He recalls that it was his mother Pearline "who told me I'd inherited The Gift, passed down through generations of her mother's family" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 4), and travelling through Europe he wonders "Was Versailles visited by the spirits his mother had seen?" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 95).

Since Magical Realism is not sufficient to deal with the animist thinking that was brought with the African diaspora to both Americas and Europe, the Costa Rican professor and researcher Quince Duncan, in his article *El Afrorrealismo. Una Dimensión Nueva de la Literatura Latinoamericana* (2006), highlights the main influences of this African cosmology into the Americas, which can also be extended to the third generation of black British writers. This new mode of decoding reality is called Afrorealism:

> The term Afrorealism is justified because this literary movement does not use the traditional references of main stream literature [...]. It is not magical realism. It is a new expression, which carries out an Africanizing subversion of the language, resorting to unpublished or until now marginal mythical references, such as *el Muntu*[36], *el Samanfo*[37], *el Ebeyiye*[38], the vindication of deities […], is the vindication of the symbolic African memory. (Duncan, 2006, s.d.)[39]

Evaristo's use of this African cosmology engages with contemporary challenges to the notion of history, contributing to the different views of Stanley's and Jessie's experiences

[36] Bantu animist philosophy.

[37] Akan animist religion.

[38] Hana religious practice.

[39] In Spanish: "El término *afrorrealismo* se justifica porque esta corriente literária no utiliza los referentes tradicionales de la literatura del main stream [...]. No es realism mágico. Es una nueva expresión, que realiza una subversion africanizante del idioma, recurriendo a referentes míticos inéditos o hasta ahora marginales, tales como *el Muntu*, *el Samanfo*, *el Ebeyiye,* la reivindicación de las deidades [...] es la reivindicación de la memoria simbólica africana."

during their journey. Evaristo's fragmented narrative reflects the temporal indeterminacy that is created by the spiritual manifestations and seems to align her writing with Bhabha's concept of the "time-lag of postcolonial modernity" which "moves forward" while simultaneously "[keeping] alive the making of the past" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 363-364).

The notion of the delay (time-lag) which subverts the linear chronology of history is represented by Stanley's realisation that "[a]s he explored the past, he became aware that the past was exploring him too, in his own spooky way. Life on earth was just the beginning, he now understood" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 155). When he was visited by the spirit of Hannibal, he understood that "history ceased to exist. We were in the same place. We were in the same time" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 180).

If Evaristo's manipulation of this mode and its characteristic temporal indeterminacy aligns her fiction with the idea of time-lag, it is possible to consider her narrative writing in relation to Bhabha's Third Space. For him, "[t]he third space is a challenge to the limits of the self in the act of reaching out what is liminal in the historic experience, and in the cultural representation of other peoples, times, languages and texts" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). According to Bhabha, "[t]hese 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). Evaristo's animist realist re-imagining of histories creates a disjunction between past and present, a metaphorical location that is "neither the one nor the other" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 53). Without any doubts, Bernardine Evaristo acknowledges her interest in history: "there are connections to be made with black European history that have not yet been made in our history books and in our literature […] and this is what interests me" (Evaristo, 2006, p. 10).

Not all figures that Stanley encounters in his journey are well known or have left their mark in history, including Louise Marie, probably the daughter of Marie-Thérèse, wife of Louis XIV and her favourite black dwarf Nabo; a forgotten Médici, Alessandro Duke of Florence; mad King George III's wife Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, whose "swarthy complexion" raises suspicions that she was product of marital infidelity (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 287). Above all, it is highly impressive Stanley's encounters with personages who really made some important contributions to European culture, such as Joseph Boulogne and the Moor Zyryab. Stanley also meets and receives advice from Hannibal and Mary Seacole. She is famous for nursing the wounded during the Crimean War and being treated as a rival by even more famous Florence Nightingale. Stanley also has conversations with Pushkin and his great-grandfather.

But what is the meaning of this *danse macabre*[40] involving all these black people from different European countries and times? They are all certainly part of Stanley's journey to himself and his identity formation. He learns that he is not an outsider and he understands that he belongs to a European culture in which so many black people have contributed. The cultural contributions of people of colour to European history are celebrated in *Soul Tourists*, whose narrative reveals the silences imposed on them.

> Was he, Stanley, really an outsider? Maybe you didn't have to blend in or be accepted to belong. You belonged because you made the decision to and if you truly believed it no one could knock it out of you. These visitations came from inside history, turning its skin inside out and writing a new history upon it with a bone shaved down to a quill dripped in the ink of blood. Europe was not as it seemed, Stanley decided, and for him at least, Europe would never be the same again. (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 189)

Historical novels have become one of the most prominent genres of women writers in the twentieth century. In *Soul Tourists*, there are two aspects that point to Evaristo's gendered treatment of history. Firstly, there is the choice of protagonists. All main characters, with the exception of Stanley, are women, who are all strong, resilient, sexy and high spirited. Secondly, there is Evaristo's treatment of time. It is clearly noticed that she deals with different time levels in a most unrestrained manner, mixing periods or inventing ahistorical timeframes, always with the intention to make connections to the present. Rather than giving a linear account of the history of blacks in Europe, Evaristo presents it as an integrated temporality. This is in accordance with what Julia Kristeva wrote in "Women's Time" (1986 [1979]). Kristeva states that contrary to the male conception of time as "departure, progression and arrival – in other words the (linear) time of history", women perceive time either as a cyclical repetition or as "the massive presence of a monumental temporality" (Kristeva, 1986 [1979], p. 191-192).

The pleasure of reading *Soul Tourists* consists in the sensual mediation of the atmosphere of various imagined spots in various times, and this is owed to the perception of Evaristo's character's regarding spaces, which is not only physical, but also spectral. Stanley does not begin his journey with the intention of finding spirits, despite his mother's, Pearline, reference to this "gift", which suggests he is "wonderfully susceptible" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 287) to the spectral. His first spiritual experience happens only after he opened

[40] According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the *dance macabre* was a literary or pictorial representation of a procession or dance of both living and dead figures expressing the medieval allegorical concept of the all-conquering and equalizing power of death. Source: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/danse%20macabre. Accessed in: 10/04/2023.

himself up to a relationship with Jessie, outside the confines of his sterile life as a London banker. What is of high interest now is the temporal layering created by the hauntological imaginary. According to Westphal's assertion that "if […] any human space, were a megabook or a palimpsest consisting of layers of spatialized time" (Westphal, 2011 [2007], p. 165), one can read Stanley's encounters as a process of temporal "layering", which shifts our special conception of Europe as a palimpsest.

Stanley's first encounter is with Lucy Negro, a former slave and Clerkenwell worker thought to be the muse for the one who "[n]o one understands […]. He is always having to prove himself. Because he is the son of an illiterate glove-maker. The upstart playwright who didn't go to university" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 64). This intertext is created when Stanley eavesdrops on a conversation between Lucy and a "dreamy-eyed poet" named William that starts to recite the opening lines of sonnet number 130:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
> (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 65)

Some historical facts about Lucy's presence in England permeate the narrative. Stanley passively witnesses the interaction between his first spirits. He is caught by surprise by his ability to enter their thoughts. However, he is not just a spectator in his next spiritual encounter with Louise Marie-Thérèse, daughter of the Queen of France, wife of Louis XIV, and "pretty Negro page" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 98) Nabo. Marie-Thérèse approaches Stanley and addresses him: "It is where I like to dream / Of Mother and the African dwarf Nabo - / Rumour had it, he was my father" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 92). This helps the reader to be transported to the site of Marie-Thérèse's conception, due to being both a temporal and narrative shift. We go into Nabo's thoughts as he hides under the bed listening as the King pays a conjugal visit to his wife.

Nabo muses about his life as the queen's sexual plaything, remarking that he has once again escaped being put to death by hiding from the king in time. One can learn that, "alas, *alors,*" the queen falls pregnant and gives birth to a baby that has everyone gasping: "*Métisse*!" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 99); the child is confined to a nunnery for life and Nabo is "extinguished from *l'histoire*" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 99). I relate this part to Gordon's definition of the spirit as "not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life"

(Gordon, 2008, p. 80). Here, Nabo is silenced and the secrecy surrounding the existence of Marie-Thérèse designates a site from which to launch the "official inquiry" into the historical invisibility of African history in Europe.

The conception of blackness and African ancestry encompasses the diversity of Stanley's spiritual encounters with black, bi-racial North-African figures, including those who have been once silenced from history. Stanley meets Joseph Boulogne, the son of a French nobleman and a freed Senegalese slave, who insists that his story "must begin with my islands Guadeloupe" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 115). He reveals how leading singers refused to be "subjected to orders from a mulatto" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 129) when Louis XVI asked him to direct an opera. These encounters are always unexpected. Then, I recall Derrida's assertion: "[A] spectre is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back" (Derrida, 2006 [1993], p. 11).

Stanley and Jessie's car, Matilda, gets stuck on a snowy road in the Alps, and they are saved by Hannibal the Great, the Carthaginian general who was considered to be one of the great military leaders in all history. This is a watershed for Stanley in the evolution of his affinity with the spiritual world, together with his growing distance from Jessie. He tries to explain this interaction to her, but in vain: "We were in the same place. We were in the same time" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 180), but Jessie chooses to confine her understanding of this moment to the concrete, physical world. Stanley's description through the notion that spiritual encounters happen is in accordance with Mark Fisher, in "Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures" (2012), when Fisher writes that "a place is stained by time, [and that] a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time" (Fisher, 2012, p. 19). Hannibal's help is what transcends the separation between the invisible and the visible, or the physical and spiritual realms, as a resistance to homogenized time and space. Consequently, this layering of space and time resists homogenized histories of Europe as a historically homogenous space.

In "Lifting the Cloak of (in)Visibility: A Writer's Perspective" (2013), Véronique Tadjo affirms that Stanley becomes attuned to "forces […] operating in the world of the dead, invisible to the eye but still active. In this sense, the visible world of the living is closely connected to the invisible world of the dead" (Tadjo, 2013, p. 2). Thus, he builds a stronger bridge to the spiritual realm. It is clear that after the incident with Hannibal, Stanley shifts into the role of an archaeologist, perhaps mirroring Evaristo's own process as a writer, who is in constant search for "ghosts" from the past.

As a self-proclaimed "soul tourist" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 187), Stanley is elated "[w]hen someone began to speak into his right ear, though there was no sensation of a body beside him" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 155). Once he develops his skills in speaking with spirits, he dives into the stories of his interlocutors, mainly Alessandro de Médici, who describes the resistance to his being named Duke of Florence: "Why should it be him that muulaatoooo bastardooo?" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 188). Then comes Mary Seacole, the Jamaican nurse who set up the "British Hotel" during the Crimean War, who comments that *Punch*[41] magazine described her as "That berry-brown face, with a kind hearts trace" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 227) in a tribute to her work on the warfront.

Evaristo stages some of Stanley's encounters outside European boundaries, stretching the continent's geographical space north to Russia and south through Turkey and the Middle East, through the encounter with Abram (Ibrahim) Petrovich Hannibal, who was sold into slavery and brought as a servant to Czar Peter and his grandson Alexander Pushkin, who wrote the book *The Negro of Peter the Great* in 1827 to honour his black ancestor (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 236). The European cartography is depicted as a historically permeable and temporally stratified space, constituted by layers of historical mobility of the subjects from adjacent regions.

While Jessie is left searching for her place, Stanley maps a cartography of subjectivity through his discovery of spiritual African and Afrodiasporic kinship: "And there, the equatorial line across my stomach, the fuse wire, the flaming roads behind me, each detonation has made me, the phantoms that come to me and turned my world around" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 281). The African cosmology actualizes Stanley's subjectivity in relation to history and the sociological imaginary, as represented by the reintegration of his visible physical self and with his invisible ancestry which leaves him feeling "like a man" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 282) at the end of the narrative. His travelogue ends up with the realization that he cannot return home (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 282), once his previous notion of home has irrevocably changed, together with his physical (im)possibility of return.

[41] *Punch,* or *The London Charivari* was a British weekly magazine of humour and satire established in 1841 by Henry Mayhew and wood-engraver Ebenezer Landells. It was most influential in the 1840s and 1850s, when it helped to coin the term *cartoon* in its modern sense as a humorous illustration. From 1850, John Tenniel was the chief cartoon artist at the magazine for over 50 years. After the 1940s, when its circulation peaked, it went into a long decline, closing in 1992. It was revived in 1996, but closed again in 2002. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punch_(magazine). Accessed in: 15/04/2023.

Interviewed by Michael Collins (2008), Bernardine Evaristo evokes the histories of black mobility associated with slavery and colonization, together with the transnational affiliation created by her African and European ancestry.

> I think that being English, bi-racial, and having grown up with both my parents, has in fact informed the greater project of my writing. The division between black and white is more nebulous when you are the product of an inter-racial marriage [...] but I am deeply interested in the connection between Africa and Europe and this is a dominant feature in my writing. I have thus far interrogated African history within a European/Western context, and also the past with the present, never one to the exclusion of the other. My preoccupations are in my DNA. (Evaristo, 2008, p. 1203)

In "Ethnic Cartographies of London in Bernardine Evaristo and Zadie Smith" (2004), Pilar Cuder-Domínguez calls attention to the fact that Evaristo's conception of her biracial identity is further nuanced with her acknowledgment of her mother's mixed Irish-German "Whiteness", as well as her father's Nigerian ancestry, and a former Brazilian slave (Cuder-Domíngues, 2004, p. 176-177). *Soul Tourists* depicts melancholic travellers on the road and Evaristo's preoccupations with the past and present of African presence in Europe. The novel is "a road journey [that is] also about ghosts of colour in European history who come into their lives along the way" (Muñoz-Valdivieso, 2004, p. 9).

Evaristo's novel is haunted by the spirits of black historical figures. Pondering over hauntology, Jacques Derrida affirms that "[t]o haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology" (Derrida, 2006 [1993], p. 202). If the very idea of "being" of Britain and Europe is implicitly conceived of as normatively white and monocultural by the failure to "see" race, then hauntology, the way it was informed by Evaristo's preoccupations with her African history in Europe, necessarily raises the challenge of remembering race, blackness and multiculture.

Evaristo's hauntological imaginary can take her to the level of an archaeologist, unearthing histories buried in the sands of time to shed light on the lived experiences of the present. She also responds to the quarrel that black subjects are already constructed as absence, silence and gaps which are reinforced by their erasure from the accounts of official histories. Avery Gordon, in her study of the social imaginary, remarks that

> it is not so difficult to see that any people who are not graciously permitted to amend the past, or control the often barely visible structuring forces of everyday life, or who do not even secure the moderate gains from the routine amnesia, that state of temporary memory loss that feels permanent and that we all need in order to get

> through the days, is bound to develop a sophisticated consciousness of ghostly haunts and is bound to call for an "official inquiry" into them. (Gordon, 2008, p. 151)

In accordance with Gordon's assumption, Evaristo's novels are a call for an "official inquiry". Although *Soul Tourists* does not extend its geographical scope across the Atlantic Ocean like *Lara*, it does expand its focus to continental Europe, relating the novel's Afro-European sensibility to the author's "distinctly continental sense of cultural plurality which shifts the ground away from the more strictly national, exclusively British focus of late-twentieth century black British" (MacLeod, 2011, p. 168).

Evaristo's hauntological imaginary digs the past in a variety of ways, from personal vs. historical chronologies and from fictional vs. semiautobiographical narratives to inverted vs. (re)mapped mobilities. This takes the novel into a broader ontological challenge in relation to her DNA of Europe and Britain as being white and monocultural.

Hauntology is not a term which is devoid of political valency at this present juncture in British and European history. Addressing the imaginary of slavery, Gordon comments on the "way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). This underlines the discourse of the migrant crisis and the manner in which it frames the migrant as both the racial "other" and a threat to European social order.

Theresa May's *hostile environment*, launched during her tenure as Home Secretary in 2013, cannot be delinked from stripping the Afro-Caribbean *Windrush* generation's citizenship rights or the aggressive policing practices which target black Britons. On the other hand, haunting is also a site for "producing a something-to-be-done" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi), which can be associated with the political valency of Evaristo's hauntological imaginary as a harsh challenge to this ideological hardening.

Being on the road in *Soul Tourists* can be related to "something to be done" with spatial binaries that reinforce the preconceptions of which bodies belong where: "If who we see is tied up with where we see [...] then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place" (Mckittrick, 2006, p. xv). Stanley and Jessie's journey contribute to a multi-modal (re)mapping of European space, which is signalled in the paratext by the cartographic excess of the fifty-plus chapter headings, made of a mix of geographic sites (*Café Italia*, Soho), routes (The Freeway), temporal markers (Eighteenth Century Slave Market) and conceptual locations (The Room in Jessie's Head).

Soul Tourists is more than a novel of transformation which follows Stanley through his encounters with different spirits or "ghosts" along his journey. Through Evaristo's use of Afrorealism, she rewrites the history of Black people, recovering African epistemologies that have been invalidated and obliterated by the colonizing process. The novel may also be seen as a hauntological imaginary which encompasses Stanley and Jessie through their personal histories.

3.2 The shipwrecked past and the cartographies of exclusion

In *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011 [2007]), Bertrand Westphal highlights that the literary engagement with space is also a question of form: "[O]ne often speaks of an aesthetic of the fragment, an aesthetic that mobilizes the blank spaces between paragraphs and operates on the real, material space of the page" (Westphal, 2011 [2007], p. 21). Evaristo describes *Soul Tourists* as a "novel-with-verse, that is, a novel that juxtaposes prose, poetry, script-like forms and, as it happens, other non-literary forms such as relationship described through a budget" (Evaristo, 2008, p. 1199). This creates a fragmented narrative structure with over fifty chapters signalled by chapter titles. Topographically marked as a narrative of dislocation and subjectivity, *Soul Tourists* reflects a lived experience that is disjointed.

Stanley's fractured relations with his parents, Pearline and Clasford, are depicted in the opening chapters of the novel and these connections can be attributed to his widowed father whose melancholia permeates Stanley's conception of home. Mark Fisher, in his study of hauntology in music, observes the use of the "crackle" to evoke the sound of a vinyl record: "a sonic signature of hauntology: the use of crackle, [which] won't allow us to fall into the illusion of presence" (Fisher, 2012, p. 18-19). This "crackle" effect, both a sonic and narrative disturbance, can be seen in the repetition of Pearline, the name of Stanley's mother, and in the distinctive layout of the text itself when Stanley first enters the house where his father has moved to run away from the spirit of his wife.

> Pearline
> whose voice still greeted him when he returned home at midnight
> from the Working Men's Club
> *Oh! Yu remember yu have a yard?*
>
> […]
>
> Pearline

> who told me I'd inherited The Gift, passed down through generations of her mother
> 's family: to see what others could not
> *They'll find yu in time Stanley*
> (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 4, author's emphasis)

The name Pearline forms a kind of invocation through its repetition. Over two pages, "Pearline" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 4-5) is repeated ten times in a passage characterized by lack of punctuation. We hear her voice through the italicized words, spelt distinctively to reflect her pronunciation. What she says appears in italics, but the dissonance created by the repetition of her name is like the "crackle" of a vinyl record, reminding us that she is not physically present. While Stanley perceives the loss of his dead mother as a spiritual presence, his father can also be seen as a spirit of his former self, rendered a distant figure by *longing for home* despite settling in Britain.

Stanley's father is a distant father figure who the dutiful Stanley depicts as being adrift: "I am no anchor; he is supposed to be mine, he is going, going" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 9). This metaphor of drowning echoes in one of the last chapters, "The Ocean Floor" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 256-257), when Stanley reconnects spiritually with his paternal ancestors towards the end of the journey. As a symbol of entrapment and also as a strong reminder of his attachment to *returning home*, there is his father Clasford in the suit he bought when he first came to the country in 1965. In this fantastical encounter with the paternal ancestor on the ocean floor, Stanley evokes his father's hermit-like existence in the British space:

> can you feel me diving through one of your man-sized blood
> vessels, while your stubborn pride soars on,
> never able to settle, even though your chosen
> country had changed, *your home remained an island*
> *in your childhood heart*
>
> well, this is your watery country now, Clasford, and say hello
> to my new circle of acquaintances hereabouts,
> a body of restless beings like yourself
> because you will not release me
> (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 256, my emphasis)

His father's failure to mourn the death of his past self as a qualified professional can be read as a reaction to the trauma of immigration. So, in his hermit-like existence, Clasford is rendered (in)visible. Likewise, Jessie's lived experience is marked, from an early age, by a social (in)visibility which modulates her response to the questioning of the British citizenship:

> That customs officer fingered my black
> United Kingdom passport at length,
>
> glancing up to compare information to person,
> as if he couldn't quite believe ... something
>
> […]
>
> *You Jamaican? Bob Marley? I shot the sheriff,*
> *Get up, stand up. No woman no ...*
>
> […]
>
> 'No Jamaican' Moroccan? 'No Moroccan.'
> *Ah Brazilian! Pele best footballer in the world—*
>
> *One thousand two hundred goals—not out!*
> Eng-*lish*, I said, as if proffering a kiss. Really?
>
> [...]
>
> he actually read the dammed passport,
> seeing as he'd spent ages looking at it
> (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 197–199, author's emphasis)

The exclusions of the border locations are experienced in Jessie's voice, as they cross over from the European space into Turkey. The above conversation with the immigration officer is presented as a series of couplets in which the Turkish border official's words are in italics. What is meaningful about this exchange is the official's inability to reconcile the identity represented by Jessie's British passport and the bi-racial person standing in front of him. The dissonance implied by "as if he couldn't quite believe… something" seems familiar to Jessie, who is reminded of a past incident in which her car had been strip searched for four hours as she tried to return to England by ferry from continental Europe. Conditioned by this expectation that her Britishness or Europeanness is always questioned because of her race, Jessie plays along with conjectures about her nationality, rather than asserting her citizenship rights. This embarrassment is familiar for black subjects, who are forced to negotiate Western borders, regardless of their citizenship status.

Analysing *Soul Tourists*, John MacLeod (2011, p. 168-182) and Janine Hauthal (2015, p. 37-46) dwell on Jessie's role as the instigator of the couple's European road-trip. According to what has been discussed, Jessie's character can be interpreted as a haunted subject running away from the ghosts of her past and personal history. Everything marked by the absence of kin. Refusing to understand Stanley's encounters with spirits, she thinks:

> *Got my own ghouls, Stanley, dear -*
> the nameless mother who shamelessly left me,

> the named father who could have rescued me,
> the son who selfishly deserted me -
> (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 129, author's emphasis)

Differently from Stanley, Jessie has always been without a sense of place or a genealogy of belonging. Her predicament can be read in accordance with Janet Carsten's concept of relatedness. She explains that "[i]t is through living and consuming together in houses that people become complete persons, that is, kin" (Carsten, 2004, p. 310). Jessie's memories of growing up "homeless" in an orphanage run by nuns and of getting pregnant as a teenager evoke the haunting absence of kinship: "Didn't even have a pair of knickers until I was sixteen" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 109). It is through the men who left her as well as her son Terry, who disappeared to Australia that Jessie's placelessness motivates her imagined re-union with her long-lost son (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 277).

It is paradoxical that is Jessie, not Stanley, who articulates a political claim around black bodies belonging in Europe: "I think you'll find, Stanley, that slavery and the colonies were a pipeline of liquid fertilizer pumping away into British soil […] Think that gives us land rights, don't you?" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 51-52). She has nothing else to hold on. Her placelessness illustrates the "unresolved social violence" to which Avery Gordon refers when describing haunting as "those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). On the other hand, in Jessie's case, the notion of home is related to being born and raised in Yorkshire in an environment which was hostile to her very existence. Her claims to her heritage are inexorably undercut by her social exclusion as a mixed-race orphan and a teenage mother.

It is interesting to observe that most of Evaristo's characters have never had a map of kinship structure with which to conceive of themselves as subjects with a sense of place. Jessie wanders through Europe, haunted by her memories of social exclusion and driven by an imagined reconciliation which connotes an expectation that kinship with her son will relieve her sense of unbelonging. Jessie, a subject who flees the ghosts of her personal history, may act as a foil for Stanley's discovery of African spirits in European history. She starts her journey with a sense of purpose, while Stanley only merely tags along to escape the monotony of his middle-class immigrant life. She repeats her cycle of running away from the painful memories of being without kin, while Stanley finds kin through meetings within the spiritual realm. She has no real hope of reaching her only kin in Australia, while Stanley's spiritual

meetings metaphorically reconnect him with his shipwrecked paternal ancestor on the ocean floor and, ultimately, to himself.

The Ugandan-British socialist Avtar Brah, in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (2003), states that in diasporic writing “home is a mythic place of desire” (Brah, 2003, p. 192), an idea which is directly related to kinship. In other words, Brah proposes that home is a place invested with nostalgic longing and a sense of belonging to a particular in-group. This condition results in a reconfigured treatment of the imaginary homeland and it is no coincidence that in exploring the notions of home and belonging, Bernardine Evaristo chooses the themes of *journeys* and *memory* as the primary narrative focus of her novels. In resonance with Paul Gilroy, John MacLeod posits that

> [h]e [who] does not have secure roots which fix him in place [...] must continually plot for himself itinerant cultural routes which take him imaginatively as well as physically, to many places and into contact with many different peoples. [...] The grounded certainties of roots are replaced with the transnational contingencies of *routes*. (MacLeod, 2000, p. 215, author’s emphasis)

Evaristo’s narratives are thus at pains to negotiate geographical space as well as historical time and race in an effort to forge a relationship between past, present and future. *Soul Tourists* brings into question whether new homes can be secured in the host country or, by extension, in the host continent of Europe.

With an impressive list of mostly high-ranking European blacks, Evaristo provides her readers with ample testimony for Europe’s mixed-blood heritage and history of miscegenation. She not only explodes the myth of racial purity but also forges a space for blacks at the heart of the highest strata of European society. The novel builds up a monument to the memory of these forgotten blacks which were largely disremembered and unaccounted for in official European historiography. For Evaristo, it is important to show that black people have existed and have been marginalized and ignored for centuries throughout Europe; it is also highly important to show how black people have contributed in different ways to European history and culture. Her main objective is to explore how the awareness of the existence of famous blacks through the centuries affects the identity-formation and sense of belonging of black British citizens. In her novels, she creates characters who embark on actual emotional journeys through Afro-Europe and end up gaining new insights about their location in the British and European cultural and historical context.

Evaristo’s unique contribution lies in the fact *Soul Tourists* has opened up to include the history of continental Europe, perhaps a timely approach in view of the European Union’s

constant expansion and its difficulties in dealing with its "others". MacLeod observes that "it is a falsehood to think that Britain and *other colonizing nations* were culturally and ethnically homogeneous before the Second World War" (MacLeod, 2000, p. 206, author's emphasis). Through what she refers to as "literary archaeology" (Evaristo, 2006, p. 4), Evaristo wants to uncover the black history of Europe to inscribe black people firmly on the map of European history and then, "explode the myth that there wasn't a black presence in Britain [Europe] before the 1948 *Windrush* influx" (Evaristo, 2006, p. 6). Followed by the further objective of "debunking the myths that abound about racial purity" (Evaristo, 2006, p. 13), Evaristo makes her readers to re-contextualize received notions of European history and identity, challenging ideas of national purity and exposing Europe's past as always having been contaminated by racial *Otherness*.

Evaristo's project is an attempt at re-visionary myth-making, a desire to challenge and undermine popular ways of thinking about European history in terms of a coherent national culture. She successfully breaks up with monolithic discourses about the homogeneity of the Western nation, the myth of its cultural and national cohesion together with its continuous temporality. Through the retrieval of black past histories, Evaristo contributes to countering historical amnesia and to offering counter-narratives in the Bhabhaian sense: "Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 149).

Considering Bhabha's concept of the split nation which is "alienated from its eternal self-generation [and which] becomes a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by minority discourse, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonists authorities and tense locations of cultural difference" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 148), it is possible to affirm that in *Soul Tourists* Evaristo demonstrates this internal rift is not a recent phenomenon; rather, it has been a constant in the course of history.

She is concerned with depicting the perpetuation of racism and discrimination over the centuries by means of drawing meta-historical parallels between present and past. For example, Mary Jane Seacole was not admitted to serve in Florence Nightingale's corps due to her darker complexion and Lucy Negro (also a historical figure, but in the novel, a character) fears for her life, "damned by the colour of [her] skin, hounded" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 65), following the issuance of a warrant by Queen Elizabeth in which the monarch wishes to reduce the number of "blackamoores brought into this realme, of which kinde there are all ready here to manie… Her Majesty's pleasure therefore ys that those kinde of people should

be sent forth of the lande" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 63). This passage from the novel brings to mind actual campaigns for the repatriation of migrants from former colonies, such as the "voluntary re-emigration" scheme defended by Enoch Powell[42] in the late 1960's.

By expanding her field of vision to Europe, Evaristo reaches out across the English Channel and opens up a sense of community among black peoples across countries and ages, an attempt at what Bruce King called "a step toward imagining black Europe" (King, 2005, p. 73). What makes Evaristo's approach so refreshing is that she does not present a historical perspective guided by past colonial and Commomwealth experience; on the contrary, she recreates the occluded black side of Europe. *Soul Tourists* focuses on the meaning of this inheritance for the present state of Europe and the place of the descendants of these figures in contemporary Europe. Evaristo wants to make the past resonate with the present. As she remarks in an interview, she is "very interested in the historical/contemporary fiction combo" (Evaristo, 2006, p. 9). Her claim of the past onto the present is both spatial and temporal. *Soul Tourists* does not negotiate between a mother country conceived of as *home* and Britain/Europe figured as the *new home*. What Evaristo tries to reconstruct is a collective history of belonging for a variety of figures across gender, race, class, religion, origin, place, and time.

If dominant discourses exclude migrants from the nation, disqualifying them from conceiving of their new homeland as their home, *Soul Tourists* firmly asserts that they have been part of Europe for ages and do not have to justify their presence. MacLeod observes that "differences of gender, race, class, religion and language (as well as generational differences) make diaspora spaces dynamic and shifting, open to repeated construction and reconstruction" (MacLeod, 2000, p. 207). In *Soul Tourists* it is the generational differences that establish the altered attitude toward the notion of home. It is not the idea of an *old country* or a country of origin that Evaristo's protagonists are looking for but a home within the place to which their parents brought them or in which they were born.

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[42] John Enoch Powel (16 June 1912 – 8 February 1998) was a British politician. He served as a Conservative Member of Parliament (1950–1974) and was Minister of Health (1960–1963) then Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) MP (1974–1987). He attracted widespread attention for his "Rivers of Blood" speech, delivered on 20 April 1968 to the General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre. In it, he criticised the rates of immigration into the UK, especially from the New Commonwealth, and opposed the anti-discrimination legislation Race Relations Bill. The speech drew sharp criticism from some of Powell's own party members and *The Times*, and Conservative Party leader Edward Heath dismissed Powell a day after the speech from his position as Shadow Defence Secretary. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enoch_Powell. Accessed in: 16/04/2023.

Growing up, Stanley internalized his father's defeatist narrative and it is only through his encounter with Jessie that he starts to have doubts and to rethink his identity within British society and culture:

> 'My father always said I was a Jamaican first and foremost.' It had always been a statement, but now I imagined a question mark on the end. What did I, Stanley Orville Cleve Williams, think? [...] Was I really just like him, hanging on to a state of statelessness? *We don't belong, Stanley*. So why did he never make it back home. Where presumably he did belong? (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 51)

Jessie's answer to Stanley's identity crisis leaves no doubts whatsoever:

> 'You are just another Englishman, don't kid yourself. You think like an Englishman, walk like an Englishman, talk like an Englishman and most likely you dance like an Englishman. You've spent all your life in England, Stanley, so what does that make you? Mongolian? Peruvian? Egyptian?' (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 51)

Differently from Stanley, Jessie identifies completely with England and asserts repeatedly her Englishness. In her response to the Black Power slogans of the 1960's, she says that "the only culture [she] knew wrapped greasy chips in dirty old newspaper / with battered fish and squashed peas" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 197). Unlike their parents or even their grandparents, these second or third generation descendants of migrants do not seek a home that exists across the border as a homeland of the mind. Instead, they attempt to lay claim to places which do not readily accept them within their geographical and mental boundaries.

Stanley's attitude to England as *home* is more ambivalent and complex. On the one hand, he is simply English and rejects his father's longing for the imaginary homeland. On the other hand, he is frequently afraid of racist attacks, a fear justified by his sense of exclusion and his awareness that his situation as a black Briton is perilous to both his mental and physical integrity. This feeling is clearly shown in the following passages: "It's because we're black [...] See, as soon as you leave the big cities this is what you find" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 43) and "It's dangerous for us driving across Europe [...] It's not safe for us out there [...]. Fascist thugs all over Europe" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 51).

Once Stanley meets Jessie and they start out on their physical and spiritual journey of discovery, he successfully represses any issues surrounding his identity and origins. After having been discouraged by his mother: "shame, shame, shame *Doan go raking up the past, Stanley*" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 122, author's emphasis) and appalled by his father, he finally manages to detach himself from his parents' world. *Soul Tourists* captures this

disengagement and attempts at purification through his completely white apartment and his job as a financial analyst dealing purely with numbers. Stanley keeps no closer human bonds and seems to live in a stage of near-total emotional and physical alienation: “I gave up on both – marriage and love. I became the kind of man who succumbed only to the carnal” (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 45). He is the exact mirror-stage of his father’s state of abandonment and neglect because both have failed to deal with the predicaments of their diasporic condition.

Fictionalizing the return of the obscured past in the form of *embodied spiritual appearances*, Bernardine Evaristo places her novel in an established tradition of black writing. She recalls Toni Morrison’s treatment of the embodied return of the *haunting past* in *Beloved*[43] (1988 [1987]) and in Leone Ross’ *Orange Laughter*[44] (2000 [1999]). Both Morrison and Ross explore the return of the past through an uncanny, ghostly embodiment and the ensuing personal and collective effects. In this context, Bhabha’s discussion of “unhomely lives” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9) provides us with useful insight into the idea of a haunting historical memory. His observations were based on the Freudian term *das Unheimliche* or the uncanny, which means “the name for everything that ought to have remained […] secret and hidden but has come to light” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 10).

For Bhabha, it is literature that is central in unsettling and “unhousing” received ways of thinking about the global order: “the critic must attempt to fully realise, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical moment” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 12). This is precisely the way that the unspoken alternative histories embodied in the uncanny, spiritual presences of *Soul Tourists* return to haunt received versions of history, speaking out against their absences in order to assert their presence.

The spiritual apparitions highly stimulate and contribute to Stanley’s personal development and self-knowledge. He gradually develops a sense of who he is and what his place in this world is. This search for identity and a place to belong is a long and painful process. When he takes into account his hybrid identity, negotiating his Jamaican descent and his English upbringing, he says that “Clasford [his father] always said that Jamaica delivered him and England / destroyed him, but he was wrong…, both formed him” (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 122). Following this realization, Stanley resolves to “discover [his] difference and make it [his] own” (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 123). *Soul Tourists* is a story of self-discovery

[43] *Beloved* tells the story of a dysfunctional family of formerly enslaved people whose Cincinnati home is haunted by a malevolent spirit.

[44] O*range Laughter* tells the story of Tony Pellar, a man living on the verge of madness in the subway tunnels of New York City. The narrative recalls his life during the 1960s Civil Rights movement in North Carolina in an effort to recreate his painful past.

and personal journeys, and this is what makes Stanley claim for himself the recognition of both similarity and difference. He has a new sense of empowerment while contemplating one of the spiritual revenants:

> Clasford never rose above being a victim, one who had been betrayed by the life he had chosen to lead. 'Once a foreigner, always a blasted foreigner' had been his motto – tattooed on to his psyche. Was he, Stanley, really an outsider? Maybe you didn't have to blend in or be accepted to belong. You belonged because you made the decision to and if you truly believed it no one could knock it out of you. These visitations came from inside the body of history, turning its skin inside out and writing a new history upon it with a bone shaved down to a quill dripped in the ink of blood. Europe was not as it seemed, Stanley decided, and for him, at least, Europe would never be the same again. (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 189)

This important passage shows not only Stanley's new-found personal sense of identity but also his revised conception of the history of Europe. For both Stanley and Bernardine Evaristo, the personal is connected with the collective. Similarly, the depiction of history in corporeal terms evokes the literal flesh-and-bone bodies that have been written out of history and the textual body of recorded history. By stressing the act of writing a new history, Evaristo thematizes her own procedure of (re)writing history through the literal resurrection of hidden presences.

It is important to observe that in different moments of the narrative, Evaristo claims a space for human beings and asserts an African presence in a British/European context by means of comparisons, such as: "Down in the water, fishing boats banged against each other with a sound like soft pads of African drums, building a ritualistic crescendo against the wooden stakes of the pier" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 50) or, when in Versailles: "In the Orangery, there were paths lined with the perfectly snippet afros of hundreds of small orange trees. Like a line-up of Motown singers in repose" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 92). The first reference seems to capture the rising chorus of black voices which cry out against the injustice received, whereas the second attributes African features to one of Europe's most venerated cultural monuments. Throughout the construction of Europe in African terms, Evaristo reverses the colonizer's gaze by firmly inscribing African elements in the European context.

Soul Tourists demonstrates successfully that identity is a discursive product, with its emphasis on recuperation and recovery and "presencing" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5). The narrative exemplifies how migrants can act as agents of change. The hybrid subject is empowered to intervene actively rather than passively accepting official master-narratives. By the end of the novel, "Stanley says that the journey from England, with all its characters and happenings, had not only freed him from the bondage of his early years but also opened up the history of

his country and continent to him" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 239). This quote has got two important terms: "bondage" with its allusion to the slave trade, and the possessive pronoun "his" which emphasises his new and assertive sense of belonging. Through his intervention, Stanley liberated himself from the limitations that a culture based on ideas of exclusionary notions of identity imposed on him. MacLeod affirms that "hybrid identities are never total and complete but remain perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription" (MacLeod, 2011, p. 219).

Soul Tourists prompts its protagonists to think about identity and seize the precarious possibilities of their lives. For Stanley, this road is endless and stands out for a journey which is never finished and may never be: "I cannot return home. Perhaps not ever" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 282). He is determined to continue his travels and feels "ready for anything. And this is what [he] want[s]" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 282). By the end of the narrative, Stanley is not a mere passive player anymore, ordered around by someone else and alienated from his past and identity. Because of his travels and encounters with his black European past, he learnt to claim agency for himself and his actions. He certainly knows that he has to remain a traveller for an unspecified amount of time. He, as a migrant subject, replaced the grounded certainties of *roots* with the uncertainties of *routes*.

At this very moment in his journey, Stanley is about to embark on his personal "passage to India" with more discoveries to come. That these findings will be imaginative as well as real are suggested by the intertextual allusion to E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), which is preceded by an overt mention to "Lawrence of Arabia" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 268). The possibility of travelling by ship evokes one of the most meaningful migrant metaphors, since the ship symbolizes "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (Gilroy, 1993a, p. 4), recalling the slave trade, the Middle Passage and the contestation of absolutist notions of *roots* in contrast to transnational *routes*.

Once Stanley realizes he "cannot return home. Perhaps not ever" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 282), he understands he is not able to ever return to his previous life and idea of identity. MacLeod argues that "[s]tanding at the border, the migrant is empowered to intervene *actively* in the transmission of cultural inheritance or 'tradition' (of both the home and the host land) rather than *passively* accept its venerable customs and pedagogical wisdom" (MacLeod, 2011, p. 218-219, author's emphasis). Symbolically, the border is an active site for contestation and redefinition of received narratives which encompasses notions of monolithic identity and culture.

For Gilroy and Bhabha, mobility as a cultural condition is a state that aims to combat the static condition of borders and the rationale of racism. James Clifford, in his conceptualisation of a discrepant cosmopolitanism, says that "[i]f we rethink culture […] in terms of travel, then the organic, naturalising bias of the term culture – seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, dies, etc. – is questioned. Constructed and disputed *historicities*, sited of displacement, interference, and interaction, come more sharply into view" (Clifford, 1997, p. 101). Clifford argues for the recognition of discrepant histories and new angles of vision which challenge the destructive consequences of inert understandings of culture.

In *Dwelling Places: Postwar black British Writing* (2003), James Procter argues that such a fixation on what Clifford would term "travelling cultures" has produced dominant discourses of "post-national placelessness" (Procter, 2003, p. 4), in which diasporic communities become "largely seen as detached from the local, material landscapes in which they have settled" (Procter, 2003, p. 13). In correspondence with the deterritorialization of lives in motion, Procter gives value to sites of dwelling in his study, "a house, a home, a territory", together with the activity of dwelling, to linger, to settle, to stay as a means to critically ground these "non-place-based solidarities" (Procter, 2003, p. 14). For Pheng Cheah, in *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* (2006), critics such as Clifford and Bhabha refigure globalisation in terms of "hybrid, radical cosmopolitanisms" that "obscure the material dynamics of nationalism in uneven globalization" (Cheah, 2006, p. 82). In Cheah's words, the "chronotope of travelling culture does not give equal time to the tenacity of national dwelling" (Cheah, 2006, p. 91). On top of that, a set of binaries comes to shape the operative incommensurabilities within recent studies on diaspora and cosmopolitanism: the notions of dwelling and travelling, the local and the global, land and water constitute the dichotomous logic that upholds the contradictions of contemporary globalisation. Turning to water and its metaphors of travelling may signify a progressive reimagining of transnational affiliations that delegitimises the rationale of xenophobic attitudes.

Bernardine Evaristo's *Soul Tourists* rethinks the impasse between dwelling and travelling, land and water. She turns toward inanimate objects in order to defamiliarize the well-known characteristics of cosmopolitan subjectivity. Her creative style of writing enables an unexpected esoteric blurring of the physical and metaphysical, disturbing any innate connection between movement and transcendence, dwelling and materiality. Cultivated by the experimental aesthetics of the text, the notion of dwelling becomes refigured as concomitantly physical and metaphysical, situated in the plan of motion. The way Evaristo collapses the

boundaries between various modes of movement gestures towards the novel's vehicular cosmopolitanism. Cars, buses, houses and flats are put in service of destabilising connotative associations with dwelling and travelling so as to excavate unexpected connections between objects and people. She plays with these associations very early in the novel in one of the most poetic scenes about the run-down home of Stanley's father.

Located in the 1980s industrial space of the Isle of Dogs, the decrepit state of Clasford's house reflects his own deteriorating health, with its roof of "ill-matched tiles," "black and fissured" window-panes, and "stench of warm urine" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 3-4). His decaying home represents a stubborn dwelling space, almost completely static in its lack of change and movement. His "new bed remains in its plastic sheath. The new bath stands upended in the otherwise empty bathroom. Clothes spill out of scuffed suitcases" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 6). His house is a caricature of dwelling—a grotesque "inferno" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 7) that depicts a condition of stalled and rigid immovability. Dwelling is delineated in its extremity: Clasford is not lingering but dying. His steadfast refusal to move, even out of his chair, marks his anxious existence as a first-generation Jamaican migrant. The story denies Clasford a fixed dwelling space, as the narrative lyrically disintegrates the materiality of his home.

While the novel depicts the fixity of Clasford's dwelling place, it paradoxically works to ground Stanley's livid living space. Evaristo situates Stanley's flat in the famously restored Paragon, which was originally designed by the British architect Michael Searles[45] in the nineteenth century. The narrative sums up its status in the urban landscape with a short historical blurb about the building: "a model of supreme excellence, it was completed in 1807. The year that Blackheath achieved the status of a fashionable and elegant place to live" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 12). Figure 6 illustrates these beautiful and meaningful buildings, whose location in Blackheath, a name which stems from the Old English words "dark soil", indicates how the text intentionally locates Stanley's flat in that *terra firma*.

Figure 6 – *The Paragon, Blackheath*

[45] Michael Searles was described as the first local architect to make a genuinely original contribution to the architecture of South London. He created ambitious and elegant buildings using his trademark motif of Tuscan colonnades. Charles Bernard Brown restored the Georgian style terraces of the Paragon in the 1950s, converting them to prosperous up-market flats. (Cherry; Pevsner, 1983, p. 53)

Source: Paulo H Sá Jr, Blackheath, London.

Yet, while Stanley's home is given historical importance and material dimensions, Evaristo's clever use of Searles' architectural legacy furthers the caricature of dwelling in the novel. The Paragon illustrates a space of wealth and an ideal which helps to reify Stanley's metaphysical conception of his home. The novel indicates the historical background of Stanley's flat in ways that it manages to highlight and circumvent its own attention to the material. The notion of dwelling is constantly challenged as it necessarily constraints its physicality and its resistance to an exclusively located poetics and politics of black British writers.

Soul Tourists shows its characters through exacting geographic contexts, highlighting the rigorous historical consciousness of Evaristo's work. However, by putting into question the connotative connections between dwelling and materiality, the novel brings to the fore both Procter's and Cheah's theoretical insistence on the grounding politics of territorial places alongside with the ideas of Bhabha, Gilroy and Clifford, regarding progressive and transcendent qualities of travel and movement. Because of the novel's experimentalism, dwelling and travelling offer unexpected cross-cultural and cross-material opportunities for Evaristo's characters that become mismatched from their associations to both space and time.

In *Soul Tourists*, Evaristo tries to create a home, a space of belonging by digging up black roots in a European context, invoking the haunting memory of black Europeans who have been erased out of the official historiography. In her search for new models of identity and belonging, she has moved beyond the first-generation of immigrant's nostalgia for home, exploring new routes and weaving new ways of thinking, forging narratives about her place in the world in relation to a distant homeland. Stanley's *routes* have not led to the grounded certainties of *roots*. On the contrary, he is left in a state of rootlessness and in a constant

search for this place called home, which unlike the idealized place of no-return that it was for the first-generation of immigrants, is nevertheless a place that remains forever deferred.

3.3 Home, *routes* and vehicular cosmopolitanism

In *Soul Tourists*, Evaristo addresses the rearticulations of cosmopolitanism to bring to the fore new meanings and forms of a hybrid and vernacular mode of being. Her novel questions how cross-cultural and cross-material connections complicate notions of cosmopolitanism as a hybrid subjectivity. It is the car which will help to reconfigure such politicised tactics of belonging and contribute to unsettle the humanistic assumptions of vernacular cosmopolitanism. A novel primarily praised for its progressive ability to bring into question the European myth of racial purity, *Soul Tourists* uses the car as a chronotope to evoke a transnational mode of belonging.

Evaristo's use of the car as a chronotope is analogous to Paul Gilroy's choice of the ship as his central element in his theorizing about routes which go against the roots taken from anti-imperial forms of black expression. In *The Black Atlantic* (1993a), the ship stands for "key cultural and political artifacts" such as "tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs" (Gilroy, 1993a, p. 4), which dig into neglected cross-cultural communities of black alliance throughout the Middle Passage. As a strong metaphor, it captures the fluidity of Gilroy's intercultural hermeneutics that associates the vessel with histories of slavery and the itinerant ways in which black writers travel. Its symbolism and its association with water becomes political and ethical signifiers, in a project which positions itself against the ethnic absolutism of the land.

All the objects which propel movement in Gilroy's and Bhabha's kinetic understanding of culture become in a certain way tactical metaphors which identify mobile modes of identity formation. Evaristo's interest in reimagining history through unexpected transnational alliances is present throughout the novel. It is Jessie's 4x4 Lada Niva, named Matilda, that makes their distinctive journey possible. The transmogrifying nature of the car as an anthropomorphic site of dwelling and travelling encapsulates the urgent cultural politics of inanimate objects. Matilda accumulates contradictory features which expand upon her transmuting constitution; she is often rendered in human terms: her rust is described as "eczema" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 37), her full tank as "pi[ling] on the pounds" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 81), her headlights as "eyes" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 178) and her "chug[ging]" engine as a "damaged third lung" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 127), among others.

She moves on both land and water as she traverses roads, mountains and even "drift[s] out to sea" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 145). Matilda is a progressive and conflicted machine, a dwelling place in motion which collapses the binaries between stasis and movement. Like Glissant's notion of submarine roots, the "floating tree, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions" (Glissant, 1989 [1981], p. 67), she is neither the articulation of a universal transcendence nor a strictly rooted immanence, but the product of transversality.

Matilda's characterization in *Soul Tourists* is not usually seen as engendering an attentive engagement with history for the novel as a whole. The car is either ignored by critics and readers or dismissed as just one element of a light-hearted love story. However, it is Matilda that carries the burden of connection which the other characters are unable to establish, indexing unexplored and unexpected global perspectives. It is also the car which registers cosmopolitanism whereby transnational connections are made through its encounters with other vehicles. Recollecting an encounter with border control at Dover, Jessie documents how her difference aligns her with Matilda. As she explains that "they strip-searched both me and my motor, / yes, my clothes and my holes and poor Matilda's / winter coat, thermals and mechanical undergarments" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 197). Jessie's suspicious "otherness" is identified alongside Matilda's racialized, gendered and automotive terms as "every other sod, native and foreign / sailed through" the border (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 197). In *Soul Tourists*, the car stands not only for a valuable estranging experience for Jessie and Stanley, but also for an already existing stereotyped outer-national positionality.

Unlike Gilroy's conceptualization of the ship in *The Black Atlantic* (1993a), the car as a physical entity obliterates organic and oppositional forms of belonging together with any kind of progressive politics. The car as a cultural commodity articulates the ways in which consumer products, sold as enabling freedom of movement, obfuscates both liberty and oppositionality. The artificiality of the car, its fumes, headlights, and windows, coalesce with Stanley as he transforms himself into a hybrid human-car. The Blackwall Tunnel is a "birth canal" which incubates and brings forth his machinic life:

> Every week, as I descend into the tunnel's arched, prowling depths, headlights dipped, windows closed because of the damned fumes, I dread the moment when I'm finally pushed out, noiselessly screaming, tiny fists clenched, eyes all screwed up and gummy, face blue and bruised like a little boxer, into the thundering traffic and toxic air of the Isle of Dogs [...]. (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 3)

As a mechanical foetus, Stanley is birthed from the womb of the road tunnel. The window shell of the car constitutes his vehicular flesh as it becomes naturalized through the kinaesthetic experience of its driver. The pollution excreted by the car contributes to rather than detracts from its newly organic constitution. As he travels to meet his father, Stanley's altered new-born state attempts to re-assert familial bonds.

Matilda obscures any neat separation between the natural and the artificial world, the physical and the metaphysical. Stanley's recollections from his childhood become a gateway that mediates between worlds and it is through it that he experiences his first spiritual encounter: "I was such a small child […] seeing a queue of cars at traffic lights turn into horse-drawn carriages" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 138). His visions begin again only after he meets Jessie's "trusty jeep" (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 37). The act of haunting itself constitutes an incongruous kinaesthetic occurrence which exists somewhere between situated lingering and transient ephemerality.

The traffic signs are also of utmost importance once they become a discursive formation. Aesthetically, they articulate a bodily poetics of the road which imitates the logic of automobility on the page. Readers are interpellated as drivers through the directed guidance of the traffic signs and the text functions as a narrative vehicle which moves and is moved by readers. The material realities of the road are rendered through the materiality of the narrative. This is a literal example of the moving text that Bhabha imagines in his articulation of vernacular cosmopolitanism where the dichotomous logic between situatedness and displacement is dismantled. It is via its vehicular cosmopolitanism that the novel legitimatises the affective and material consequences of the car and its inconsistent mobility.

Matilda, as an object-in-motion, *always already* exists in a world of exchange and dislocation. The conceptualisation of the car moves away from notions of hybridity and towards the more productive and materially informed concept of contamination, which makes intelligible hierarchies of exchange. In *Soul Tourists*, the search for belonging is replaced by an examination of the connective economies of the objects that discern the world of the text.

3.4 Moving forward: being always on the road

Interpreting Bernardine Evaristo's novels only through the *Bildungsroman* genre or Stein's novels of transformation concepts risks displacing her wider concern with (un)belonging. While a lot of critical analyses of postcolonial and black British literatures may be rather celebratory, *Soul Tourists* attempts to move Evaristo's novels away from

debates that favour narratives of self-formation and identity negotiation. According to Anne Anlin Cheng, an examination of Evaristo's articulation of and creative engagement with several losses, of ancestral links, histories, and the "haunting negativity of the racialized" (Cheng, 2002, p. 25) reveal how these losses affect both migrant and black British generations, demonstrating the value of placing Evaristo's work within recent readings of melancholia.

Evaristo's complex engagement with loss does not leave room for (un)belonging to be resolved by the "re-homing" of the protagonists elsewhere, or by conceiving the possibility of a warm national embrace. The idea of moving forward and of being always on the road is going to come the fore in a different way in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019a), discussed in the next chapter. Being always on the road will constitute one of the major processes her protagonists will go through in order to face the social construction of stigma which causes various kinds of social inequalities of the stigmatized.

In her novels, Evaristo opens up a space for mourning by means of exposing the residues of past histories of hurt which make belonging contentious for the black British generation, questioning the very foundations on which social integration and self-formation are achieved.

Soul Tourists, like *Lara*, thematizes a type of postcolonial discourse involving the recuperation of silenced voices as axial to a positive construction or reality. Both novels foreground plurality and gaps, which are produced by the colonial encounter and those produced by the system of writing itself. They also demand a certain kind of reading process in which the imagination becomes stimulated into liberating different codes of recognition, often present in *Afrorealist* texts.

4 *GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER*: A TRAJECTORY OF HYPHEN-ATED *ID*-ENTITIES

Mako[46]

Identities are forged through the marking of difference. This marking of difference takes place both through the symbolic systems of representation, and through forms of social exclusion. Identity, then, is not the opposite of, but depends on, difference. In social relations, these forms of symbolic and social difference are established, at least in part, through the operation of what are called classificatory systems. A classificatory system applies a principle of difference to a population in such a way as to be able to divide them and all their characteristics into at least two, opposing groups – us/them, self/other.
Kathryn Woodward[47]

Written in a hybrid style that combines prose and poetry, eschewing punctuation and long sentences, Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019a) subverts normativity for aesthetics in narratology. The effect of this subversion is the creation of a narrative which challenges conventional literature by means of the paratactic narrative mode. This writing technique facilitates a juxtaposition of clausal or sentential elements with or without linking devices, enabling the production of spontaneous, conversational, rhythmic and enjambed prose. Evaristo's novels *Lara* and *Soul Tourists* use this technique in the narration of stories spanning different generations, but it is in *Girl, Woman, Other* that the importance of this mode in textual exegesis really stands out, once the parataxis yields plausibe hermeutics due to its reductionism. The two following fragments illustrate this *avant-garde* technique:

> the women's magazine Penelope now read argued that women should not define themselves by a male partner, that to depend on a man was a sign of weakness
>
> […]

[46] This is an Adinkra symbol which stands for inequality and uneven development; from the proverb "All peppers on the same plant don't ripen at the same time".

[47] WOODWARD, Kathryn. *Identity and Difference*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 1997. p. 29.

> in the space of a decade the school went from predominantly English
> children of the working classes to a multicultural zoo of kids coming
> from countries where there weren't words for please and thank you
> which explained *a lot*
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 297-298, author's emphasis)

Evaristo's novel is also a good example of what she calls *fusion-fiction*, a kind of writing that employs poetic patterning and compression redolent of prose poetry. Carole's experience of a gang rape clearly describes the use of this genre:

> then
> her
> body
> wasn't
> her
> own
> no
> more
>
> it
> belonged
> to them
> […]
> it was hurtinghurtinghurting
> onandonandonandon into infinity
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 125-126)

The absence of punctuation and the topographical arrangement illustrate how the use of the paratactic mode verbally conveys the trauma experienced by Carole. In an interview with Alison Donnell, Evaristo says that this mode allows her "to get inside the characters' thoughts as if they are speaking in the first person". Then she adds that it helps her "to present them [the characters] externally, while […] their stories also flow into each other's. The surface narrative describes what is happening externally, but this is always fused with the deeper levels of private interiority" (Evaristo, 2019b, p. 101).

Girl, Woman, Other is a transmodern narrative which gives voice to a marginalised group of black women living in Britain, interweaving several stories set in countries from Africa, the Caribbean and America to Britain. Its *network* structure exposes transtemporal and transnational patterns of diversity, connectedness and relationality, as well as a distinctive genealogy of black British women and their empowerment. The narrative portrays a group of diverse black women on their journeys from being a "girl" to becoming a "woman" and an "other". The novel goes back to the female characters in *Mr Loverman* (2013a), which tells the story of Barrington Jedidah Walker, a seventy-four-year-old closeted homosexual

Caribbean living in London, his wife in her sixties, two middle-aged daughters, and his lover Morris. In 2013, Evaristo wrote “London Choral Celestial Jazz” (Evaristo, 2013b), a short story in verse, comissioned by BBC Radio to commemorate the centenary of Dylan Thomas’ birthday. The story presents four black women, including Carole, a precursor of one of the main characters in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Inspired by the female characters in *Mr Loverman* and by Carole, Evaristo said she felt the need to write the “women’s stories” in her following work (Evaristo, 2019b, p. 99).

Girl, Woman, Other portrays the stories of twelve interconnected black British women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Its chapters are grouped into four sets of three interrelated characters from different generations with diverse backgrounds including, but not limited to, Africa, the Caribbean, and America.

The first chapter focuses on the life of Amma, her daughter Yazz, and Amma’s friend Dominique. Amma is a rejected actress who becomes a famous lesbian playwright and theatre director. Yazz is a social activist in the black community in which she builds empathic relations and a sense of solidarity with her friends from different countries. Amma’s lesbian friend Dominique leaves for America with her abusive partner Nzinga, but manages to escape from this destructive relationship.

In chapter two, we hear the stories of Carole, her Nigerian mother Bummi, and Carole’s classmate LaTisha. Although Bummi has a Maths Degree from the University of Ibadan, she ends up working as a cleaner in Peckham and dreams of saving the world by founding a transnational cleaning company. Carole studies at Oxford and later works in the City of London, despite her traumatic experience of gang rape and underprivileged background. Whereas, LaTisha becomes self-sufficient despite her three unwanted pregnancies by the age of twenty by three different men.

In chapter three, Carole’s teacher, Shirley, complains about her middle-class life while her mother Winsome, from Barbados, works as a bus driver under harsh conditions and resents her daughter. The chapter ends with the upsetting story of Shirley’s colleague Penelope, the only white character in the novel, who is unaware of her black origins.

In chapter four, we read the stories of a resilient black genealogy including Megan/Morgan, Hattie and Grace. Megan/Morgan, a social-media influencer quite radical in her politics, builds an empathic and harmonious world with her transsexual partner, Bibi. Although both Hattie, Megan/Morgan’s great-grandmother, and Grace, Hattie’s deceased mother, experience great difficulties as mothers, mainly because of their colour, they manage to hold onto life. As the novel draws to a close, we learn that Hattie is Penelope’s biological

mother. Some of these characters meet in the last chapter when *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, the play written and directed by Amma, is staged. The strong African female warriors of the play seem to mirror the novel's resilient characters, their complex identities, along with their diverse occupations, classes, ethnicities, and sexualities.

Girl, Woman, Other brings to the fore Rosa María Rodrígues Magda's conceptualization of the *network* as opposed to the modern idea of the "centre" and the postmodern idea of "dispersion" (Rodrígues Magda, 2019, p. 21-29). Instead of a linear and progressive chronology, the narrative moves back and forth in time, interweaving events from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, spanning numerous geographical places.

Evaristo's novel conforms to Rodrígues Magda's idea of "transboundary" rather than to the notions of "territory" and "extraterritoriality". In "The Networked Novel" (2019), Caroline Edwards gives emphasis to the ideas already presented and discussed in Chapter 1 about "Webs" and "Breaking the mould". For the critic, *Girl, Woman, Other* "knit[s] together a disparate set of temporal locations that are interconnected at the level of narrative structure, as well as being thematically interlaced" along with "characters that are dotted throughout historical time to present a story that takes as its primary figural terrain the image of the network" (Edwards, 2019, p. 14-15).

Edwards writes that employing such unorthodox temporal structures is suitable for "the transtemporal, transmedial and transnational patterns of connection experienced in the twenty-first century, in which time and space are felt as increasingly compressed, accelerated and abstracted" (Edwards, 2019, p. 15). Her arguments agree with the features Rodrígues Magda emphasizes in her conceptualization of the network. *Girl, Woman, Other* refracts transmodernity via the stories of strong black British characters.

4.1 Transmodern narratives and their silenced voices

Rodrígues Madga asserts that we live in "a period of transformation, transience, and of accelerated time". She attests that subaltern peoples, minorities and women have been "denied, made invisible, or subalternized" in this fast changing world (Rodrígues Magda, 2019, p. 23). This state of exclusion calls for "a systematic criticism of what was claimed to be universal but which was in fact only the perspective of the lords, of land masters, of the bodies, of the unlawfully upholders of power". This assumption contributes to "recover the voices that did not manage to enter the canon [such as the voices of black British (female)

writers], and to challenge the criteria of that canon if necessary" (Rodrígues Magda, 2019, p. 23-25), especially through the novels of transformation.

Girl, Woman, Other was dedicated to the sisters, the women, the brothers, the men, the LGBTQI+ and the members of the human family. Evaristo presents a transmodern, plural and inclusive cultural world that intermingles different cultures and respects *otherness* and *difference*. The novel depicts individual journeys worth of telling as anyone else's quest for understanding their own *id*-entities. Among such journeys, there is Amma's. Exposed to discrimination in the theatre for nearly forty years, she is now celebrating the performance of her play at the National Theatre.

Years earlier, Amma was offered only menial roles of a slave, maid, prostitute or criminal and, what is worse, ended up not even getting these roles. She therefore spent "decades on the fringe, a renegade lobbing hand grenades at the establishment that excluded her" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 2). Only when she joined a black women's group, did she have the opportunity to relate to the experiences of other black and lesbian women. Together with them, Amma discovers what it means to be a black feminist, for "white feminist organizations made them feel unwelcome" and to elaborate on black women's feelings when "white men open doors or gave up their seats on public transport for white women (which was sexist), but not for them (which was racist)" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 13). Amma's feeling of being overlooked by the dominant white society, even by the feminists among them, seems to change for the better when her play *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* premieres and is praised by the mainstream audience, marking that day as "the pinnacle of [her] career" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 434).

Likewise, Dominique, Amma's best lesbian friend, recovers from being a marginalised actress and a victim of an abusive relationship. She ends up as the founder of the Women's Art Festival in Los Angeles. She is at first denied a role in a Victorian play on the grounds that "there weren't any black people in Britain then" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 7), which was not at all the case. As an adult, Dominique was disillusioned again. At this time, it was not by white patriarchy but by Nzinga, a radical feminist African-American lesbian that visited London for a short period of time. She believes Nzinga is an angel, but soon she realises her affectionate attitudes are atrocious, aggressive and sometimes sadistic. Fortunately, Dominique was able to recover her lost self by escaping from Nzinga, attending a counselling group for female survivors exposed to domestic violence, marrying Laverne from the same group and founding the Women's Arts Festival (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 107-112).

Amma's and Dominique's journeys show that sisterhood can help marginalised women to heal their *rifts* and to find relief by relating to the suffering of other subaltern women. Both are portrayed as resilient black lesbians who manage to cope with their personal problems, and make headway beyond the exclusionary politics of the white patriarchal society. Apart from foregrounding the resilience of marginalised black British women, *Girl, Woman, Other* stresses their empathic relatedness to others. Such relatedness brings to mind Edwards' image of the network, central to the relationship between Megan/Morgan with her partner Bibi. During Megan/Morgan's troublesome childhood, her mother and father unknowingly reproduced patterns of gender-biased oppression. For instance, the mother ignored that

> Megan preferred wearing trousers as a child, which she found more comfortable than dresses, she liked the look of them, like having pockets to put her hands and other things into, liked looking like her brother Mark who was three years older wearing trousers really shouldn't have been an issue for a girl born in her time, but her mother wanted her to look cuter that she already was
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 307-308)

Alienated from her family and going against the conventional roles expected of women, Megan/Morgan moves into a hostel with other teenagers looking for a life no longer defined by the people around her. She establishes a strong relationship with Bibi, an online friend she met when she isolated herself from the noise made by the young people in the hostel (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 318). Such a relationship was so strong that when they are separated from each other "[t]hey feel vulnerable being so far away, after six years together the two of them are in sync with each other's rhythms" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 331). Their network transcends pleasure and becomes life defining for Megan/Morgan.

This bond between this couple brings to mind Yazz's solidarity with her black friends, mainly Waris, the Muslim hijabed Somali woman. It was after 9/11 that Waris and her family were exposed to discrimination such as the one "that terrorism is synonymous with Islam", being called "a cockroach immigrant", or even being told that "she can't speak English" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 60). To protect her friend, Yazz shows disgust at those who insult Waris and sympathy for her not "in a patronising way" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 60). This action results in the extension of attention and care for her friend to a transnational and transcultural dimension.

The transnational and transcultural dimensions need to work across national borders to redefine and promote women's rights. Rodríguez Magda gives particular emphasis to the

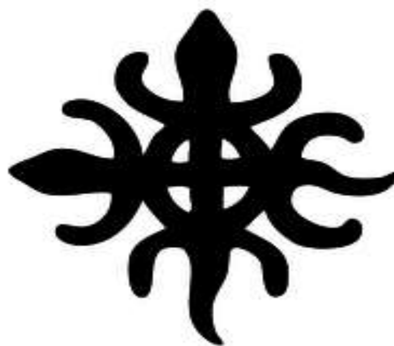
possibility for women to be in a better position, to make themselves and to reinvent themselves. She argues that the individual woman is responsible for all women, acknowledging the role of transcultural feminist discourses in speaking for the local and the international and in empowering the silenced voices (Rodrígues Magda, 2012, p. 157-172).

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo thematises transcultural feminism, including transexual feminism. While Dominique believes that transwomen cannot understand what a woman feels when she is denied in society, Amma thinks that transwomen need to be praised because "many more women are reconfiguring feminism and that grassroots activism is spreading like wildfire and millions of women are walking up to the possibility of taking ownership of our world as fully-entitled human beings" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 438). In the same way, Yazz emphasises gender fluidity, remarking that "we're all going to be non-binary in the future, neither male nor female, which are gendered performances anyway", and finally she asserts that humanitarianism "is on a much higher plane than feminism" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 39). Such posture is later reinforced by Bummi, who envisions women will fight on behalf of humanity. She dreams of building up her own cleaning company of an army of women cleaners from all parts of the world. It would "set forth across the planet on a mission to clean up all the damage done to the environment" and succeed in "driving out the oil companies with their mop and broom handles… sifting the rivers and creeks to remove the thick slicks of grease" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 170-171). Bummi's dream implies that women need to take up responsibility not only for their own rights but also for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

The Adinkra symbol which introduces the novel draws attention to the idea of diversity and difference, the conjoined crocodiles, *Funtumfrafu* and *Denkyemfrafu,* function as a symbol of unity in diversity: they "share a stomach but when they get food, they strive over it because the sweetness of the food is felt as it passes through the throat"[48]. Figure 7 shows this important West African Symbol:

Figure 7: *Funtumfrafu* and *Denkyemfrafu*

[48] In the original (Adinkra proverb): "Funtumfrafu denkyemfrafu, wowo yafunu koro nanso wonya biribi a wofom efiri se aduane no de no yete no wo menetwitwie um".



Source: OWUSU, Philip. Adinkra Symbols as "Multivocal" Pedagogical/Socialization Tool. *Contemporary Journal of African Studies*, vol. 6 (1), p. 46-58, 2019.

Girl, Woman, Other presents many stories of the different black generations in Britain, the oldest being Hattie, a ninety-three-year-old farmer in the North of England. Her lineage goes back to the nineteenth-century. Her mother Grace was born in 1895 to Wolde, an Abyssinian seaman, and Daisy, a sixteen-year-old girl from South Shields. What is distinctive about her background is the depiction of the resilience of both her grandmother Daisy and her mother Grace. When the family rejects Daisy because she gets pregnant, she starts a new life with Grace without any external help. She is able to find a job in a factory and take care of Grace as much as she can. Later on, when she is diagnosed with tuberculosis, Mary, her friend, takes Grace to the Northern Association's Home for Girls. After being trained for thirteen years to become a maid, Grace starts working for the new Baron Hindmarsh. One day, while walking outside, Grace meets Joseph Rydendale, who falls in love with her and soon asks to marry her (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 386–388). Joseph wants to have a lot of heirs, especially boys, so that the farm that has belonged to his family for more than a hundred years would continue to grow. They get married and Grace ends up being the owner of a farm in Greenfields instead of working as a maid.

Her success does not lie in bearing heirs: she loses four children just after their birth. To make things worse, her husband shows no sympathy for her and their relationship edges towards marital rape (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 397). Hattie, Grace's only living child, born after three long days of labour, exacerbates her isolation which results in postnatal depression. Unable to feel love for Hattie, Grace refuses to breastfeed her and even tries to commit suicide. Only two and a half years later, after overcoming her depression, is she able to express love for Hattie (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 400-402). Eventually, Grace comes to realize her strength as mother and woman, addressing her words to the deceased mother: "I wasn't a pushover, just as you weren't, I could stand up for myself when I had to" (Evaristo, 2019a, p.

403). Doing so, she builds up an empathic link between herself and her mother as a resilient woman.

By drawing a strong parallel between resilient black mothers and their strong daughters, Bernardine Evaristo treats them as individuals rather than as a stereotypical group. While disclosing both their suffering and resilience, she highlights their unique ability to overcome their initial marginalised condition. Intergenerational networks reinforce the importance of discovering and understanding their historical legacy so as to build up a strong web of self-perception with their distinctive genealogy.

Girl, Woman, Other through its individual characters' stories demonstrates that black British women's resilience and empowerment are related to their motherhood. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Adrienne Rich makes an important distinction between "two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; the institution which aims at ensuring that that potential (and all women) shall remain under male control" (Rich, 1976, p. xv). Thus, motherhood as a patriarchal institution is a place of oppression, while the experience of mothering can be a source of power for women.

Evaristo's novel presents the empowering effects of motherhood through its portrayal of the diverse maternal identities of Amma, Bummi and Winsome. As black and single working mothers, Amma's and Bummi's maternal identities contrast with those conventional images of the stay-at-home mother. They are not in conformity with the traditional gender roles either. Their sense of maternal empowerment is the result of their challenging gender roles and following anti-sexist parenting practices. For instance, Amma is an actress and involves others in raising Yazz (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 36-37). She allows Yazz to wear whatever she likes. It is clear that she wants her daughter to become "free, feminist and powerful" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 38). For Amma, "Yazz was the miracle she never thought she wanted" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 36).

Mothering for Bummi is another empowering experience. She is able to raise Carole as a highflier who earns a scholarship to study at Oxford. Carole climbs the corporate ladder despite her background and her traumatic experience of gang rape. In her first semester at Oxford, she feels so "crushed, worthless and a nobody" that she wants to drop out (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 132). Bummi confronts her with possible outcomes of such a decision: she may "end up distributing paper hand towels for tips in nightclub toilets or concert venues, as is the fate of too many of our countrywomen" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 133) and urges her to "go back and fight the battles that are your British birth-right… *as a true Nigerian*" (Evaristo, 2019a, p.

134, my emphasis). Carole returns to university, after her mother's advice and becomes the vice president of an important bank. Amma's and Bummi's mothering experiences show that social and political change is possible by raising empowered children.

Evaristo's narrative challenges the ideals of patriarchal motherhood via Winsome's bewildering extramarital affair with Lennox, her daughter's Shirley's husband. After spending her working life as a bus conductor, Winsome goes back to Barbados where she enjoys life with her friends and Shirley and Lennox's summer visits (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 249-255). These visits turn out not to be simple gatherings, and Winsome looks for relief from her previous unhappy marriage by sleeping with Lenox. Evaristo tries to go against the rhetoric of the good mother who cares only for her children. Instead, she highlights that mothers need a feminist discourse which speaks to their singular needs and desires including sexual satisfaction. Winsome's case points out to the need of a more inclusive feminist discourse in meeting the complex roles of women as mothers and as individuals.

Rodrígues Magda says that there are "[m]any voices without voice, many victims without names"[49] and she adds that "we will not be really humans as long as death is for a single woman the payment for her freedom"[50] (Rodrígues Magda, 2012, p. 172). *Girl, Woman, Other* features the voices of twelve black British women, focusing on their resilience and empathic connections through their individual journeys of transformation. This relatedness reaches a climax when Penelope, the only white character in the narrative, meets Hattie, her black mother, following their lifelong separation. In her sixteenth birthday when Penelope learns that she is an adopted child, she is disillusioned and devastated, because she realized that "she was a foundling / anonymous / unidentified / mysterious" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 282).

Only when she becomes a grandmother, does Penelope decide to take a DNA test to discover where in the United Kingdom her biological parents are from. She is shocked by the realization that she was not a pure white European but came from a mixed descent, her identity made of *scattered fragments*. When Penelope meets Hattie, her biological mother, she experiences an epiphany: "Who cares about her colour?" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 452). Only now does she realize that "this is not about feeling something or about speaking words" but "this is about being together" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 452). Evaristo tries to situate black and white British women on the same footing via the mother-daughter bond established between

[49] In Spanish: "[q]uedan muchas voces sin voz, muchas víctimas sin nombres".

[50] In Spanish: "no seremos realmente humanos mientras la muerte sea para uma lola mujer el pago por su liberdad".

Penelope and Hattie. Bernardine Evaristo's multi-layered transmodern narrative depicts marginalized black British women who break up with the various kinds of inequalities of the stigmatized, celebrating their resilience, their generational interconnection, hybridity, and humanity.

4.2 The *Other(s)*

Girl, Woman, Other poses two important questions since the very beginning: "Who are the *Others*?" and "Can they be the stigmatized, the excluded or the marked ones?". In the stories of twelve female characters in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, the *Other* women are the *ones* who are in any way different or at least, are perceived as such. They are the *ones* who do not belong to the traditional idea of femininity, with their own phenotype or sexual orientation, the *ones* who are stigmatized or even socially excluded. Through the different individual journeys of various female characters, Evaristo shows how stigmatization and oppression are brought to the fore via gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation. Both girls and women unveil themselves to readers via their different life journeys, highlighting their commonality because of a myriad of differences. It is simply the stigma which leads a hegemonic society to see them as being the *Other* and the *different*. Due to their gender, skin colour, class, or even sexual orientation, they are stigmatized primarily via the scope of difference.

In *Stigma, Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Erving Goffman calls attention to the fact that it was the ancient Greeks who used the term stigma "to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier" (Goffman, 1963, p. 11). This has a very specific effect on the way those who are stigmatized are literally seen and treated; the social construction of the stigma, together with its symbolic violence, is often obscured. Goffman, one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century, studied and analysed the stigma and the processes of stigmatization, which he understands as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" and reduces an individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, disconnected one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). His further analysis suggests that stigma has three main dimensions: bodily abomination, character blemishes and tribal stigma; the latter one refers to negative characteristics associated with a particular group (Goffman, 1963, p. 184). Stigmatized identities are produced through the processes of perception and they achieve their results in interpersonal skills.

In "Race as Stigma: Positioning the Stigmatized as Agents, not Objects" (2006), Caroline Howarth defends the idea that this is true for the non-negotiable stigma of race, which defines a particular body as "raced", as it can be seen on the body itself (Howarth, 2006, p. 442-451). Howarth's research focuses on the relationship between culture, identity, racism, and agency, exploring how representations of different communities and social groups impinge on how these groups define and represent themselves. She is interested not only in the social and political consequences of the psychology of identity, but also in the impact of *others*' stigmatising representations of identity. According to Howarth, stigma needs to be seen as a collective construction in the systems of difference, privilege, and inequality, which constitutes the social structures and institutionalized practices of any society (Howarth, 2006, p. 442-451).

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Amma observes that a discriminatory activity may take place through labelling and various acts. She recalls the first time she attended a black women's group in her last year in Brixton.

> she listened as they debated what it meant to be a black woman
> what it meant to be a feminist when white feminist organizations
> made them feel unwelcome
> how it felt when people called them nigger, or racist thugs beat
> them up
> what it was like when white men opened doors or gave their
> seats on public transport for white women (which was sexist), but not
> for them (which was racist)
> Amma could relate to their experiences, began to join in with the
> refrains of, we hear you, sister, we've all been there, sister
> it felt like she was coming in from the cold
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 13)

Amma becomes aware of her oppression because of her skin colour. When race is conceptualized in this way, it does not shed light on the operation and contestation of racism; instead, it highlights the ways in which stigma operates so as to produce and defend structural inequalities. According to Fanon, race is seen in or on the body itself. Informing social spaces, linguistic styles, and fashion, it is primarily connected to the body, or more particularly to the skin (Fanon, 1986 [1952], p. 1-7).

Yazz is fully aware that her mother experiences an invisible discrimination, since she does not belong to the majority. She describes Amma using the following words:

> [she] will always be anything but normal, and as she's in her fifties, she's not old yet, although try telling *that* to a nineteen-year old; in any case, aging is nothing to be ashamed of

> especially when the entire human race is in it together
> although sometimes it seems that she alone among her friends wants to celebrate getting older
> because it's such a privilege to not die prematurely, she tells them as the night draws in around her kitchen table in her cosy terraced house in Brixton
> as they get stuck into the dishes each one has brought, chickpea stew, jerk chicken, Greek salad, lentil curry, roasted vegetables, Morrocan lamb, saffron rice, beetroot and kale salad, jollof quinoa and gluten-free pasta for the really irritating fusspots
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 3-4, author's emphasis)

The reduction of life chances is described through the life of Amma, a black lesbian who wants to settle her own theatre. Her mum Helen is a half-caste, born in Scotland, and her father was a Nigerian student, a clear semi-autobiographical element in the novel.

> Mum, Helen, is half-caste, born in 1935 in Scotland
> her father was a Nigerian student who vanished as soon as he finished his studies at the University of Aberdeen
> he never said goodbye
> years later her mother discovered he'd gone back to his wife and children in Nigeria
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 9)

In chapter two, Evaristo demonstrates that discrimination together with marginalization lead to the exclusion and reduction of the individual's possibilities in the processes of stigmatization. LaTisha learns that it is at school that her father faces oppression, intimidation and ridicule, leading him to deviant behaviour and a "criminal career".

> Daddy came from Montserrat when he was thirteen speaking funny and looking foreign, as he told his kids a hundred million times
> when he complained of the cold, the teachers said he had behavioural problems
> when he spoke patois, they thought he was thick and put him in a class the year before, even though he was top of his class back home
> when he was naughty with his white schoolmates, he alone was singled out and sent to the Sin Bin
> when he got angry at the injustice of it all, they said he was being abusive
> when he stomped out of the classroom to let off steam, they said he was aggressive
> so he decided to be, threw a chair at a teacher, narrowly missing him the first time but not the second
> he was sent to Borstal for the crime of chair-throwing, LaTisha, it was like a prison for young offenders, where he served time with junior murderers, rapists and arsonists
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 195)

All these negative social perceptions of the individual are internalized by Evaristo's characters and they become part of the self-perception. Before starting the "criminal career", there are processes of defining, labelling and marginalization, which reduce the chances of an individual for socially desirable alternative forms of behaviour. These labelling processes are

not limited to the individual but lead to discrimination against different groups that differ from the majority.

One can recognize the different degrees of marginalization based on race. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), Hélène Cixous writes that the man/woman and white/black dichotomies emanate from the same oppressive system of binary opposition. She asserts that "[a]s soon as [women] begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. *Dark is dangerous*" (Cixous, 1976, p. 878, my emphasis). She also says that the oppressions come from the same place: the phallocentric culture built on the Symbolic Order (the structure of language) (Cixous, 1976, p. 19).

Id-entity is established through the processes of differentiation that lead to the oppression and exclusion of the ones who are different. When one of the featured women characters in *Girl, Women, Other* named Carole visits college for the first time, she feels her difference not only because of her colour but also because of a social environment which is completely different from hers.

> most students weren't like that but the really posh ones were the loudest and the most confident and they were the only voices she heard
> they made her feel crushed, worthless and a nobody
> without saying a word to her
> without even noticing her
>
> nobody talked loudly about growing up in a council flat on a skyscraper estate with a single mother who worked as a cleaner
> nobody talked loudly about never having gone on a single holiday, like *ever*
> nobody talked loudly about never having been on a plane, seen a play or the sea, or eaten in a restaurant, with waiters
> nobody talked loudly about feeling too uglystupidfatpoor or just plain out of place, out of sorts, out of their depth
> nobody talked loudly about being gang-banged at thirteen and a half
>
> when she heard another student refer to her in passing as 'so ghetto', she wanted to spin on her heels and shout after her, excuse me? ex-cuuuuuse me? say that to my face, byatch!
> (people were killed for less where she came from)
> or had she misheard it? were they actually saying *get to* - the library? supermarket?
> she couldn't even make eye contact when she walked along the narrow corridors built for the smaller men of long ago, centuries before women were permitted entry
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 131-132, author's emphasis)

One of the facets of oppression is the feeling of invisibility and social isolation. This is something experienced by Carole during her visit to the faculty and it is also the result of her difference. Evaristo's *heroines* in their various narratives of transformation "enter a more mature stage" (Stein, 2004, p. 40). In fact, they enter into it faced with "visible" social

categories or social identities (such as race and ethnicity) as well as "invisible" ones (such as sexual orientation and social class), writes Lisa Bowleg, in "Once You've Blended the Cake, You Can't Take the Parts Back to the Main Ingredients: Black Gay and Bisexual Men's Descriptions and Experiences of Intersectionality" (2012, p. 754-767).

A person can respond to oppression in different ways and one of the strategies is to identify with it. Amma's mother is a clear example of this. Within a patriarchal marriage, she accepted her subordination as a wife and renounced her own *id*-entity. As Amma recalls that

> […] her mother died, devoured from the inside by the ruthless, ravenous, carnivorous disease that started off with one organ before moving on to destroy the others
> Amma saw it as symptomatic and symbolic of her mother's
> oppression
> Mum never found herself, she told friends, she accepted her subservient position in the marriage and rotted from the inside
> she could barely look at her father at the funeral
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 34-35)

The subordinate role of the mother is better described when the narrator says:

> Mum worked eight hours a day in paid employment, raised four children, maintained the home, made sure the patriarch's dinner was on the table every night and his shirts were ironed every morning
> meanwhile, he was off saving the world
> his one domestic duty was to bring home the meat for Sunday lunch from the butcher's – a suburban kind of hunter-gatherer thing
>
> I can tell Mum's unfulfilled now we've all left home because she spends her time either cleaning it or redecorating it
> she's never complained about her lot, or argued with him, a sure
> sign she's oppressed
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 11)

Amma's father was from Ghana and came to Britain, a place where he never really became successful or felt himself at home. His situation reminds us of Stanley's father in *Soul Tourists*. As Amma later reflects, "[i]t must have been so traumatic, to lose his home, his family, his friends, his culture, his first language, and to come to a country that didn't want him once he had children, he want us educated in England and that was it" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 35).

In *Stigmata* (1998), Hélène Cixous does not understand stigma only in a negative way; she also sees it in a potential development of the new, "in another reign, in another scene, that of vegetation […] the stigma is a sign of fertilization, of germination" (Cixous, 1998, p. 14).

It is the vulnerability which stigma causes that enables new possibilities. Consequently, vulnerability may well be a wound or a stigma.

Evaristo's characters in *Girl, Woman, Other* deal with oppression and stigma in different ways. For instance, Yazz, Amma's daughter, does not accept a subordinate position: "I'm not a victim, don't ever treat me like a victim, my mother didn't raise me to be a victim" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 61). Even while at school, Amma's friend, Dominique, rebelled against the traditional binary understanding of gender regarding the rule that women were forbidden to play male parts. She was

> the only person of colour in the whole school
> she demanded to know why the male parts in Shakespeare couldn't be played by women and don't even get me started on cross-racial casting, she shouted at the course director while everyone else, including the female students, stayed silent
> I realized I was on my own
> the next day I was taken aside by the school principal
> you're here to become an actor not a politician
> you'll be asked to leave if you keep causing trouble
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 8-9)

Evaristo's characters were aware of their need to talk about their subordinate position and oppose it. Nzinga, Dominique's partner, is vehement when it comes to denounce racism: "[she] didn't miss a beat in replying that black women need to identify racism wherever we find it, especially our own internalized racism, when we're filled with such a deep self-loathing we turn against our own" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 82). In chapter two, when Carole tells her mother that she intends to quit university because she feels she does not belong, her mother urges her not to give up:

> lastly, did me and Papa come to this country for a better life only to see our daughter giving up on her opportunities […]
> you must go back to this university in January and stop thinking everybody hates you without giving them a chance, did you even ask them? did you go up to them and say, excuse me, do you hate me?
> you must find the people who will want to be your friends even if they are all white people
> there is someone for everyone in this world
> you must go back and fight the battles that are your British birthright, Carole, as a true Nigerian
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 133-134)

All these stories within this powerful novel of transformation highlight "the political implications of inclusion and exclusion" (Stein, 2004, p. xv). The life stories of the characters created by Evaristo render them visible and dramatize their power to change their lives. In *Justice and Politics of Difference* (1990), Iris Marion Young argues that oppressed groups, by

finding a positive meaning to their own identity, seek to seize “the powering of naming difference itself, and explore the implicit definitions as deviance in relation to a norm, which freezes some group into a self-enclosed nature” (Young, 1990, p. 171). Diversity does not represent more difference as defined by the privileged group; rather it means specificity and heterogeneity. A relational understanding of difference leads to greater justice without neglecting the specificity of individual groups. Social movements asserting the positivity of group difference have established this terrain, offering an emancipatory meaning of difference to replace the old exclusionary meaning (Young, 1990, p. 160).

Kathy Davis remarks that intersectionality has shown the influence of race, gender, and class on the identity and experience of women, while it emphasizes how the addition of individual categories increases their marginalization, and oppression (Davis, 2008, p. 70-71). In “The Intersections of Sexuality, Gender, and Race: Identity Research at the Crossroads” (2013), Leah Warner and Stephanie Shields remind us that “any consideration of a single identity, such as gender, must incorporate an analysis of the ways that other identities interact with, and therefore qualitatively change, the experience of gender” (Warner; Shields, 2013, p. 804-805). In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Yazz, who knows that the various forms of oppression are intertwined and contribute to different degrees of underprivileged status, shows her awareness about the intersectional character of identity.

> yes but I’m black, Courts, which makes me more oppressed than anyone who isn’t,
> except Waris who is the most oppressed of all of them (although don’t tell her that)
> in five categories: black, Muslim, female, poor, hijabbed
> she’s the only one Yazz can’t tell to check her privilege
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 66)

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, women’s narratives function as different forms of broadcasting *voices* otherwise excluded from or neglected within the dominant political structures. They have the role to open up and address the different forms of women oppression that intersect with each other and diminish women’s opportunities in the patriarchal world. Despite the vulnerability caused by oppression, the characters do not give up their *otherness*, searching for new spaces in life and the world. Bernardine Evaristo’s female characters offer the reader the opportunity for a different perception and understanding of diversity. Representing stigmatization and the process of *othering* through her characters, Evaristo brings into the narrative the very possibility of change and transformation of social and cultural structures.

The design of the novel is figuratively decentred and diasporic, as different characters appear, disappear, and reappear in someone's else's story. Their gendered/racialised perspectives switch back and forth between temporal and spatial dimensions as if portraying journeys of history and memory. It is via an intense use of narrative flashback that Evaristo creates discontinuities and gaps in the characters' life accounts. This technique exemplifies what Elizabeth Freeman names "temporal drag", with "all the associations that the word *drag* has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present" (Freeman, 2010, p. 62, author's emphasis). Freeman's concept ends up illuminating what is often excluded from the future-oriented time and its related key words: progress, advance, development, and evolution.

It is outside this paradigm that Freeman places the materiality of bodies and prioritizes its connections and pleasures against the emphasis on trauma, pain, and loss that characterized many queer metanarratives. She refers to this process as *erotohistoriography*, a non-linear approach to history, making past and present interact, registering this via erotic and embodied sensations.

> *Erotohistoriography* does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as *hybrid*. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. *Erotohistoriography* admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations. (Freeman, 2010, p. 95-96, my emphasis)

The characterization of Amma as lesbian might be read as an illustration of Freeman's *erotohistoriography* inasmuch as the account of her various sexual experiences which serve to break up with time and her lesbian moments. She had many sexual relations with several partners, some of whom helped her repair previously inflicted bodily damage, while others helped her learn about herself.

Amma tries not to fit into hegemonic or even homonormative standards like gay marriage. By doing so, she takes control of her own story, her own chronology. She does not see relationships as having to culminate in a committed long-term relation. She resists patriarchal heteronormative structures. Amma recalls her mom associating her queer sexuality with a manifestation of juvenile desire she would grow out of one day: "She said she suspected when pencil skirts and curly perms were all the rage and I started wearing men's

Levis. She's sure it's a phase, which I'll throw back at her when I am forty" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 12).

Trans and non-binary characters like Megan/Morgan and Bibi transition various gendered positions and corporealities thus experiencing, like coloured Orlandos, what it means to inhabit the world in the opposite sex. For instance, Bibi, who has transitioned from male to female, confesses to have learnt first-hand how women are discriminated against: "I miss sitting alone in bars nursing a quiet pint, without feeling self-conscious or being hit on […] I am wary of walking home late at night on my own, I miss being respectfully called sir when I am in a shop or restaurant" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 322-323). It is clear that the very notion of transition proves to be a problem because of its association with essentialist ideas of before and after that imply binary approximations to time and gender, not easily accommodated by trans-subjects.

The experience of temporal abjection[51] which affects trans narratives is epitomized by Megan/Morgan's perception of her own contradictory subjectivity as a "woman who wondered if she should have been born a man, who was attracted to a woman who'd once been a man, who was now saying gender was full of misguided expectations anyway, even though she had herself transitioned from male to female" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 321).

Within *Girl, Woman, Other*'s polymorphous black female cast, there is another instance of women characterized as time abjects or of the lowest degree, which are the *feminist killjoys* that Sara Ahmed places in a queer temporality.

> The idea that you mature out of being a feminist killjoy, that in growing up you unbecome her, also implies a linear development and progression: as if being unaffected or less bothered is the point you should reach; what you should aim to reach. It associates maturity with giving up, not necessarily conviction as such, but the willingness to speak from that conviction. A feminist life is not so linear. Some of us become angrier and more volatile in time. We don't always become feminist killjoys early on; she can catch up with you anytime. (Ahmed, 2007, p. 163)

Ahmed analyses the figure of the feminist killjoy along with the unhappy queer. The angry black woman and the melancholic migrant illustrate how the Western imperative for happiness affects the ones whose life experiences do not adjust to the dominant narratives of success. Within this framework,

[51] Julia Kristeva describes abjection as the state of being cast off and separated from norms and rules, especially on the scale of society and morality. It is the loss of the distinction between subject and object, the *self* and the *other*. For more information on the concept, see KRISTEVA, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjectio*n. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 [1980].

> [f]eminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. The word feminism is thus saturated with unhappiness. Feminists by declaring themselves as feminists are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy 'spoils' the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, to meet over happiness. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 65)

As the daughter of a polyamorous lesbian (Amma) and a gay narcissist (Roland), Yazz may be seen as a feminist killjoy. She feels completely alienated from what she calls the "Swipe-Like-Chat-Fuck Generation where men expect you to give it up on the first (and only) date, have no pubic hair *at all*, and do the disgusting things they've seen women do in porn movies on the internet" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 52-53, author's emphasis). Yazz loses her own ability to simply enjoy the things that are supposed to make her happy. She questions other people's ease to be affected by the objects and practices which align them to different forms of socially constructed happiness.

Yazz, "[w]ith her own unique style (part 90s Goth, part post-hip hop, part slutty ho, part alien), […] having to compete with images of girls on fucksites with collagen pouts and their bloated silicone tits out" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 53), is aware of the "situations of conflict, violence, and power that are read as *about* the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what the feminists are unhappy about" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 67, author's emphasis). Although her feminism is just one side of her radical politics, she is also committed to fight systemic racism in higher education, when, for instance, she writes a column titled "*Why is My Professor Not Black*? (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 72, author's emphasis) in her university newspaper. She verbalizes the claims that feminist scholars such as Ahmed, Spivak (1993) and hooks (1994) have made for decades about how black women in academia have been appropriated and instrumentalized by the fetish of diversity, while most of their work on diversity remains invisible.

The field of gender and narrative stakes its different approaches from the shared belief that sex, gender, and sexuality are significant to textual poetics and to the shapes, structures and representational practices of texts, argues Susan Lanser (2015, p. 23-42). Evaristo's multilayered novel is also fragmented and dispersed in a hybrid mixture of poetry-prose. John McLeod interprets Evaristo's adoption of this genre as indicative of her "transpositional sensibility" (MacLeod, 2011, p. 172). He makes reference to her transpositional fusion of diachronic histories within synchronic spaces, looking forward to the often unrealised polycultural possibilities of dwelling companionably side by side. In addition, Evaristo has

acknowledged her debt to Ntozake Shange's *choreopoem*[52], *For coloured girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (2010 [1976]), which gave inspiration to a lot of female playwrights who came after her. In an article published in *The Guardian* (2018), Evaristo admits her fascination about this series of feminist monologues by seven black females named after the colours of the rainbow, which opened up the experimental possibilities of poetry by and about black women.

In the epilogue of *Girl, Woman, Other*, Penelope recalls being told on her sixteenth birthday that she was "a foundling". The line breaks evoke her tearing apart and the pain of disconnectedness:

> the feeling of being
> un
> moored
> un
> wanted
> un
> loved
> un
> done
>
> a
> no
> one
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 283-284)

This revelation disrupts her sense of time and history and makes her reconsider her life narrative outside the normative patterns of futurity and linearity:

> she was an orphan
> a bastard
> unwanted
> rejected
>
> now the disparity between them made sense
> her parents were not her parents, her birth date was not her birth day
> she was not of their blood or history
> […]
> there was no paper trail
> she was a foundling
> anonymous
> unidentified
> mysterious
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 282)

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[52] A *choreopoem* is a form of dramatic expression that combines poetry, dance, music and song. The term was first coined by the American writer Ntozake Shange in 1975 in a description for her work.

Bernardine Evaristo refuses the aspiration of wholeness by dismantling unifying and monolithic arrangements of plot, time, and character in her stories. Her use of textual dispersal and diasporicity may also be read as an elaboration of her own understanding of diaspora as the unfinished condition of displacement of those who have their biographies excluded from the official history. Analysing Evaristo's early fiction, John MacLeod foresees distinct characteristics of *Girl, Woman, Other* as he calls attention to the complex ways in which she acknowledges the polycultural foundations of black Briton's marginalized identities. He affirms that "diachronic routes of historical and geographical passage give away to key instances of synchronic spatial richness where a number of diverse places seem gathered together and transposed upon the local geography of London" (MacLeod, 2011, p. 171). The critic thus signals a reformulation of the English-African diaspora, not as a condition or a space, but as a process, which invites an analysis of its temporal intricacies.

Achille Mbembe declares that "the postcolony encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias" (2001, p. 14). This means that the critique of chrononormativity has been an important part of the agenda of postcolonial theory whose temporal turn seems to indicate a move from geopolitics to chronopolitics, contesting the linear account of colonial history and allowing for the existence of simultaneous times. In accordance with Mbembe's ideas, Johannes Fabian argues that colonial societies have "otherized" subaltern groups positioning them "behind the times" through recourse to a modern dominant time-line built upon such concepts as civilization, progress, acculturation or development. Fabian refers to this political and ideological use of *Time* as a metaphor for cultural difference, as the "denial of coevalness" (Fabian, 2014 [1983], p. 31). In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the eldest black Britons are shown as living anachronistically, whereas their descendants seem to have caught up as a result of an imperial project which has assimilated them to modern English time.

There is a huge generation gap between Bummi, a Nigerian immigrant who left her village near Lagos "carrying [her] possessions in two baskets upon [her] head" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 160) and her English-born daughter. Carole sings "her morning mantra in the bathroom mirror and chants that [she is] *highly presentable, likable, clubbable, relatable, promotable and successful*" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 140, author's emphasis) before she heads to her London City office at an investment bank. The gap between mother and daughter is both generational and cultural, complicated by the dominant belief that *backward* cultures have been left behind European modernity.

Given that postcolonial experiences are characterized by discontinuity, non-linearity and fragmentariness, Carole's temporality may be interpreted within this heterochronic matrix. As a successful businesswoman with hard-won professionalism, she might fit within what Ifewunigwe (1997) calls "Diaspora's daughters, African's Orphans" identity. Carole accommodates herself within a narrative of progress and success modelled on the "motivational books ordered from America telling her to *visualize the future [she] want[s] to create, believe [she] can and [she's] halfway there, and if [she] project[s] a powerful person, [she] will attract respect*" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 118, author's emphasis). By means of extricating herself from her African background, Carole tries to sync her lifetime with that "of the privileged of this world who take it for granted that it's their right to surf the globe unhindered, unsuspected, respected" and is determined to "release the past, and look to the future with a positivity and the lightness of a child unencumbered by emotional baggage" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 118-119). Her utopic cosmopolitanism fails to address the individual conflicts experienced locally and diachronically. Like Jessie, in *Soul Tourists* (Evaristo, 2020 [2005], p. 197–199), Carole remembers being subjected to border control by virtue of her colour:

> but there was that one time, at the start of her career, in a country known for its terrible record on human rights, even though she'd told them she was there to meet a team from their national bank, and presented the documentation to show them, which they refused to look at
> even her body was
> invaded
> as if she were an impoverished mule with half a kilo of white powder stuffed up her fanny, or waiting to be evacuated out of her bowels in the little plastic bags she *obviously* must have had for breakfast that morning
> the invasion of alien hands in a window-less, dungeon-like room cut off from the flow of the airport, while another grubby immigration official in a sweat-stained blue uniform
> looked on
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 119, author's emphasis)

Salmon Rushdie typifies the border, in any of its manifestations, as one of such spaces of the globalized world where citizenship is compromised and tested.

> At the frontier we can't avoid the truth; the comforting layers of the quotidian, which insulate us against the world's harsher realities, are stripped away and wide-eyed in the harsh fluorescent light of the frontier's windowless halls, we see things as they are. [...] At the frontier our liberty is stripped away - we hope temporarily - and we enter the universe of control. Even the freest of free societies is unfree at the edge, where things and people go out and other people and things come in. Here, at the edge we submit to scrutiny, to inspection, or judgement. These people guarding these lines must tell us who we are. We must be passive, docile. To be otherwise is

> suspect, and at the frontier to come under suspicion is the worst of all possible crimes. (Rushdie, 2003, p. 412-413)

According to Rushdie, borders operate palimpsestuously, meaning different things to different peoples at different times. It is at the very moment that Carole is submitted to border control that her transition from citizen to pre-citizen may be understood. She is victimized by a violence which has less to do with where she is geographically at the time of her legal border crossing and more to do with her uncertain status as a black female diasporic subject. This racist incident at the border could be understood through the lens of what Sara Ahmed, from her own experience of inhabiting the white world in a non-white body, named phenomenology of whiteness, "which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space, and what they 'can do'" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 149). Postcolonial criticism warns us against the insistence on a shared present for both settlers and colonized peoples that would remove the force of dominant settlers' articulations of time. Following this idea, this episode unveils Carole's painful awareness that her past is not over and despite her modern privileges as a black woman going and coming, she is still positioned as "untimely".

Evaristo seems to conceive personal and national history as a mosaic of contradictory existences and absences, through what seems to be a persistent projection of a hierarchy of time (in which certain pasts and certain presents are better than others), "so as to emphasize a living and potentially limitless fluidity between diverse cultural positions, which might be seen to constitute not only Black British identity, but Britishness itself" (Kamali, 2016, p. 215).

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, womanhood is questioned in a multiplicity of gender positions and sexual orientations. Their blackness or their Britishness cannot be taken into account when dissociated from their relational experiences. Evaristo's characters attribute themselves to genealogies of dispersion crafted from the remains of slavery and imperialism to an interracial and multicultural present: "Megan was part Ethiopian, part African-American, part Malawian, and part English / which felt weird when you broke it down like that because essentially *she was just a complete human being* / most people assumed she was mixed-race, it easier to let them think it" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 311-312, my emphasis).

Leila Kamali affirms that since Evaristo's publication of *Lara*, "[she has] challenge[d] a hegemonic politics, in which Britishness is equated only with whiteness, and in which British history is regarded as 'closeted', 'finished'" (Kamali, 2016, p. 213). It is through Amma that she makes a powerful statement about black Britons being subjected to racial and

cultural prejudices which end up alienating them. When the Afro-American Nzinga sneers at those black women sounding so British,

> Amma thought she was accusing them of being too white or at best, in-authentically black, she'd come across it before, foreigners equating an English accent with whiteness, she always felt the need to speak up when it was implied that black Brits were inferior to African-Americans or Africans or West Indians
> in any case, it might explain why Dominique had adopted an American lilt in the short period of time she'd been with Nzinga
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 82)

Evaristo's adoption of a feminist queer temporality accommodates a multicultural cast of black British women within non-linear and non-normative life scripts. *Girl, Woman, Other* shows an overlapping of chronologies and subjectivities, together with a queer erasure of identity boundaries across cultural, geographical, and sexual lines which are fused with an understanding of migration in non-binary ways.

Sten Pultz Moslund declares that one of the features of the so-called millennium's postmigrant literatures is the move "from the periphery to the centre of what is commonly understood as British literature" (Moslund, 2019, p. 106). The fact that the 2019 Booker Prize was shared by Bernardine Evaristo and Margaret Atwood might be an indication of how black or Asian British or Commonwealth Literature have been "demarginalized" to reflect the raising awareness of a multicultural Britain.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the black British womanhood of its twelve protagonists is represented intersectionally in a mix of categories of identity, age, class, occupation, and sexuality. This representation brings to the fore the relational modes in which (un)belonging is produced in terms other that just race and gender. Evaristo's cast of black lesbians, trans/non-binary women, feminist killjoys or menopausal females does not align with linear progress, once they choose to live their life journeys contemporaneously with one another observing their pasts and futures overlapping.

4.3 The *Self* and the *Other* within a journey of transformation

Mark Stein argues that novels of transformation imply radical generational conflict. They refer to "the process of subject formation", once

> the bildungsroman negotiates the formation of its protagonist or protagonists within the social world that is encountered and shaped. While the individual, then, struggles with family, education and the expectations of society at large, this struggle is

> significantly not without consequence for the cultures within which it takes place. (Stein, 2004, p. 30)

The construction of the *other* follows an essentialist approach, establishing simplified assumptions as natural and leaving phantoms in the notion of the *self*. "The black British novel of transformation does not predominantly feature the privatist formation of an individual: instead, *the text [also] constitutes a symbolic act of carving out space, of creating public sphere*" (Stein, 2004, p. 30, my emphasis).

Analysing the concepts of the self, understood as inner individual journeys, will show the great impact the incomplete notion of the true self has, as it greatly determines acts of self-representation. Thus, the protagonists in *Girl, Woman, Other* are products of their own socio-cultural time and place as well as part of a family history or journey of self-knowledge.

"Who am I?" This is a question at the core of every human being in its becoming and it is fundamental for the cultural landscape of the West. The questions "who are we?" and "who are we not?" shape the self-perception of an individual as they strive towards their "unique true selfhood", affirms Judy Giles and Tim Middleton, in *Studying Culture: A Practical Introduction* (2008, p. 34). This belief is understood as a fundamental concept of "the predominant philosophy of the individual over the past two centuries in the Western world" (Giles; Middleton, 2008, p. 34).

In *Selected Essays* (2019) and in accordance with Giles and Middleton, Stuart Hall suggests that shaping one's self-perception may be directedly connected to the journeys of their unique selfhood, as it is philosophically "the ground of action" (Hall, 2019, p. 65) upon which every act of self-representation is based. The validity of these journeys of self-representation are judged on a degree of authenticity those movements have, implying the innate truth of a person. Furthermore, this idea leaves the impression that the truth a person expects to find at their core might only be an incomplete version of who they are. As Hall describes the "psychological discourse of self" as a "notion of the continuous, self-sufficient, development, unfolding, inner dialect of selfhood" (Hall, 2019, p. 65), he confirms that this assumed truth within the self is a matter of negotiation.

The self is built up by the practice of self-narration and a subjective reception of reality: "The personal narratives we tell are never simply mirror reflections of a lived reality, but are mediated by the need to represent the self as possessing a sense of identity and control" (Giles; Middleton, 2008, p. 58). Novels of transformation are shaped by the experiences starting in early childhood, through the hard negotiations in adolescence and adulthood; a person's narrative is modelled by the values, goals and beliefs they hold. In *Girl,*

Woman, Other, the twelve protagonists' sense of identity seem to be acquired only through control and their ability to execute this control over mental presentations that imbue the self with the sense of power and agency. This idea reinforces the sense of self and its aim to acquire a seemingly whole self-narrative.

Through a constructivist approach, the self is constantly adding, shaping and subtracting parts within its narration. Evaristo's narrative calls for a constant decentering of the self by adapting a practice which allows the continued notion of change being the new status quo, highlighting the "increasing social diversity and plurality, the technologies of the self which characterize the modern world in which we live" (Hall, 2019, p. 68).

It is in the black British society portrayed in Evaristo's novels, such as *Lara*, *Soul Tourists* and *Girl, Woman, Other*, that the search for the true self becomes quite political, clashing with the multiplicity the West appropriated. Being black is still the defining factor for being the *other* in a Western society. Yet, it is unquestionable that there is political and social power attached to the category black. In *Brit(Ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (2018), Afua Hirsch perceives the ability to identify with a group as desirable, "because when it comes to the *black* British experience, [one's] world is its epitome" (Hirsch, 2018, p. 6, author's emphasis). For her, identifying with and belonging to a group dissolves the instability she feels in her concept of self. It roots a sense of power into individual acts of self-representation as they gain meaning and social relevance. Hirsch sees the "black British experience" as a rooted identity that is "transcendental in popularity, shaping identities that range from northern working-class Asian masculinity, to white working-class youth culture in Glasgow". Besides, the fact the male body is placed in the centre of the "black British experience" (Hirsch, 2018, p. 7) hints to a hegemony within the *other*, promoting according to Hall, the note of a

> unified collective [identity], which could be spoken about almost as if they were singular actors in their own right but which, indeed, placed, positioned, stabilized and allowed us to understand and read, almost as a code, the imperatives of the individual self: the great collective social identities of class, race, nation, gender and the West. (Hall, 2019, p. 66)

The dialogue between self and other may end up by assuming a single truth about the *other*, whether within or outside the self, for the other's truth negates every ambivalence, silencing each single voice which cannot join the chorus. Being excluded in the construction of the other by both the West and the black group, Evaristo's polyphonic novel shows how hegemony is reproduced and black women's stories are not only disregarded but also

disqualified from being the *other*. The construction of the self and its implications for self-representative acts are clearly depicted through the characters of Amma and Yazz. It is through these strong protagonists that Evaristo constructs the meaningful *other* which will shed light onto the importance of a self-narrative.

By means of switching in and out of the present and the past, Amma introduces the reader to her story. As the director of the play *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 1) which opens at "The National Theatre", she muses that "years ago she expected to be evicted as soon as she dared walk through its doors, a time when people really did wear smartest clothes to go to the theatre" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 3). The theatre Evaristo decides to stage Amma's play is called "The National Theatre". Amma is convinced that years back she would not have been allowed to speak and act as herself on the stage where the nation is represented. At best, Amma would have been a mute side-character that faded in the background as soon as something of importance is happening on the centre stage. Her attempt to get into this nation's story would have made her an intruder only grudgingly tolerated on the fringe and the act of speaking up would have made her an offender who had to be ousted.

In the first pages of the novel, Evaristo introduces her readers to a main conflict within one of her protagonists. Amma, a woman in her fifties, identifies herself as a female, black, lesbian, and the mother of nineteen-year-old Yazz. As such, she experiences the processes of *othering* on the level of gender, race, and sexual orientation. The fact that she is black makes her an easy target for being othered in West societies. Her gender and sexual orientation further marginalize her. Hall claims that "a singularly inclusive black identity also created many serious problems [as] it tended to silence all those who were subordinated within this category" (Hall, 2019, p. 57). From childhood onwards, Amma would be pushed to the margins and silenced by the mainstream society. Identifying herself as a lesbian within this already marginalized group puts her "outside the normative category of heterosexual masculinity" (Hall, 2019, p. 57). Her activism is shaped by the notion that she has to fight for the mere right to exist in her own way and "until the mainstream began to absorb what was once radical and she found herself hopeful of joining it" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 2).

As a black woman born in the wake of the independence of many former colonies and of the feminist movements of the 60's and 70's, Amma still felt marginalized by the British national narrative all her life. She holds a self-determined life in high esteem, fighting for equality and keeping the family tradition that fight public. Amma affirms, "as for me, I get my fighting spirit from my dad, Kwabena, who was a journalist campaigning for Independence of Ghana / until he heard he was going to be arrested for sedition, legged it over here, ended up

working on the railways" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 9). While resenting that his fight for independence did not aim at the liberation of women, Amma does acknowledge her father as being the one who introduced her to political activism.

Her father's ambitions echo what Hall calls "the pursuit of 'roots' as a symbolic counterweight to the process of exclusion and marginalization" (Hall, 2019, p. 56). Amma's search for roots involves finding out who she truly is and what she wants to stand for. She has the "belie[f] that a unique true selfhood" (Giles; Middleton, 2008, p. 34) is somewhere rooted in her. Her quest is an internal one.

In the very beginning of her career, she aspired to be an actress, believing that it would allow her to assume different roles and discover a multitude of experiences. However, Amma felt "disillusioned at being put up for parts such as slave, servant, prostitute, nanny or crim" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 6). She realizes that the theatre world only holds certain types of roles for her when one director observes that "with [her] African hips and thighs [she was] perfect slave girl material" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 6). Unfortunately, it is her body (together with her skin colour), not her ability that determines the spaces she is allowed to fulfil.

As Giles and Middleton remark, "the possibility of some human agency, choice and self-determination remains however constrained by social structures" (Giles; Middleton, 2008, p. 42). These enforced limitations might be visible through the roles Amma auditions for in the society she lives in. At the very moment she "walked right back out again […] slamming the door" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 6-7), after the director's comment at that singular audition, Amma chose to walk out of the place she perceived was "assigned" to her by society. This "assigned role" reminds us of the ideas discussed by Silvio Almeida, in *Racismo Estrutural* (2020), when he calls attention to the fact that "racism, while a political and historical process, is also a process of subjectivity construction, of people whose awareness and feelings are somehow connected to social practices"[53] (Almeida, 2020, p. 63).

By sustaining her politics about her ideals, Amma assumed a position on the margins, going against and disrupting the story a nation tells about itself. Amma makes statements which project a strong sense of *Self* rooted in her empathy with others. Moreover, her authenticity and her self-representational acts will highly contribute and lead towards discussions on her constructs of *herself*.

Amma's ideals are clearly visible in her establishment of her co-owned theatre company:

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[53] In Portuguese: "o racismo, enquanto processo político e histórico, é também um processo de construção de subjetividades, de indivíduos cuja consciência e afetos estão de algum modo conectados com as práticas sociais".

> Bush Women Theatre Company best captured their intentions
> they would be a voice in theatre where there was silence
> black and Asian Women's stories would get out there
> they would create theatre on their own terms
> it became the company's motto
> On Our Own Terms
> or Not At All.
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 14)

Both Amma's strength and fighting spirit become part of her *Self*-narrative, a feature she shares with the company's co-founder Dominique. When in her youth Amma meets Dominique, the quest to find and be her true *Self* gains validation by another person who also wants to be an actress without compromising her politics and ideals. Amma can root herself in this partnership with her friend, obtaining relevance by being acknowledged by an *Other*. Through the cooperation between both female characters, Evaristo calls her readers' attention to the fact that even a personal account is shaped and partly co-narrated by the *Other*.

Amma's quest to find her true *Self* led her into battles with hegemonic structures, including her family. When she recalls the idealized scenes of shared family meals, she imagined "it was like we were literally being force-fed his [her father's] politics" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 12). The control of her father over her voice left her feeling like he "was [in] his pulpit and [they] were his captive congregation" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 12). Amma believes in expressing her opinion openly about her social and political beliefs. When she affirms "I am a dyke" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 12) and that she "learnt to head women off, to state her intentions upfront, to never sleep with the same person twice, or pushing it thrice / even when she wanted to" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 21), she demonstrates a very strong sense of *Self*-confidence which shapes her actions and attitudes. This idea of self-confidence is clearly shown when she makes use of adjectives like "customary" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 2), when she describes her Americano (coffee), when she informs the readers that she "has her own *sod-you* style" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 3, author's emphasis) or that her "pink lipstick [is] her perennial signature" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 3). Amma often looks at those who surround her and uses them as referential when she negotiates towards her *Self*.

The protagonists in *Girl, Woman, Other*, including Amma, want to be "a person in [their] own right" (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 257), a goal that may remain unfulfilled, given the prevailing racist ideology that fosters violence and inequality against groups.

4.4 Evaristo's black British Amazons

> *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* is probably the pinnacle of my career, Dom, Amma says, no longer celebratory, as the night deepens she's going into the maudlin mode Dominique recognizes
> I can't image it getting any better than this, maybe they'll invite me back to do another play if this one picks up a major award, or maybe not, I still have so much to give, I might still be scrabbling around trying to get jobs, and be in even more demand sitting on panels to discuss diversity in theatre
> *I've become the High Priestess of Career Longevity in the Chapel of Social Change preaching from the Pulpit of Political Invisibility to the Congregation of the Marginalized and Already Converted*
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 434, my emphasis)

Amma's words in the night her play opens reflect her awareness of her career, status and place within British society. Through her self-description as "The High Priestess", she addresses the problem of "Political Invisibility" of the ones who are not at the centre: black British women. Evaristo's novel belongs to the realm of politics as it shows the presence of people of colour in Britain whose voices were silenced, admitting she is a "political writer". Ahead of *Windrush* day, in an interview with Amelia Gentleman, Evaristo affirms that

> [t]he interesting thing is that I'm not usually a political writer. And I *am* a political writer! There is a political underpinning to *Girl, Woman, Other*, which is to explore as many black British women as possible in a single novel. The intention is for the reader to enjoy the book on the level of story, but at the same time, they're engaging with all these issues. This is my eighth book, and all of them have been very political in terms of the ideas, the context of my characters and the subversive way in which I'm exploring the Afro-diasporic experience and black British history and society. (Evaristo, 2020, n. p., author's emphasis)

The political slant is further exploited through the poetics and politics of space in Evaristo's narrative. The fact Grace's mother was British and her father Abyssinian[54] sheds light on a central, yet often overlooked aspect, regarding the history of Britain. What is being described in this corresponds to Jacques Rancière's idea about *dissensus*: "[It] is the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself. Political demonstration makes visible that which had no reason to be seen; it places one world in another […]" (Rancière, 2010 [2008], p. 38). In Evaristo's novel, the narrator says:

> Grace
> came into this world courtesy of a seaman from Abyssinia called Wolde, a young fireman

[54] The Ethiopian Empire, also formerly known by the exonym Abyssinia, or just simply known as Ethiopia, was an empire that historically spanned the geographical area of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopian_Empire. Accessed in: 26/06/2023.

> who stoked coal into the boilers in the holds of merchant ships
> the hardest, filthiest, sweatiest job on board
> Wolde
> who sailed into South Shields in 1895 and left a few days later leaving behind the beginnings of Grace hidden inside her Ma
> who'd just turned sixteen
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 372)

This passage shows the exchange of goods and humans whose mobility at the end of the nineteenth century is emphasised through the use of run-on-lines[55], a non-traditional choice more often used in poetry than in novels. What is central in this excerpt is the idea of hybridity, embodied in the character of Grace. Evaristo shows the African presence in Britain through inter-racial relationships, making Britain a hybrid country. Hybridization points to a subversion of the authoritative and whitewashed history of Britain. Homi Bhabha's use of the concept is very useful as Evaristo displays a double vision through the stories of Grace's mother and father. According to Bhabha, hybridity is a "sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). The colonial discourse loses its univocal claim to truth: "Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other denied knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of this authority – its rules of recognition" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114).

Amma and Dominique are interesting characters to start the narration with. Both of them are victims of what Kimberlé Crenshaw calls *intersectionality* (1989). As black British lesbians, the intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation impact the construction of their identities, probably triggering the development of coping mechanisms in a patriarchal society dominated by whiteness (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 2). In her introduction to Audre Lorde's *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (2017), Sarah Ahmed explains that "*speaking as a black woman matters* in a world that takes the white man as a 'mythical norm', to borrow [Lorde's] important term. To speak as a subject who has been made into the other, not white, not man, not straight, not human, is to challenge that norm" (Lord; Eddo-Lodge; Ahmed, 2017, p. viii, my emphasis). This marginality places women in the realm of dissensus. Evaristo's characters, Amma, Dominique, and even Carole, create politics by interrupting the distribution of the sensible, by intervening in the distribution of space. Amma and Dominique might well be the most dissensual characters and the most political in the gallery of portraits

[55] According to the Encyclopedia Britannica on line, run-on, in prosody, or *enjambment*, is the continuation of the sense of a phrase beyond the end of a line of verse. Source: https://www.britannica.com/art/enjambment. Accessed in: 26/06/2023.

presented in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Amma's play also indirectly refers to what has been called, in postcolonial studies, the periphery, as opposed to the centre, which to a certain extent, summarises the relationship between Europeans and the peripheral colonies. Before being invited to stage her play, "Amma… has waited three decades before being allowed in through the front door, although she hasn't exactly been hammering on the *castle walls* for the duration" of The National Theatre (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 406, my emphasis).

> Amma
> is walking along the promenade of the waterway that bisects her city, a few early morning barges cruise slowly by
> to her left is the nautical-themed footbridge with its deck-like walkway and sailing mast pylons
> to her right is the bend to rise as it is heads east past Waterloo Bridge towards the dome of St Paul's
> she feels the sun begin to rise, the air still breezy before the city clogs up with heat and fumes
> a violinist plays something suitably uplifting further along the promenade
> Amma's play, *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, opens at the National tonight
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 1)

What is questioned by Evaristo through the image of the river is the binary structure, centre vs. periphery, bringing to the fore fluidity and confluence while suggesting that the development of such categories is not natural, but discursively produced. Some of the struggles in former colonies aimed at disrupting this over-simplistic binary structure by showing that the geographical and cultural peripheries were a Eurocentric construction. Europeans claim that they were civilized and *the rest* needed to be civilized. One of the practices of postcolonial studies is to denaturalize these ideas. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, this denaturalization occurs through representations of the marginal *Other*: black lesbians.

The centre stands for *The National Theatre*, the very heart of the former colonial empire which England used to stand for. In the novel, the featured play the theatre is showing, *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, is directly associated with the Kingdom of Dahomey[56], a West African kingdom located within present-day Benin that existed from approximately 1600 until 1904. See Figures 7 and 8 for a geographical location.

Figure 8 – *Kingdom of Dahomey*

[56] The end of the kingdom was precipitated when King Béhanzin lost against the French. 1904 is indeed officially the date of the annexation of the Kingdom by the French colonial power. The "Amazons of Dahomey" are described by Fleur MacDonald as a "fierce all-female army" that "was so ruthless that European colonists called them the Amazons after the merciless warriors of Greek mythology". (MacDonald, 2018, n. p.)

Source: www.britannica.com

Figure 9 – *Kingdoms of Dahomey, Asante, Yoruba and Benin*

Source: www.britannica.com

By choosing Amma as the main character in the play, Evaristo shows that "the empire writes back"[57]. The play about a female fighter from Benin showing at The National Theatre indicates that black (British) women are brought to the fore, from supporting to leading roles. What can we say about *the voices* in Evaristo's narrative? Can the female black British subaltern speak? Female black British characters speak loudly since the very start of the novel, destabilizing the Occidental reader's expectations, which therefore makes up both an aesthetic and political act. Readers are also destabilised by what Evaristo has named "fusion fiction", or the paratactic narrative mode.

The generation which follows Amma and Dominique's, represented by Amma's daughter, Yazz, and her friend Waris, is equally political:

[57] This sentence was used to quote the title of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's postcolonial theoretical reference: *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989).

> Yazz is reading English Literature and plans to be a journalist with her own controversial column in a globally-read newspaper because
> she has a lot to say and it's about time the whole world heard her
> Waris from Wolverhampton […] is reading Politics and wants to become a Member of Parliament, to *re-pre-sent*, and will go down the community activism route first, à la Barack 'Major Role Model' Obama"
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 42, author's emphasis)

Yazz's political engagement at the university is also important as she aims at decolonising and feminising the university curriculum. These young women must prove that they ARE there and the point of the novel is to show that it IS an ongoing struggle. In a conversation with her dad, she asks him:

> what about bell hooks? she shot back, quickly scrolling down the reading list for her 'Gender, Race and Class' module on her phone
> what about Kwame Anthony Appiah, Judith Butler, Aimé Césaire, Angela Davis, Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, Julia Kristeva, Audre Lorde, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Steinem, V. Y. Mudimbe, Cornel West and the rest?
> (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 46-47)

Ranciére's words emphasise that "[t]he images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible" (Rancière, 2009 [2008], p. 103). By writing *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo aims at giving voice to characters most readers are not familiar with. Frustrated when it comes to the representation of black British women in British fiction, including herself, she brings diversity into British literature in the same way Amma does, bringing it into the theatre (Evaristo, 2019a, p. 434). *Girl, Woman, Other* suggests alternative ways of representing contemporary black British womanhood.

Experimenting against conventional narrative patterns may be disastrous, mainly when the impetus of breaking up with barriers does not come from the necessary needs encompassing the stories which writers intend to narrate. However, the experimental narrative techniques in *Girl, Woman, Other* are aligned with its content. Evaristo's novel talks about twelve marginalized heroines and her stories come to light via a decentred structure which subverts the mechanisms responsible for making her protagonists invisible within society.

Girl, Woman, Other is divided into five big parts and it is only in the fifth segment that the characters' lives interconnect. Let's look at figure 10 for a better understanding of the novel macrostructure.

Figure 10 – *Girl, Woman, Other* macrostruture

	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4	Part 5
Chapter 1	Amma	Carole	Shirley	Megan/Morgan	The party
Chapter 2	Yazz	Bummi	Winsome	Hattie	Epilogue
Chapter 3	Dominique	LaTisha	Penelope	Penelope	Grace

Each of these characters has her own journey of recognition and it is through them that readers may observe the alterity dynamics which keeps the narrative going. All these female characters are the *Other*(s) to society, in a sense that they are in a stage of submission to the patriarchal, heteronormative and racist modes. Evaristo's narrative tries to move her heroines from this alterity dynamics, by means of bringing them back from the margins to the centre.

Each chapter starts with the names of a character, focusing on the importance of the individuality of these heroines. We are not facing stereotypes of black female characters; we are facing Amma, Yazz, Dominique and the others… In the fifth part of the narrative, Evaristo manages to merge these *Selves*, highlighting the idea that individuality is built up from the *Other*'s perspective. All the characters are defined from their mutual social contacts. For instance, in Carole's chapter, the reader finds her teacher Shirley hateful, because she steals Carole's glory. Shirley steals to herself all the merit of placing Carole in Oxford. In Shirley's chapter, we meet a teacher who has always dreamed of changing her students' lives, but who becomes more and more rancorous due to the hardships of the educational system. So, we get to know each characters individuality not only by her own perspective, but also from the way she sees the *Other(s).*

Evaristo brings each character's voice to society as a whole. Each of her characters has her own narrative excerpt. She decentralizes the narrative in twelve equally relevant characters without placing any of them as "protagonists". This is what echoes the diasporic movement which is at the core of the novel. The decentralization of the narrative gives value to everything that was once neglected, filling in all the spaces which were once erased.

The twelve black British Amazon narratives function as different forms of broadcasting voices otherwise excluded from or neglected within the dominant political structures. They open up and address different forms of women's oppression that intersect with each other, thus reducing women's opportunities in the patriarchal world. They are

stigmatized due to their differences, which characterizes each of them in their own way. Evaristo's twelve Amazons do not give up their *Otherness*, despite the vulnerability caused by oppression, allowing them new spaces within their long individual journeys of self-knowledge and empowerment.

Through Evaristo's narrative, the story of "the rest" is put into focus, creating an interesting effect that is completely dependent on the reader. By recognizing their role in the nation's history, those characters who always found themselves out of the spotlight of the "The National" can see the depth of their own shadow thrown into hard contrast by the West's insistence to render the *Other* invisible. For all those who were stereotyped or not even allowed onto the stage, Evaristo's writing creates an emotional resonance to the always present search for the *Self* within our society.

Having led her readers among polyphonic journeys which tease one another, Evaristo gives emphasis to these fragmented individualities within a plural humanity, which is brought together by difference. The last moments of *Girl, Woman, Other* work as a big canvas, bringing together all the sketches of which the novel is made up. In the epilogue, the test on genetic ancestry works as a mortar able to fill in all the blanks which may possibly be left in the narrative. We are the products of a family tree. Thus, who are we and who are the others, but a big family? Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* intermingles realities. How can we be against that?

FINAL REMARKS

Akofena[58]

It's easy to forget that England is made up of many Englands.

Bernardine Evaristo[59]

Fiction writing appears instrumental in fighting patriarchal society and its institutions in order to raise awareness of the barbarism, violence, and inequality human beings, especially girls, women, and all the *others* face. Literary contributions by black British women writers provide an inspirational impetus to the contemporary woman to challenge traditions and customs imposed on them. Bernardine Evaristo has been raising significant and urgent questions about women's lives, leaving them to her readers to answer.

In Great Britain, black women have been facing numerous barriers for decades. To surpass them, fight for survival, and pave their way towards empowerment, they show resistance in politics, sports and diverse artistic manifestations. This thesis has examined patriarchal, heteronormative, and racist modes as some of the many reasons for women's resistance to fight against male-domination, ideological divisions, policies, traditions and cultures, and religion to claim the (trans)formation of their individual *id*-entities throughout different journeys of recognition. Through Bernardine Evaristo's selected novels, this work has addressed the role of literature in awakening society and exploring how writing helps in resistance and maintains the struggles for liberation.

Lara, *Soul Tourists*, and *Girl, Woman, Other* claim empowerment and emancipation. These novels provide readers with a wide-angled portrait of the intertwined relationship between histories of postcolonialism, migration, diaspora, and a transatlantic legacy which helps to define the complexity of being black in Britain today.

The ongoing search in Evaristo's novels for clues to individual pasts is, metaphorically, a *re*-turn, since her protagonists physical and psychological journeys of self-

[58] The Akofena is an Adinkra symbol. The crossed swords stand for courage, valour and heroism.

[59] EVARISTO, Bernardine. *Girl, Woman, Other*. New York: Grove Atlantic, 2019a. p. 450.

discovery traverse Africa as the location where they must piece together their paternal heritage. Her narratives can be described as literary domains where postmodern critical models interface to narrate the *bildungsroman* of characters whose ancestors suffer the *fate of Columbus*.

Evaristo's protagonists' individual journeys narrate their desire to reconstruct historical pasts and connect them to future history. Her texts share the image of *borderlessness* by blending prosaic and poetic elements together so as to present narratology that requires fecund imagination for deep and insightful hermeneutics. All the burden of interpretation, therefore, rests on readers with their knowledge or assumptions of conventional histories. Prose poetry allows automatic writing which operates on spontaneity and uses the promptings of the unconscious, at times bypassing critical rational thoughts in its narrative process.

Lara, *Soul Tourists*, and *Girl, Woman, Other* help readers to understand the importance of literature and cultural production as a means of representation. They highlight what Mark Stein (2004) called the *performative* power of black British writing: the power of fiction in the construction of black identities that can be integrated into Britain and its role in the modification of the image of the country; the redefinition of national identities. As a child of postwar immigrant parents, Bernardine Evaristo belongs to the third *Windrush* generation. Her fiction features different strategies in the reinscription of past African experience into Britain history, exploring what it means to belong in Britain in the present. Evaristo's novels circulate in the imaginative world of literary creation of an ethnically varied nation and they articulate the idea that the British are all British in a *hyphen-ated* way.

The principles of alterity and pain that connect Evaristo's characters in the macrostructure of her work are enhanced in the microstructure, since the flexibility of free verse allows her texts to slide fluidly between the languages and worldviews of each character. Behind this hybrid structure, which brings the verse of poetic forms to novelistic prose, there are still the basic characteristics of the novel, but renewed by Evaristo's aesthetic strength, which refracts her ideological projects in the composition of her books. After guiding the reader through a scattering of voices that provoke each other, Evaristo highlights the convergence of these fragmented individualities into a plural humanity, united by difference.

These (re)creations of a plural past in which black people have participated in the history of the British nation for centuries contribute to the acceptance of plurality in the

present. The understanding that Britain has had a long and complex history of immigration before postwar movements serves to enrich what it means to be British.

Bernardine Evaristo's attempt to (re)tell and (re)construct British history, through the lives of Lara, Stanley, Jessie, Amma, Dominique, and Yazz among others, brings to the fore different modes of oppression and exploitation that is prevalent in society. Through their journeys, Evaristo reveals how society has failed to accept differences without exclusions.

In accordance with the U. S. feminist civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer (2020 [1971]), "[n]o one is free till everyone is free". Evaristo has freed the narratives that were silenced for so long and through her characters, she illuminates how the trajectories of intersectionality will one day forge a society that offers equity, justice, and safety to everyone. Everyone enters a historical moment from a different entry point. Some tread the path their forebears walked, some do it with indent, some follow it unconsciously. Many of them are convinced they will take a different path from the one chosen by their parents, yet others feel trapped, bound to predetermined routes. Evaristo's characters do the contrary. They break their bonds and throw themselves into their individual journeys of (trans)formation, encompassing the multiplicity that is always in the present of human interaction.

Responding to the pressures of racism, sexism, and historic erasure, black British women's writing is frequently semi-autobiographical: recording traumatic histories and the reinvention of black female subjectivies. Using a range of perspectives to confront the silences of history, a number of writers have managed over the past decades to engage with, transcend, and counter multiple oppressions. They not only write themselves into the narrative of British history but also continue to create new voices and contexts from which to reconfigure their lives.

Transforming a statement that splits Western societies by means of unifying them in the realization that we all had mothers and fathers, Evaristo creates a new space for encounter between the *self* and the *others*. This philosophical approach shows how much influence our construction of *self* and *other* has on the way we act as individuals and how we interact with our society.

The globally visible violence against blacks has led people to unify in their demand for justice. It is everyone's history: when there is a story of the oppressed there is also the story of the oppressor. By acknowledging the relevance of ancestral history, the potential for a more complete sense of self can be accomplished. The story of the "Rest" is brought under the spotlight through Evaristo's novels, creating an interesting effect that is completely dependent on the reader that encounters her novels.

Fruits of a global family tree: who are we and who are the others, if not one big family? Evaristo's project, presented in her works not as a *manifesto*, but as well-crafted literary pieces, seems to be a reality in which differences are the main elements for us to connect with each other.

I hope this thesis contributes to the emancipation of all the *others* in patriarchal, heteronormative, and racist societies by resisting the forces which work to suppress their rights and *id*-entities. Women's writings are strong tools of survival. Black (British) Women must write and raise their voices against injustice, inequality and violence.

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