

“Presence into absence”: The Production of National Identity in *The Emperor’s Babe* and *Girl, Woman, Other*

Woman, Other

by

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Bernardine Evaristo's artistic project includes establishing, uncovering, inventing, and expanding a Black British literary canon. While growing up, Evaristo did not encounter any Black British women "who were born or raised here and writing our stories from this perspective" (72). Instead, Evaristo's literary inspirations "came from African Americans: Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Alice Walker were foremost among them, and of course Ntozake Shange... These were the writers who foregrounded black women's lives and in so doing gave me permission to write" (72). This canon of African American feminist and womanist writers informs the purposeful tensions in Evaristo's novel, such as the struggle between collective power and individual subjectivity, and universality and particularity. Although these authors provide that foundation for Evaristo, their presence also denotes a significant absence of representations of Black British women in novels. Evaristo elaborates that there is a specific hole in the literary market fueled by a misunderstanding of who buys and reads books: "Editors told black writers that there was no market for our voices, which demonstrates the extent of our marginality. Writers who drew on their formerly colonized countries of origin for inspiration might do well, but the black British-born experience was considered of little consequence" (76). Faced with the dismissal of her own experience, Evaristo is conscious that her writing must unsettle the difference between how the literary market conceives of Black British readers and how Black British readers interact with fiction.

To address the precarious presence of Black British writers in the British literary market, Evaristo foregrounds activism in her writing career. In a piece for *The Guardian*, Evaristo implores that "the future won't look after itself. We cannot take any developments for granted. If those of us who are considered marginal stop campaigning, we experience social regression... we must be wary because today's boom is not the result of a steady, incremental transition. It has

exploded out of a void” (“These are unprecedented times for black female writers”). Holding positions of power such as the president of the Royal Society of Literature, heading mentorships for younger Black British writers, and curating book series like *Black Britain: Writing Back*, Evaristo has made a project of gaining cultural capital in order to maintain this trend of greater visibility for Black British writers. Arguing that “commercial books underpin the publishing economy,” Evaristo depends on Black British fiction appealing to humanistic values to preserve its upwards trajectory in popularity: “This means convincing readers that good fiction transcends perceived differences. This means buying the books. This is how we continue to thrive despite the whims of the publishing industry” (“2023 Is A Breakthrough Year For Black British Women Novelists”). This sentiment echoes what Barbara Smith wrote in 1977 on the importance of Black Feminist criticism: “For books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about. For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered. Because of racism Black literature has usually been viewed as a discrete subcategory of American literature...” (268-269).

Compared to Evaristo’s later 2019 novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo’s 2001 verse novel, *The Emperor’s Babe*, “struggled to find an audience” (“How Bernardine Evaristo Conquered British Literature”). A cover of one of the novel’s physical copies uses a blurb from *Kirkus Reviews*, which calls *The Emperor’s Babe* “Lots of fun...like an episode of *Sex and The City* written by Ovid.” This review is a gross understatement of what the novel offers, but it is understandable that Evaristo’s publisher would use a review evoking an immensely popular television show in order to try to commercialize such a niche novel. In a *Callaloo* interview about her then-new novel, *Blonde Roots*, which was written completely in prose, Evaristo hints at the struggle for her previous verse novels to reach an audience: “As much as I love writing

poetry, I am a storyteller at heart, and nearly all my poetic endeavours since the early Nineties have been narrative. Poetry reaches such a tiny audience and with *Blonde Roots* I am so happy that the form of the novel will not be a barrier to readers” (1200). To achieve the commercial success for *Girl, Woman, Other* that her other publications did not receive, Evaristo experiments with the formal limits of prose to include poetic elements, like line breaks, that transform the traditional novelistic form. Evaristo strove for her writing to “be accessible to the general reader because I don’t want my work to appeal only to those with a doctorate in experimental fiction. I have found that once people get past the first few pages of how I present my stories on the page...they find them easily readable” (66). The resulting form is what Evaristo calls “‘fusion fiction’ – which employs a pro-poetic patterning on the page and non-orthodox punctuation, while fusing the women’s stories together” (67). To clarify, the novel consists mostly of prose, with Evaristo intermittently isolating lines via line breaks. This form is a stark departure from *The Emperor’s Babe*, which is squarely in the “traditional” verse novel form and contains no prose passages.

By entering into popular discourse, which in contemporary literature is arguably novelistic prose, Evaristo represents Black Britishness with a form that is more likely to elicit mass readership. Stuart Hall claims that “a politics of representation” must disturb the “unproblematic notion of the concept of representation,” which “images a reality that exists ‘outside’ the means by which things are represented” (244). Hall asserts, therefore, that “events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but that it is only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning” (244). To fulfill her artistic and activist ambitions that “spring from the same fountain of intention,” Evaristo invents

a form that functions within the conditions of commercialized literature, while also interjecting a poetic slant. Any reader of *Girl, Woman, Other* who feels lulled into straightforward prose will find themselves continually confronted with brief disruptions of poetry. The novel therefore is commercial, but Evaristo uses “pro-poetic patterning” to question the limits of commercialization.

Intervening in the British Archive: *The Emperor’s Babe*

Evaristo’s verse novel, *The Emperor’s Babe*, did not receive the level of acclaim and popularity that *Girl, Woman, Other* later achieved, but it begins interrogating the issues of national identity and Black subjectivity that define her career while also pushing the imaginative capacities of her readers to locate Blackness in the British archive. *The Emperor’s Babe* chronicles Zuleika, who lives in Roman Empire-era London, Londinium, during the early 200s A.D. Zuleika begins as the child bride to a Roman Senator, only to later start up an affair with Septimius Severus, a Libyan-born Roman emperor. Notably, though, a significant amount of Zuleika’s narrative deals with her being “more than just a pretty babe” (167). Along with cultivating her romantic and platonic relationships, Zuleika writes poetry and wants her literary status to rise to that of classical poets Ovid, Virgil, Horace, and Juvenal. Partly, Zuleika’s literary aspirations come from a desire for fame, but also, like Evaristo, she hopes to intervene in who is represented in widely-read literature and how they are represented. Despite these ambitions, her poems never reach any level of acclaim, nor do they successfully circulate beyond her friends and romantic partner. The novel’s form consists completely of blank verse, mostly in couplets with a few conscious deviations to mark significant events, like Zuleika’s first time enjoying sex or Severus’s death.

Evaristo cites Peter Fryer's book, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, as inspiration for *The Emperor's Babe's* premise. Opening with the line, "There were Africans in Britain before the English came here," Fryer begins his centuries-spanning historical survey with a brief subsection on "Africans in Britannia" (16). Evaristo latches onto Fryer's short analysis of Septimius Severus, "the Libya-born emperor who spent his last three years in what was then a remote province..." but crucially, does not make Severus her novel's central character (16). Reading Fryer's book, along with others by historians J. A. Rogers, Ivan Van Sertima, and Edward Scobi, made Evaristo "feel that I was part of a continuum in Britain and Europe. People of African origin were not just Johnny-come-latelys, but an integral part of the continent's roots" (61). Evaristo explains that *The Emperor's Babe's* "conceit is a direct challenge to the monocultural myth of British history..." (61). Part of deconstructing this monocultural myth goes beyond the straightforward representation of Black people living in Roman Empire-era Britain. Through Zuleika's poetic ambitions, Evaristo intervenes in Britain's archive of historical representations so that Black British literary production predates British national identity itself. Evaristo's representation of Zuleika establishes a precedent for her later depiction, in *Girl, Woman, Other*, of Amma's artistic production of national identity.

As Evaristo has previously pointed out, Britain's historical archive contains little about Black literary history or Black history in general. Evaristo experienced this glaring invisibility when discussing her project with the Museum of London's curators while she was completing a residency there. Even though Evaristo insisted it was possible for a Black girl to live in Roman London, the curators "dismissed the idea, because there was no archaeological evidence for it" (62). Years later, after the novel's publication, "archaeological science caught up with my creative imagination when more sophisticated DNA analysis of ancient human remains revealed

an African presence in Roman London two thousand years ago” (62). Stuart Hall contends that “the marginalization of the black experience in British culture” is not “fortuitously occurring at the margins, but placed, positioned at the margins, as the consequence of a set of quite specific political and cultural practices which regulated, governed and ‘normalized’ the representational and discursive spaces of English society” (242). The British archive, formed through cultural institutions like literature, theater, and museums, is an originating source for the marginality of Black voices.

The slow and arduous process of recognizing an “official” Black presence in the British archive demonstrates the sociopolitical mechanisms at work in official archives to try to maintain a homogeneous sense of history that excludes Black people’s presence. Jacques Derrida breaks down the etymology of the word “archive,” dating it back to the Greek word “arkheion.” Greek citizens who “held and signified political power,” termed “archons,” kept official documents at their house and were “accorded the hermeneutic right and competence...the power to interpret the archives” (9-10). Part of archontic power included consigning, which “aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner” (10). To represent Britain’s history as containing different cultures and races, which all have fluctuating relationships to power and oppression, is to contest the monolithic archive that lays the cultural foundations for national identity. Especially since this book was published at the turn of the 21st century, after Britain lost much of its empire and increasingly faced cultural, economic, and political instability in the 20th century, archival intervention is a powerful political tool for Evaristo to use to approach the formation of national identity.

Evaristo joins a lineage of Black authors who intervene in the archival absence of Black narrative representations. In an essay chronicling her process of writing fictional narratives about enslaved historical figures who have little archival presence, Sadiya Hartman asserts that narrative has the ability “to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance” (12). Hartman uncovers brief mentions of her subjects through historical documents like legal records, journals, and early literature, but Evaristo does not have such artifacts and faces incredulity from curators for “falsely” inventing the historical presence of a Black British population. Even though archival discoveries later vindicate her fiction, Evaristo faces a unique challenge in representing Zuleika’s voice. Representation of marginal figures is “an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive” (12). Rather than be discouraged by the dearth of Black representation in the British archive, Evaristo uses the “impossibility” of her project to generate the form and content of the story.

Zuleika may strive to be an epic poet, like Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, but her existence and the content of her literary aspirations are fundamentally inconsistent with the epic form. Bakhtin explains that the epic genre is a part of “the world of high literature in the classical era” (45). The genre requires a “world projected into the past, on to the distanced plane of memory, but not into a real, relative past tied to the present by uninterrupted temporal transitions; it was projected rather into a valorized past of beginnings and peak times. This past is distanced, finished and closed like a circle” (45). Evaristo represents Zuleika as an antithesis to the epic’s generic values

— she is unable to separate her poetry from an unresolved present that is deeply entrenched in her own experiences. As a Black teenage girl, who is the wife to a Roman senator, Zuleika's experiences concerning her immigrant parents, her transgressive friends, and her developing sexuality do not serve as the "right" content for poetry. Theodorus, her professor, especially focuses on her gender identity, saying, "...all the notable poets were men, except / for some butch dyke who lived with a bunch / of lipstick lesbians on an island in Greece, / but she was a minor poet..." (79). Besides pointing out the role of her gender identity in poetry writing, Theodorus tells Zuleika she'd "never write good poetry because what did / [she] know about war, death, the gods, and the founding of countries?" (79). Zuleika can never be a "*noster maximus poeta*" because she prioritizes the scope and experiences of her present world, the "contemporaneity" of which is a "reality of a 'lower' order in comparison with the epic past" (45). Uneasy with the poet's role of mythologizing feats of war and nationalism, Zuleika recognizes the poetic value of portraying her and her community's embodied experiences.

Despite her professor's insistence that she is unsuitable to be a "true" poet, Zuleika resists the hierarchization of poetic content and asserts her own poetic vision. She tells her father she wants "to read / and hear is stuff about us, about now, / about Nubians in Londinium, about men / who dress up as women, about extramarital / peccadilloes, about girls getting married / to older men..." (79). Instead of viewing poetry as some form of immortalization, Zuleika states, "And I don't care about the past / and I ain't writing for posterity— / he [Theodorus] also says I should write for readers five centuries hence. / Well I'm a thoroughly modern miss..." (80). This vision of poetry's function, as opposed to the epic's withdrawal from contemporary time and "lower" realities, aligns with the Black feminist project of demystifying Black experiences and emotions. In "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Audre Lorde emphasizes that women must "train ourselves to

respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before” (38). Given the restrictive limits of expression as Felix’s wife, Zuleika takes advantage of Felix’s promise to her father to “see to an education for her” (21). Zuleika employs her own poetic perspective to defy the generic elements of the epic’s form that marginalize her and her community’s experiences.

Besides resisting the epic’s generic restrictions and intervening in poetic representations, Zuleika’s poetic ambitions are her attempts at breaking out of her assigned roles. In her marriage to Felix, Zuleika occupies multiple positions: she is the child bride compared to the rare *pulcherrima* flower, while also being an exotic sexual object like “the mysterious, dark ones / from the south,” which Felix feels empowered to abuse sexually (20). The structure of her life demands that her voice be secondary, if not often invisible, in the patriarchal discourse that her father and her husband participate in. Evaristo depicts Zuleika’s objectification most plainly the times when Felix has over “salubrious visitors” (70). In these dinner parties, Zuleika recognizes that she “will never be a Grand Dame,” and reflects, “But a dusky maiden knows /...that she is a knock-out objet d’art; / though it was a touch / disconcerting years ago, when she was eleven” (70-71). Instead of being consigned to this status, Zuleika uses poetry to challenge her status as an art object and to regain agency through art. When later explaining her poetic ambitions to her father, Zuleika “At last I’ve found a way to express myself / I know they’re not brilliant yet, but you see, / If I keep at ... Watch ... this ... space!” (80). Poetry allows, as Lorde explains, Zuleika to “formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare to make real (or bring action into accord with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.” (37). Zuleika

regains a sense of agency in her poetry, but she remains unrecognized for crossing the boundaries of poetic form and content.

Although Zuleika uses poetry to break out of assigned gender roles and gain subjectivity, she conversely tries to use those roles to facilitate a forum for her poetry and her subjectivity. In “The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity,” hooks defines subjectivity as the process that occurs when “one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one’s own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined” (23). Zuleika says she wants to throw the party because “I’ve been scribbling away for years now, / I want exposure. I want recognition, / I want a standing ovation!” (166). She wants men, especially Severus, to “know of my talent through the acclaim / of an adoring public, to see / I was so much more than just a pretty babe” (167). Knowing she cannot get an audience through regular forums, Zuleika comes up with the “recitatio-cum-orgy,” which allows for her to “read [her] poems and the orgy / will pull in the crowds” (167). Zuleika transforms her home for the Verbosa Orgia and, through that transformation, uses the once-oppressive domestic space that silenced her as the setting for her liberation. However, her creation of this new forum is not enough to give her the needed literary platform and ends up reproducing Roman patriarchal and literary values.

Form prevents Zuleika from being recognized or canonized in her time period. Zuleika’s refusal to write about war and conquest, along with her gender identity, precludes her from joining the canon of classical poetry. Ruminating on Virginia Woolf’s pivotal feminist work, *A Room of One’s Own*, Rachel Cusk argues Woolf’s observations about literature’s patriarchal values still hold true: “A book about war is still judged more important than a book about ‘the feelings of women’...The woman who confines herself to her ‘female’ reality is by the same

token often criticized. She appears to have squandered her room, her money” (168). Evaristo constructs an origin story for the devaluation of women’s literary voices with Zuleika’s interactions with Londinium’s poetry scene. The star of Zuleika’s “Verbosa Orgia,” the part-orgy and part-poetry reading she hosts with her friends, ends up being Hrrathagherwood, the “very real Authentic Pict,” who fulfills the audience’s desire for poetry about war and conquest. With emphatic gestures and movements, Hrrathagherwood yells his poetry: “*There’re only three groups of fowk I hate, / De Romans who’re trying tae thief Scotland / De Celts who’ve sold oot tae de Romans, / An de Christians who didnae wint nae bugger / tae enjoy thaimselfs ...*” (170). Because the crowd is so enamored by the “exotic charm of his Pictish patois” and “how brilliantly he *did* Anger,” Hrrathagherwood receives a standing ovation (171). Through this performance, Evaristo shows how the veneration of poetry about war extends to settings outside of the classical canon. So enchanted by Hrrathagherwood’s male rage and his “authentic” point of view, the audience does not care about the poem’s literary merit. Zuleika only finds out later from Venus that Hrrathagherwood’s “real name is Robbie” and “he’s not a real Pict” (185). By portraying the audience’s admiration of Hrrathagherwood’s “authentic” poem about war and then exposing that authenticity as a sham, Evaristo satirizes the glorification of patriarchal themes like war in literature.

Zuleika’s work is in direct opposition to what Bakhtin describes as the “wholeness” of the literature of “great organic poets of the past” (31). Bakhtin states the epic world is “impossible to change, to re-think, to reevaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive, immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value” (43). Part of Zuleika’s creative innovation comes from valuing fragmentation and ambivalence over the epic’s drive for completeness. These artistic choices are in line with what Cusk values in *A Room of One’s Own*: “Woolf concedes that the

woman writer might have to break everything — the sentence, the sequence, the novel form itself — to create her own literature” (173). Zuleika necessarily breaks with those generic elements of the epic form to make poetry her own. Evaristo represents this divergence in “*Identity Crisis: Who is she?*,” which Zuleika reads at the Verbosa Orgia:

*Am I the original Nubian princess
 From Mother Africa?
 Does the Nile run through my blood
 In this materfutuo urban jungle
 Called Londinium?
 Do I feel a sense of lack
 Because I am swarthy?
 Or am I just a groovy chick
 Living in the lap of luxury?
 Am I a slave or a slave-owner?
 Am I a Londinio or a Nubian?
 Will my children be Roman or Nubinettes?
 Were my parents vassals or pharaohs?
 And who gives a damn! (174-175)*

With Zuleika’s poem, Evaristo depicts a clash in ancient Roman literary sensibilities and Zuleika’s interrogation of the self and national identity. Evaristo explains, in a *Callaloo* interview, that this poem “is satirical. *The Emperor’s Babe* merges the past with the present, exploring both, and this poem is really a reflection on the kinds of cliched poems prevalent in some performance poetry communities today — it’s not making a deeper statement about

Zuleika” (1200). However, Evaristo’s evaluation seems like an unfairly simplistic understanding of Zuleika’s poetic voice and conflicts with the text itself. No matter the literary quality of Zuleika’s poetry, she forges her own transgressive literary path. Along with being the only woman to read at the Verbosa Orgia, her work diverges from the epic’s traditional form and unsettles the “national epic past,” “national tradition,” and the “absolute epic distance” which define Bakhtin’s approximation of its content (39). Zuleika not only questions her place in the “national epic past” but also raises issues about how future generations of Black people will locate themselves in Londinium.

Zuleika’s disruptive poetry echoes many feminist authors who have written extensively about form’s relationship to subjectivity. Hélène Cixous writes of wishing “woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs” (876). For a woman to liberate her own voice and cultivate her own subjectivity is to then allow for the liberation of other women. Cixous then asserts that women who have “always functioned ‘within’ the discourse for man” must “dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of” (887). By resisting both the patriarchal signifier of war and the epic genre, which constitutes the then literary canon, Zuleika tries to foster her own subjectivity outside of the patriarchal societal framework she lives in.

However, it is Zuleika’s resistance to the epic genre, along with the forum she chooses to exhibit her work at, that leads her to fail to enter the literary canon. The method Zuleika used to draw an audience in for her reading turned against her. Once the first few poets read their work,

the party turns into “an almighty / piss-up, feel-up and throw-up, the floor was a pit of writhing flesh, grunts and gasps” (173). When Zuleika reads her work, her audience is lacking: “I found the courage to re-focus my eyes / and saw that the only person listening was Tranio / who nodded encouragingly at me, / in between uncontrollable yawns” (175). Faced with this lack of attention, she then leaves “the room, for to strip and open / [her] legs was the only reason to remain” (175). Evaristo uses this moment to show how, when faced with the devaluation of her poetry and the reasserted link between her worth and her sexuality, Zuleika gives up on her literary ambitions and its connection to her subjectivity. hooks expands on how this break can happen: “Without a context of critical affirmation, radical black female subjectivity cannot sustain itself” (52). Unable to rely on a community to recognize her subjectivity, Zuleika mistakes the lack of acknowledgment as a sign for her to stop writing. She tells her friends, “No one cheered, said I was brilliant / or the Next Big Thing. Nothing. / I’ve had it with poetry. Finis. / My future lies with Severus, I’ve decided, / I’m going to make damn sure he marries me” (184). Zuleika’s sudden abandonment of poetry seems like a drastic and, frankly, immature pivot after she spent so much of the novel working on poetry and asserting that she is “going to become a great poet” (45). Yet, Evaristo orchestrates this shift to show how, especially in that time period, a Black British woman’s voice might fail to circulate in the public realm. It is a radical act to utilize her poetic voice and claim her subjectivity when the patriarchal societal framework she lives in is built upon her silence and submission. To then revert to that position of going unheard in the domestic space that is predicated on her silence makes Zuleika think the subjectivity she cultivated in her poetry is useless. What once was so empowering becomes another signifier of who she cannot be. Since she is not aiming for a utopian revisionist history of the London literary scene, Evaristo strategically demonstrates Zuleika’s failure to enter the poetic canon in

order to reflect the absence of Black British women's voices for centuries of British literary history.

By representing Zuleika's poetic aspirations and failures, Evaristo stages an intervention in the British literary archive to imagine how Black British people tried and were unable to join national literature. Scholars such as Katharine Burkitt and Justine McConnell have previously explored how Evaristo's form contributes to a conversation about British history and the epic genre. In their analyses, they attempted to link Bakhtin's theories with *The Emperor's Babe* before, but they mistakenly only prioritized the epic form in this work without adequately exploring the critical role of the novelistic genre in Evaristo's project. Burkitt's application of her theory of the "post-epic" to *The Emperor's Babe*, and McConnell's efforts to rehabilitate the term in her analysis of Evaristo, do not address how Evaristo's formal resistance to classical traditions lies in her novelization. Burkitt explains the "post-epic" has the "transformative intention" to confront the epic and is "a form which is aware of its genealogy and sets itself in relation to it; however it also operates as a dialectical critique to epic ideology" (12). Although Burkitt's and, subsequently, McConnell's analysis using this term make brilliant points about British nationalism and Evaristo's complication of British identity, they do not adequately consider how the novel's form works and, instead, they sometimes use Zuleika's character to re-energize the values of classical epics. As McConnell herself states, "...many of the features which Burkitt lists as constituting the category are in fact important to some classical epics..." (106-107).

Evaristo does not create a new form of epic but applies the novelistic genre to the epic form as a way to anchor its content to real, contemporaneous issues. To echo Bakhtin's analysis of those who only refer to a novelized poem as a "romantic poem," I do not think Burkitt can call

The Emperor's Babe a “post-epic” and then believe they have “exhausted the subject” of genre (34). Elements of the novel offer innovative methods to express Zuleika’s subjectivity and the work’s relationship with time that the epic genre, even the “post-epic” genre, cannot provide. Bakhtin argues there are three characteristics that define the novel: “(1) its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-linguaged consciousness realized in the novel; (2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image; (3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness” (37). It is the novel’s relationship with contemporary time that Evaristo uses to complicate the epic genre’s desire to mythologize the past and separate it from the present.

For example, Evaristo employs anachronism, particularly in language, to generate a dialogue between the present and the imagined past. The novel’s language switches between “standard English” and a “lexical concoction of Latin words, a Scots-Latin pidgin invention, Americanisms, cockney rhyming slang and neologisms” (61). One powerful instance that illustrates the tension produced by this dialogue starts when Felix’s sister comes over and declares, “A real Roman is born and bred, / I don’t care what anyone says” (52). In reply, Zuleika’s “tongue became wood. I could never speak in her presence / or to Felix’s cronies, who spoke as if they owned the world. Well, / I guess they did. My words revealed me, / their ornate diction was a mask” (52). Zuleika’s patchwork of dialects signifies the diverse, lower-class community she grew up in. In “Amo Amas Amat,” she mentions how her father, for his stores, “employs all sorts to work in them, / a Syrian, Tunisian, Jew, Persian, / hopefuls just off the olive barge from Gaul, / in fact anyone who’ll work for pebbles” (12). Yet, Zuleika continues, “...my father spoke pidgin-Latin, / we ate off our laps in the doorway, / splattered with mud. Yet I was

Roman too. / Civis Romana sum. It was all I had” (52). Zuleika’s voice can only be imagined through a mixture of past and present language, but in the dialogue between different dialects and clashing spatiotemporal dimensions, Evaristo locates Zuleika at the intersection between a demythologized British history and Britain’s “inconclusive present-day reality” (63).

Through her application of the novelistic genre to the epic, Evaristo is, therefore, able to portray Zuleika both as the girl struggling to become a subject in her own time while also proposing her as a figure invisible from the British archive. After Felix finds out about Zuleika’s affair and locks her away, Zuleika dies with neither an established literary reputation nor a guarantee that her remains will be marked after death. Zuleika implores Alba, her childhood friend, “Will you bury me, Alba?” and, after Alba protests Zuleika’s “moribidity,” Zuleika says, “I’m being pragmatic, Felix will chuck me out / as carrion...” (215). This threat to proper burial echoes Alice Walker’s investigation of the circumstances around Black literary figure Zora Neale Hurston’s death and the search for her unmarked grave. As Walker writes, “*We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone*” (150). With Zuleika’s death, Evaristo calls on a global history of devaluing Black women creatives and then erasing their legacy. It is clear to Evaristo and the reader that Zuleika is not a literary genius, but she represents the unrealized potential of Black British literary voices in the British archive. The epilogue, titled “Vivat Zuleika,” contests the finality of Zuleika’s death. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “vivat” as a Latin word “word of acclamation wishing a person (long) life and prosperity, or expressing applause or approval” (“Vivat”). The speaker, who could debatably be Evaristo, the reader, or another figure, assumes Zuleika’s body and voice: “It is you I have found to wear, Zuleika...” (219). After finding

Zuleika dead on the couch, the speaker continues, "...I slip / into your skin, our chest stills, drains / to charcoal. You have expired, Zuleika, / and I will know you, from the inside" (219). In embodying Zuleika after death, the speaker promises to continue this representation of a British Black literary voice. Evaristo fulfills the task of her epigraph, which quotes Oscar Wilde: "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (9). She establishes an unfinished continuum between Zuleika and the Black British present and creates a Black British presence in the British historical archive. Through *The Emperor's Babe*, Evaristo thereby presents a different imagination of the British archive and intervenes in its exclusive history.

Polyphonic Form and Subjectivity in *Girl, Woman, Other*

Evaristo describes *Girl, Woman, Other* as a "polyphonic paean to black British womanhood and to non-binary people, in all our flawed complexity" (66). Commissioned by BBC to write a short story for the "centenary year of Dylan Thomas's birth," Evaristo initially conceived *Girl, Woman, Other* as a narrative poem inspired by Thomas's play, *Under Milk Wood* (65). Lengthening and changing the narrative poem into a novel, Evaristo saw the work as an opportunity to expand representation: "Just as Thomas had honoured the inhabitants of a small Welsh fishing village in Wales, I decided that I would do so with black British women, who have been barely visible in fiction" (65). According to Anna Russell's *New Yorker* profile of Evaristo, "Originally, she had wanted to include the stories of as many Black British women as possible, but she eventually narrowed it down to around a dozen, whose connections to one another are teased out chapter by chapter" ("How Bernardine Evaristo Conquered British Literature"). This fervent dedication to getting a variety of Black British women and nonbinary voices in her novel aligns with the generic potential of novels to represent a plurality of diverse experiences.

To be clear, the novel's mosaic of characters has stakes far more imperative than simplistic notions of "diversity" of voices. Each character complicates any sense of straightforward ideological unity under the umbrella of "Blackness" while complicating the relationship between Blackness and Britishnesses. This structure aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel, the creation of which he attributes to Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Bakhtin claims that "the utterly incompatible elements" that constitute the polyphonic novel "are distributed among several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses; they are presented not within a single field of vision but within several fields of vision, each full and of equal worth; and it is not the material directly but these worlds, their consciousnesses with their individual fields of vision that combine in a higher unity, a unity, so to speak, of the second order, the unity of a polyphonic novel" (43). Although they intersect with each other, Evaristo grants each of her twelve principal characters their own space and voice, and within their section, she does not reach beyond the scope of their own consciousness. 19-year-old Yazza, who cares about her university "squad" and finding footing within intersectional feminist politics, does not yield to nor does she change 93-year-old Hattie, who is most invested in continuing the legacy of her family's farm and voted to leave the European Union. Evaristo does not attempt to divine an ideological throughline for her characters because that would compromise their individual consciousnesses.

In the cultivation of these individual consciousnesses, Evaristo uses the polyphonic form to facilitate distinct discourses for her characters. Bakhtin explains the interdependence between consciousness and discourse: "Self-consciousness as the dominant in the construction of a character's image requires the creation of an artistic atmosphere that would permit his discourse to reveal and illuminate itself" (82). None of these elements can be "neutral," but "everything

must touch the character to the quick, provoke him, interrogate him, even polemicize with him and taunt him; everything must be directed toward the hero himself, turned toward him, everything must make itself felt as discourse about someone actually present, as the word of a 'second' and not of a 'third' person" (82). For instance, childhood friends Amma, a theatrical director, and playwright, and Shirley, a public school teacher, clearly exemplify their distinct discourses through their physical appearances. Amma's fashion, which her daughter Yazz describes as "a mad old woman look," is based on "her own *sod-you* style" (3). Part of this style includes "year-round her peroxide dreadlocks are trained to stick up like candles on a birthday cake / silver hoop earrings, African bangles and pink lipstick / are her perennial signature style statement" (3). Shirley, in contrast, ridicules her co-workers as a "scruffy lot" and is proud to sit "neatly in her prim skirts and court shoes..." (223). When Shirley encounters Yazz after the play, she observes that Yazz has caught the "unseemly afro virus" (427). Condemning Yazz for her "wiry frizz," Shirley reveals that "her mother put her under the hot iron comb at the age of twelve and she hasn't seen or felt her real hair since" (427). Through these descriptions, Evaristo represents Amma and Shirley's respective relationship with respectability politics, especially with regards to Black hairstyles, and illustrates different registers of Black British experience, even between childhood friends.

The polyphonic form is also in line with the theoretical grounding of those African American feminist writers she alludes to in her memoir. Specifically, Evaristo works to bridge the constantly-fraught gap between collective power and individual subjectivity. Audre Lorde writes that "we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all" (115). "Our future survival," Lorde continues, "is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality" (122).

Although Lorde explores a host of differences, Evaristo's polyphonic form highlights the differentiations between Black British women's ideologies about national identity. Bakhtin writes that, in polyphonic novels, "all the voices playing a truly essential role in the novel are actually 'convictions' or 'points of view on the world...'" which makes them "brilliantly staged dialogues" (55). In a *British Vogue* piece about inclusive publishing, Evaristo explains that one of her primary artistic ambitions is to expand "the narrative of who we are in Britain. In my novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, the twelve interconnected primarily black womxn are aged 19 to 93 and span a range of sexualities, classes, cultural backgrounds, occupations and family relationships. My motto has long been to put presence into absence" ("Literature Can Foster And Express Our Shared Humanity"). Evaristo's use of the polyphonic novel ensures that she does not write a representational text of a single Black British woman but rather invites the simultaneity and complexity of multiple voices.

For example, dialogic elements that create *Girl's* polyphonic narrative become most obvious at the end of the novel. In the last few pages of "The After-party," while all the characters are in contact at the National Theatre, Dominique and Amma are in dialogue about the current state of feminism: "you're being way too cynical and doom-mongering, Dom / I'm being clairvoyant, any serious political movement that relies on beauty to sell it is doomed / oh come on, the media's obsession with beautiful women is nothing new, look at Gloria, Germaine and Angela in their youth, brilliant women but hardly ugly ducklings..." (437). By ending the last section before the dialogue with Amma and Dominique debating modern iterations of feminism, Evaristo concretizes a microcosm of the conversations already happening in the book between the characters' chapters.

Evaristo stages these dialogues by pairing the stable connection of narrative juxtaposition with the fluctuations of temporalities and spaces. Bakhtin observes how Dostoyevsky, in relation to the polyphonic form, "attempted to perceive the very stages themselves in their simultaneity, to juxtapose and counterpose them dramatically, and not stretch them out into an evolving sequence...to get one's bearings on the world meant to conceive all its contents as simultaneous, and to guess at their interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment" (52). With both falling under "Chapter 2," Carole's section precedes Bummi's, and their mother-daughter relationship presents a presumably easy narrative connection to make between the two. However, these sections are not only a study of mother-daughter relationships but a critical investigation into how the assimilation of immigrants into British identity affects different generations. Having only lived in Britain, Carole, a first-generation British Nigerian, carefully curates her appearance of respectability, including her outward appearance, to fuel her ambitions: "Carole amended herself to become not quite them, just a little more like them" (137). In Bummi's section, Evaristo travels outside of Britain to include Bummi's childhood in Lagos, her immigration to Britain, and her struggles to raise Carole after becoming a widow. From this perspective, the motives behind Bummi's loyalty toward her Nigerian identity are clear. She despises Carole's attempts at changing herself, arguing, "my point is you are Nigerian /...no matter how English-English you pretend to be" (158). Even when the two make up, Bummi notes, "her daughter would soon belong completely to them" (159). By the end of their respective sections, there is not an ideological resolution on how to navigate Nigerian heritage in Britain, and Evaristo has mapped out completely different, non-linear timelines for them that sometimes overlap and sometimes do not.

Evaristo uses formal techniques, such as nonlinearity and the generic elements of the verse novel, to expose and navigate how characters experience Blackness and Britishness in postmodern conditions, where essentialist identities are outmoded, but collectivity still provides key grounds on which to facilitate dialogue. Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernism is “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (24). To then locate the “subject” in postmodernism, Hutcheon suggests, is “to recognize differences —of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on. To situate is also both to acknowledge the ideology of the subject and to suggest alternative notions of subjectivity” (416). hooks notes, under postmodern conditions, the Black American experience “has been and is characterized by continued displacement, profound alienation and despair” (3). However, she believes this “hopelessness creates longing for insight and strategies for change that can renew spirits and reconstruct grounds for collective black liberation struggle” (3). Evaristo, therefore, interacts with a postmodernist form to challenge historical conceptions of national institutions in a way that refigures who and what makes up British identity. Her form breaks with and re-establishes national identity in order to propose Britishness as such grounds for Black liberation.

Evaristo’s hybrid formal choices navigate the tension between integrating Black British voices into national identity while not reproducing the oppressive elements of the nation as an institution. Evaristo’s fusion fiction form includes line breaks that disrupt the normative flow of prose and make a case for the novel to be somewhere in the murky generic realms of prose poetry and verse fiction. Like *The Emperor’s Babe*, Evaristo depends on the novelistic genre’s relationship with contemporaneity to anchor her project. In the case of *Girl, Woman, Other*, this means using the novel to retroactively challenge and update the boundaries of nationhood. In

addition to Bakhtin's definition, Timothy Brennan argues that the novel has "historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles" (55). Brennan continues, "The novel's created world allowed for multitudinous actions occurring simultaneously within a single, definable community, filled with 'calendrical coincidences' and what Anderson calls (after Benjamin) 'traverse, cross-time'" (57). The novel's generic ability to compose nationhood, along with its promise of a centralizing narrative, presents a direct method for Evaristo to challenge representations of Britishness. Evaristo herself recalls "the expansiveness of a novel made it the most suitable form to" write her parents' story in *Lara* (58). Although the novelistic genre informs her exploration of national identity and time, Evaristo also uses elements of prose poetry to challenge the process of nation-forming in the first place.

Charles Baudelaire first sparsely defined "the miracle of poetic prose" in the preface to his work *Paris Spleen* as "musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple enough and striking enough to suit lyrical movements of the soul, undulations of reverie, the flip-flops of consciousness" (26). Calling prose poetry "Baudelaire's generic enfant terrible," Michel Delville explains that the common definition of prose poetry boils down to two assumptions, the first of which "relies on an all-too-common equation of poetic language with the lyric; it postulates that a poem should be a relatively short piece of writing concerned primarily with the expression of feelings" (2). The second assumption "posits that the degree of stylistic and imagistic 'density' of poetry allegedly distinguishes it from the dull, commonplace, matter-of-fact language of prose" (2-3). With these definitions in mind, it would be disingenuous to call *Girl, Woman, Other* a prose poem, but the novel certainly uses prose poetry as a critical element of its hybrid form. Evaristo's prose poetic elements do include challenging the hegemonizing inclinations of the

novel genre in nation formation. Richard Terdiman asserts that “by turning the language of dominant discourse against itself, the prose poem devised a strategy for counter-discourse which could begin to situate the oppressive character of the dominant itself” (270). Prose poetry does not achieve a “critique” of dominant discourse by being located in “some imagined space of ‘objectivity.’ Rather, the locus and the means of critique are to be found within the realm of the dominant, but at its most distant edge, its point of greatest fragility” (270). Evaristo’s challenge to the dominant discourse of nationhood in her poetic prose comes from the form’s ability “to flow freely — from interiority to exteriority, from the past to the present, from one’s character’s narrative to the next” (66). This formal choice destabilizes the novel’s “one, yet many” project to singularize voice and blurs the line between public and private spheres.

The line breaks happen particularly when a character's consciousness is threatened and, therefore, perception fractures. As one example, when Carole is gang-raped by a group of boys, line breaks disturb the flow of prose, and time slows down. Evaristo shifts from the long, fragmented sentence "then she was flat on her back on the ground, damp grass against her bare back, legs and arms, she wanted to sleep, just five blissful minutes, she felt her eyes close, when she opened them, she couldn't see, she'd been blindfolded, her arms were pinned above her head / how had her clothes come off?" to the staccato lines: "then / her / body / wasn't / her / own / no more / it / belonged / to / them" (125-126). Carole's experience of sexual assault transforms her experience of time and compromises the linearity of her narrative voice. In breaking with prose, Evaristo allocates a great deal of space to show the reader how rape can cause physical and conscious disembodiment.

Evaristo's postmodernist approach to form, in tandem with her usage of the polyphonic novel, functions to develop the individual consciousnesses of her Black British characters while

also putting them in dialogue with each other. With these characters, Evaristo centralizes this dialogue around Britishness to critically consider how those with marginalized identities factor into and constitute the nation. hooks says that, in postmodern culture, the "decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent ruptures, surfaces, contextuality and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined to narrow, separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of every day" (5). While still approaching the arena of national identity with incredulity and an unrelenting gaze at its faults, Evaristo conceives Black British women and non-binary people's critical transformation of British identity to be worthy grounds to cultivate liberatory coalitions.

In Dialogue: Amma and the Production of British Identity in Theater

Evaristo capitalizes on the polyphonic novel's formal capabilities to represent multiple consciousnesses to then explore the potential of national identity to be inclusive of Black subjectivity. Specifically, Amma's section crucially grounds that dialogue with her production of *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* at the National Theatre in London. *The Last Amazon* is a framing device for the novel — Amma and her anxieties before opening night launch the novel, and the last chapter, "The After-party," acts as a focal point for multiple characters to interact with each other. Although Amma's character is often a mirror to Evaristo, this framing device does not purely serve to centralize herself as a narrative voice. Theater, especially done at such a level as the National, acts as a formal touchstone for current cultural values. As the reflection of cultural values, the National also serves as an interpretation of national identity. Frantz Fanon posits, "A culture is first and foremost the expression of a nation, its preferences, its taboos, and its models.

Other taboos, other models are formed at every level of the entire society. National culture is the sum of all these considerations, the outcome of tensions internal and external to society as a whole and its multiple layers" (177). The National is a tangible space that houses the discourse of what constitutes Britain. Shifts in ideals and values in British identity reflect themselves through the performances there.

Ideas of what is a "worthy" choice for a cultural production for the National Theatre have unsurprisingly been fraught. Effingham Wilson, one of the first advocates for a British national theater in the 19th century, displays the ideological foundations behind the institution. In his pamphlet "A House for Shakespeare," Wilson, as quoted by Loren Kruger, writes, "...the importance and expediency are suggested of purchasing, perhaps by national subscription, on the part of and for the people, some theatre where the works of Shakespeare, the world's greatest moral teacher, may continually be performed" (38). Conflating William Shakespeare as the singular, moral representation of British culture, Wilson underscores a persisting ideology in the history of the National Theatre from Laurence Olivier onward. Amma's play challenges Shakespeare, and other such classic plays, as the most "worthy" representations of British theater. Roland, Amma's co-parent, even laments that she "has waited three decades before being allowed in through the front door," partially because she never took "his advice and directed a few multi-culti Shakespeares, Greek tragedies, and other classics, instead of writing plays about black women which will never have popular appeal, simply because the majority of the majority sees the majority of *Les Nègresses* as separate to themselves, an embodiment of Otherness" (406). From the beginning of her career to her present production, Amma refuses to accept a strict definition of what national theater is.

In the context of the novel, the National is the territory in which the curation of cultural production, along with the popular consumption of such productions, constitutes and reinforces a sense of national identity. Before *The Last Amazon*, Evaristo portrays how Amma's fringe status in mainstream British theater laid the ideological foundations for her productions. In the 1980s, after going to her first "black women's group" with Dominique, Amma formed Bush Women Theatre Company, which "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 motion / On Our Own Terms / or Not At All" (14). Amma keeps this motto up until, after years on the "fringe," her work is accepted at the National when "the mainstream began to absorb what was once radical and she found herself hopeful of joining it / which only happened when the first female artistic director assumed the helm of the National three years ago" (2). It is only when a woman takes over the institution that the National restructures its hierarchy of power and becomes more open to marginalized voices.

Given the changing relationship with marginalized people and agency over British national identity in the National's structure, Amma is able to implement her own vision of how cultural production should impact nationhood. Her production aligns with Stuart Hall's assertion that "how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life" (Hall 245). Evaristo's writing career, after years of living both intentionally and unintentionally in the margins herself, parallels Amma's theatrical career. In fact, Margaret Atwood was quoted in *The New Yorker* saying Evaristo "had been toiling in the salt mines of literature for a long time"

(“How Bernardine Evaristo Conquered British Literature”). Evaristo, therefore, represents her own literary journey in Amma’s section and portrays Amma seeking an intervention in who fronts these "regimes of representation" and what representations are thereby produced in hegemonic institutions. In an argument with her communist, white friend, Sylvester, about the ethics of producing a show at the National, Amma defends herself: "she argued it was her right to be directing at the National and it was the theatre's job to make sure they attracted audiences beyond the middle-class day-trippers from the Home Counties" (33). *The Last Amazon* is not only an opportunity to intervene in how cultural productions compose British identity, but the play, as the National’s theatrical project, also broadens who engages in that national-cultural production.

In entering such an established space of cultural production, Amma nonetheless has a heightened awareness that her engagement with a hegemonic institution cannot be an uncritical one. Through formal, spatial, and narrative elements in *The Last Amazon*, Amma deterritorializes the National. As defined by Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorialization entails a "rupture" in the territory when "segmentary lines explode into a line of flight" (30). Deleuze and Guattari explain deterritorialization through the example of a wasp and an orchid: "The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen" (30-31). Deleuze and Guattari continue, “It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.). But this is true only on the level of the strata — a parallelism between two strata such that a plant organization on one imitates an animal organization on the other” (31). Most importantly, deterritorialization is “not imitation at all but a capture of code,

surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp” (31). Like the orchid with the bee, *The Last Amazon*, takes the form of the National’s national identity and deterritorializes it to apply to her production. In turn, the National, as the wasp, reterritorializes *The Last Amazon* by expanding where a radical representation of Black identity can be located. Both refuse to let the other form a hierarchical structure, and this interaction increases the territory of Blackness and Britishness to include each other.

Amma and her friend, Dominique, start out wanting to be actresses, but they are always racially type-casted “for parts such as a slave, servant, prostitute, nanny, or crim” (6). Amma discontinues her attempts to break into the theatrical mainstream after one particularly racist audition: “Amma was shorter, with African hips and thighs / perfect slave girl material one director told her when she walked into an audition for a play about Emancipation / whereupon she walked right back out again” (6). Fanon explains that, as a Black person, “I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the “idea” that others have of me but of my own appearance...I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality” (177). At the beginning of her career, theatrical hegemony, which the National embodies, narrows Amma’s ability to represent and be represented. When Amma secures space at a hegemonic institution to put on her own production, she creates a narrative that intentionally unsettles representations of Blackness in British theater and British identity in general.

The Last Amazon is about queer Black women who fight as warriors for Dahomey, a pre-colonial West African kingdom. Contrary to the popular representations of Blackness Amma and Dominique encounter while auditioning, Amma portrays Black women “who were trained to

climb naked over thorny acacia branches to toughen up / who were sent into the hazardous forest for nine days to survive on their own / who were crack shots with muskets and could behead and disembowel their enemies with ease” (24). Since “blacks have typically been the objects, but rarely the subjects, of the practices of representation,” Hall remarks that “the struggle to come into representation was predicated on a critique of the degree of fetishization, objectification and negative figuration which are so much a feature of the representation of the black subject” (242). Amma imbues her production with these critiques of Black representations but complicates Black subjectivity. The titular role, Nawi, is a “legendary general who shocked foreign observers with her fearless ferocity,” but with all her power, she is complicit in wars to “provide captives for abolished slave trade in the Americas” and enforces the patriarchal structure of the Dahomey kingdom (25). Through Nawi, Amma resists what Hall describes as outdated “black politics” that employ “the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject” (246). Besides tackling the “apolitical” inclusion of multiple races/ethnicities in the cast of classical plays (i.e. Shakespearan and Greek plays) and the notion of uncomplicated Black goodness, this representation of Black subjectivity figures into Amma’s larger deterritorializing project.

Amma’s play locates British national identity beyond the geographic boundaries of the United Kingdom and its imperial history. Amma does not produce a neo-colonizing revision that imposes Britain in a precolonial African kingdom but allows regularly-separated identities and spaces to become each other. These mutual “becomings” are not the British version of Toni Morrison’s theory of the “Africanist presence” in American literature that “invents” Africa in order to dominate and control representations of Blackness (25). Rather, as Deleuze and Guattari write, “Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the

reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further” (31). The Last Amazon proposes that precolonial Black warriors could be representative of Britishness, while the National, as a British national space, then claims those representations for itself.

Furthermore, Amma spatially deterritorializes the National by transgressing the boundaries between the audience and the performance. Evaristo textually represents Amma's use of projections: "video projections show her battles in action, thunderous armies of charging Amazons brandishing muskets and machetes / swelling towards the audience / spine-chilling, terrifying" (25). After the play, Roland describes the "Benin Amazons stampeding towards the audience brandishing weaponry and uttering war cries" as "terrifyingly realistic and without a doubt a *coup de théâtre*" (409-410). Although a projection in a 21st-century theatrical production is not itself necessarily transgressive, this projection simulates the impossible presence of an army of precolonial Black warriors flooding a historically-exclusive national space and threatening its audience. The project uses transgression, as theorized by Michel Foucault, which “carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes (perhaps, to be more exact, to recognize itself for the first time), to experience its positive truth in its downward fall?” (34). The projection exposes the distinction between this representation of Blackness and the British audience and transgresses that boundary to formalize the inevitable expansion of British identity to be inclusive of the spatial and temporal complexities of Black subjectivity.

However, this formal transgression alone is not enough to deterritorialize the National and British identity. The ephemerality of the projections and the production itself builds on this transgression to resist the uncritical consumption of Black British representation by a majority-

white audience in a hegemonic institution. In the case of Black representations like Amma's production, hooks warns that "the commodity of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the other but denies the significance of the Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (33). Evaristo purposefully calls attention to the financial sponsors whose presence represents what hooks cautions against. After the play, Sylvester "points an enfuried finger at the Boring Suits, as he calls them, who line the party's perimeter, the representatives of the multinationals who beef up the theatre's finances with sponsorship, who stand apart, smiling awkwardly, desperate to be part of the luvvie fun" (407-408). However, the theatrical form inherently resists the type of commodification hooks discusses. Peggy Phelan elaborates, "Performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive. It is this quality which makes performance the runt of the litter of contemporary art. Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital" (148). The audience buys tickets and consumes Amma's production, but there is no way for the audience to circulate the play beyond their memory. The representation they experience is solely embodied and yet impossible to possess, obstructing the possibility of consumer cannibalism.

In Dialogue: Shirley and the Production of British Identity in Education

In line with the novel's polyphonic form, Evaristo writes her characters so that each section could be in dialogue with any other, even if they do not fall under the same "chapter." When reading Amma and Shirley's section in conjunction, then, a dialogue emerges about how differently two Black women can enter national, hegemonic spaces with the intention of

reconciling Black subjectivity with British identity and what effect their individual perspectives have on redefining historically exclusive institutions. While Amma deterritorializes the National Theatre and expands British identity to articulate Black subjectivity, Shirley entirely believes national education has within it the necessary structure to meld Black subjectivity with British identity, and therefore, she does not actively institute personal and pedagogical measures to alter her participation in the institution. These differing approaches to national institutions come, in large part, from how other elements of their identities affect Amma and Shirley, what socio-spatial dialectics pre-exist their arrivals, and how each character interacts with their respective national institutions at the beginning of their careers. It would be too simplistic, and monologic, of Evaristo to make Shirley a foil to Amma. However, Shirley's narrative serves to question and complicate Amma's success in figuring Black subjectivity into British identity at an institutional level.

Like Amma's desire with her original theater company to "be a voice in theatre where there was silence," Shirley, at the beginning of her career, aims to use her position and pedagogy to benefit her community and the community's perceptions of her initially inform the trajectory of her pedagogical approach (15). Shirley starts her first day at the Peckham School for Boys and Girls with ambitions of being the teacher "who'll be remembered by generations of working-class children as the person who made them feel capable of achieving anything in life / a local girl made good, come back to generously pass on (218). By "making it to university to read History and thereafter gaining a Certificate in Education," Shirley clarifies that, in her family, she is "one who's made it, not her brothers" (218). While her brothers "became clerks pushing pens," Shirley's career as a teacher makes her "the Family Success Story" (218, 219). Before even teaching her first class, Shirley is established, in her family and in her community, as an

exemplary case of how education can secure a status of success. Success, in this case, means a higher education degree that leads to a career that promises financial upwards mobility. Even further, Shirley configures success as something teachable. She sees teaching as an opportunity to facilitate such success for local children who share her identity.

The uplift project rooted in Shirley's pedagogy echoes many theorizations of racial uplift. Racial uplift, first formally recognized in African American communities through discourses such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington's ongoing debate in the Progressive Era, worked to rehabilitate and mobilize Black-identifying people to find liberation under oppressive structures (Moore). Du Bois, in "The Conservation of Races," writes that Black people's "one haven of refuge is ourselves, and but one means of advance, our own belief in our great destiny, our own implicit trust in our ability and worth" (134-135). Although the British-born daughter of Caribbean immigrants, Shirley views her position in a similar manner: "...Neil Armstrong walks on the moon with the caption: one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind / like her / every step she takes will raise these children up, she will leave no child behind... white chalk on its wooden tray ready for her to inspire the mixed-ability classes of this comprehensive in this multicultural neighborhood" (220). Again, before even teaching a minute of her class, Shirley designates the relationship between herself and her students. Her belief in "raising" the students up positions the students as located below her due to their class and race. With her credentials and her position in the school, Shirley believes that she is at the hierarchical top, with the ability to usher everyone she can to mobilize to join her.

Unlike Amma, who works to upend the hierarchical structures that exclude Black subjectivity from British identity at an institutional level, Shirley depends on a hierarchical dynamic between herself and her students to maintain her "successful" status. Her reliance on the

hierarchical structures in place in education leads her to be unable to fulfill her promise to use her position to help everyone find her level of success. Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, stresses how "during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors.'" The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity" (27). Although connected with her community and her family, Shirley relies on certain conventions of prestige that hegemonic institutions, such as higher education, provide. Shepherding students to that outcome cannot help but clearly define the boundaries between success and failure with little room for alternate ways of being.

Despite her hierarchical understanding of socioeconomic mobility through education, Shirley instills in her students the sense that the historical events they learn about in her class are intimately intertwined with the formation of their subjectivity. She can produce a direct, dialogic relationship with her students that Amma would not be able to replicate in her production. Both Amma and Shirley deal with audiences, but Shirley can change the form of her class, via her lesson plans, based on her audience's needs. On her first day of teaching, Shirley addresses the students, "...we need to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past and to deepen our understanding of who we are as the human race...we are all part of a continuum, repeat after me, the future is in the past and the past is in the present" (221). Shirley deconstructs the ideology that history is a fixed object for students to memorize. By constructing her class as a space with real consequences that are intricately connected with the actions of the students, Shirley uses the classroom to open up a dialogue that will impact them all. Freire insists that "only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the

authenticity of the student's thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication" (45). Evaristo emphasizes Shirley's shift into "we" and, even though Shirley does not give up her position as an authority figure, the classroom turns into a space of collective learning. Shirley bases her class in a dialogue where she is as entangled with history as her students are.

Shirley's pedagogical approach is therefore not punitive towards her students' harmful actions, but uses the classroom environment to contextualize their choices. When a few students "turned up with swastika motifs stuck on their pencil cases and National Front badges brazenly brandished on their blazers," Shirley gives a lesson on Hitler's Final Solution and shows photos of concentration camps (221). When "shock of it" causes "a hundred questions," Shirley answers the students and has them engage with the material, like the historical drawings she presents (221). Another incident like this occurs "when race wars broke out in the classroom," where again, Shirley tailors her lesson plans to show how her students' realities are based on historical precedents (221) Through the repetition of "miss! miss! miss!" Evaristo illustrates the level of participation Shirley's students have in learning about the scope of history and its function in the reality of their everyday life. Shirley does not transform the school's space, but she does create an environment that challenges the monologic nature of national education.

Shirley's pedagogical values point toward the notion that, through their educational efforts, a student can cultivate their subjectivity and intervene in who represents British identity. After a particularly fraught faculty meeting, she tells her husband, "...I went to grammar school, come from working-class stock and believe in *egalitarianism über alles*...at the same time, the truth is that hierarchies of power and privilege won't disappear, every historian knows this, it's

innate to human nature and inherent in all societies in all eras and equally manifests in the animal kingdom, so I can pretend otherwise. / my job as a teacher is to help those who are disadvantaged” (228). Shirley here echoes Horace Mann’s famous declaration that “Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men — the balance wheel of the social machinery” (“Report No. 12 of the Massachusetts School Board 1848”). To further connect the relationship between education and the power to constitute British identity, Shirley points out that “our nation’s current Commander-in-Chief, who’d never have made it to the top of the political pile otherwise, love her or loathe her, it’s the principle of social mobility I’m arguing here” (229). In Shirley’s view, British public education is the most accessible and effective way for those with a marginalized identity to redefine who gets to represent Britishness.

Still, Shirley’s pedagogical alignments skirt around the sociopolitical mechanisms that generate the category of “the disadvantaged,” and the educational institution she so admires as “equalizing” threatens the preservation of her own subjectivity. In her first end-of-year review, the headmaster tells Shirley that her “easy rapport with the children,” “excellent exam results,” and “exemplary teaching skills” make her a “credit to her people” (222). This evaluation causes Shirley to feel pressure to be a “great teacher *and* an ambassador / for every black person in the world” (222). Being positioned as representative of, and yet exceptional from, all Black people, Shirley cannot compose herself within the strictures of the school’s space. Fanon writes, regarding his experience of Black consciousness, “I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. . . . I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors” (174). Her pedagogical approach is therefore mediated through this crisis of position. As a

teacher, Shirley is an institutional agent and sees mobility and the assumption of national identity as a core pedagogical motivator. However, as a Black woman, she is at a distinct disadvantage in this project because, to resist marginality, she must be the “essential Black subject” Amma resists in her theatrical representations.

Besides this omnipresent crisis of subjectivity, Shirley must deal with the consequences of the school’s socio-spatial dialectic, which differ completely from those of the National Theatre. Geographer Edward W. Soja’s concept of the socio-spatial dialectic critiques cultural theorists’ overdetermination of social and historical relations and posits that “our spatiality, sociality, and historicity are mutually constitutive, with no one inherently privileged a priori” (18). To begin with, the National’s physical structure was built only for the purpose of housing theatrical performances (“Our History”). In contrast, Evaristo begins Shirley’s chapter by describing the actual school building as “a former Victorian workhouse with two rectangular blocks of concrete attached incongruously to both ends of it / approached by what was once called Paupers’ Path / leading up to its castle-sized doors” (217). The conversion of a workhouse into a school building may seem like an innocuous piece of history, but the structure’s spatial history does not disappear with a reassignment of its use. Soja posits, “...social life is materially constituted in its historical geography...spatial structures and relations are the concrete manifestations of social structures and relations evolving over time, whatever the mode of production” (127). Evaristo’s emphasis on the former use of the space cannot help but gesture towards a foregone conclusion of its dialectic. Students must attend school to achieve a certificate that promises a degree of financial stability. No matter the teacher’s intentions, they facilitate the capitalist motivations of British education. The physical building, a historical structure with modern, “incongruous” additions, is a signifier of attempts at uncritically pairing

progressive values with historically oppressive institutions. Even though it is not a workhouse, the school is still a place of production where teachers reproduce institutional ideologies and try to construct ideal British citizens.

The National, despite its history as an exclusive space, has an interior that, in tandem with Amma's production, can integrate Black subjectivity into British identity in a way that Peckham cannot. Its external structure mirrors Peckham's spatial tension between the past and present. Even though the National was always meant for theatrical use, its exterior dons its "Brutalist grey" aesthetic (2). Similar to the modern addition of concrete buildings to Peckham, the National tries "to enliven the bunker-like concrete with neon light displays these days and the venue has a reputation for being progressive rather than traditionalist" (2-3). This exterior gestures to an attempt to renovate the ideals of its former exclusivity. However, unlike Peckham, the National's interior includes a "fan-shaped auditorium, modelled on the Greek amphitheatres that ensured everyone in the audience had an uninterrupted view of the action..." (23). The amphitheater's structure materializes, in a national space, the theatrical value that no one is excluded from visually accessing the play. While Shirley wants to leave "no child behind," the structure's historical use contributes to the dialectic that perpetuates exclusivity (220). Although the National's audience does not inhabit the same publicized space as the school, the theater's structure allows for a type of accessibility not necessarily built into the school's structure. Thus, the school becomes what Soja describes as "a tense and contradiction filled interplay between the social production of geography and history" (129). Public education promises an equal chance of success for each student, no matter their background, but factors like the school's physical structure in dialectic with the pedagogical approaches of teachers and the imposition of a national curriculum lead to the institution not fulfilling that promise.

Intentionally or not, Evaristo's representation of Peckham's socio-spatial dialectic echoes Louis Althusser's argument that education has replaced religion as the "dominant Ideological State Apparatus" (225). Althusser points out that, in the education system, "Each mass ejected en route is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfil in class society..." (226). Although he lists many roles for students to potentially gain an "appropriate" ideology for, Evaristo's depiction of Peckham's particular socio-spatial dialectic draws the interpretation that the British government is employing the state education system to cast marginalized students in "the role of the exploited" (226). The changing population of the surrounding community doubtlessly affects the shift in what roles the institution is teaching toward. Penelope, a fellow Peckham teacher, clarifies this change in her section: "in the space of a decade the school went from predominantly English children of working classes to a multicultural zoo of kids coming from countries where there weren't even words for please and thank you" (298). Given these shifting demographics of Britain, a conservative government would take advantage of the educational ISA's conditions, which include an "obligatory (and not least, free) audience of the totality of children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven" (227). Through Shirley's section, Evaristo posits Britain's changing population, along with Margaret Thatcher's rise to power, leads to a critical shift in pedagogical standardizations, which only further alienates marginalized students.

A crucial change to Peckham's socio-spatial dialectic, one that Amma does not have to contend with, is the national implementation of a curriculum that compromises Shirley's dialogic pedagogy and compels her to give up trying to redefine British identity through education. Shirley recognizes that teachers' relationship with pedagogy and their students, in general, "was bad and got worse when the Thatcher government began to implement its Master Plan for

Education” (235). To further the standardization of education, Shirley details how “then the Gestapo HQ enforced lesson plans, a new swear word in Shirley’s ever-expanding canon: National Curriculum! league tables! lesson plans! / all of which left no room for responding to the fluctuating needs of a classroom of living, breathing, individualized children” (235). The British national curriculum thrives on what Freire calls the “banking method,” which “inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the intentionality of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (49). As evidenced by Amma’s dedication to experimental plays that will “never have popular appeal,” Amma can retain her dialogic form which values Black subjectivity when she enters a national space (406). Under the circumstances of the national curriculum and its banking method, the institution severs Shirley from the methods she used to help her students form their subjectivity and intervene in who gets to claim British success.

These restrictions to Shirley’s form and pedagogy, an element which Amma would not encounter in her production, ultimately cause Shirley to fail in her attempts to redefine British identity for marginalized communities and lead her to reproduce an exclusionary culture in her class. She starts to view her students and herself as adversaries: “what was she? / a Cog in the Wheel of Bureaucratic Madness / when Shirley drove up to the school in the mornings / moments before the inmates charged up the Paupers’ Path to destroy any sense of equilibrium / its monstrous proportions settled in her stomach / like concrete” (236). Peckham’s social, historical and spatial factors come together to push Shirley to become one of the “Oldies,” a group of teachers who resent teaching and students, who she once looked down upon for their cynicism (239). Rather than emphasize a student’s relationship with history, Shirley succumbs to

the “banking theory and practice,” which “as immobilizing and fixating forces, fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings...” (49). On top of that, Shirley wishes “she could send these brats back to when the school was a workhouse, make them spend a day or two crushing stones to make roads or bones to make fertilizer” (238). While Shirley fantasizes about teaching at private schools, “the sticking point was the hard-won Education Act of 1944 that made school free for all children had been the subject of her thesis at university / when push came to shove, she couldn’t sell out on it” (240). Even with this supposed dedication to public education, Shirley isolates a select group of students and labels the rest of the general student population as unsalvageable: “she took a few promising children under her wing every year, pupils of obvious intelligence who were unsupported by their families and might otherwise end up as prostitutes or crack addicts or something” (248). Shirley’s uplift project becomes accessible to her students only when they demonstrate some level of potential, which is determined solely by her. Through this reproduction of cycles of oppression for her marginalized students, Shirley does not redefine British identity but instead reinforces its historically exclusive status.

While Amma’s production of Black British identity benefits from the national space, the national institution of education debilitates Shirley’s attempts at reconciling Blackness and Britishness. Granted, Evaristo’s representation of Shirley might first appear to condemn her and conclude that art is the most effective way to produce Black British identity. In dialogue with Amma’s section, though, Shirley’s section illustrates the myriad structural elements in national spaces that thwart even the least radical of liberatory intentions. When theorizing about radical Black subjectivity, hooks asks, “How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization

but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization? Opposition is not enough. In that vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become—to make oneself anew” (45). Perhaps, then, one of the fundamental flaws for those marginalized people who enter national institutions, like the education system, with liberatory intentions is not realizing that a key part of their work will call for creative practice. Shirley would need to make a move equivalent to Amma’s deterritorialization of the National Theatre and, in such a highly regimented realm like education that is increasingly hostile towards non-standardized pedagogy, that type of resistance might trigger greater long-term consequences to her career. Evaristo does not resolve Shirley’s section or her narrative arc in the novel, with some hollow gesture at relief. As per the polyphonic form, Evaristo allows Shirley’s section to interrogate the success of Amma’s production and also, sees that Amma’s section interrogates the failure of Shirley’s teaching.

Past and Future Interventions

In the conclusion of her memoir, Evaristo admits, “The person I am today no longer throws stones at the fortress. I sit inside its chambers having polite, persuasive and persistent conversations about how best to transform outmoded infrastructures to accommodate those who have been unfairly excluded. The rebel without has become the negotiator within, who understands that we need to sit at the table where the decisions are made, and that enrolling people in conversations is ultimately more effective than shouting at them (satisfying as that can sometimes be)” (108). When I, a 25-year-old white-leftist-feminist-lesbian-etc. etc., first read this passage, and the memoir in general, I felt a degree of disappointment. Part of me desperately wants myself, and the feminist authors I respect, to throw stones or to “be a renegade lobbying

hand grenades at the establishment,” as Evaristo described Amma’s early career (2). However, as Evaristo has clearly illustrated in her work and activism, writers who accept their marginalization do not get the audiences needed to make direct changes to societal mechanisms like cultural representation and national identity. Those are the real-life arenas where transformations need to occur. How, then, do feminists, specifically Black feminists, enter hegemonic institutions without reinforcing the oppressive structures already in place?

In *The Emperor’s Babe* and *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo shows that attempts to enter any hegemonic institution require a level of disruption to and transformation of form in order to sustain one’s subjectivity and to alter the culture of domination in place. *The Emperor’s Babe* uniquely portrays a Black British girl’s failure to be remembered in the British archive. Nevertheless, in representing Zuleika’s presence and poetic ambitions, the novel intervenes in the British archive to include her. Its form as a verse novel signals a shift in Evaristo’s formal sensibilities to accommodate a larger audience, but like Zuleika, in some ways, Evaristo cannot achieve her goal with the novel. Through *Girl, Woman, Other*’s polyphonic form, Evaristo shifts the focus of her novel to encapsulate the range of Black British women and non-binary people’s experiences more fully. This novel manages to accomplish a break from normative form, all while becoming a breakthrough success, commercially and critically. Evaristo challenges and expands British identity to include Black British voices who are so easily marginalized. In doing so, she also proposes national identity as a potential ground for Black and feminist liberation.

We have yet to see precisely how Evaristo’s hegemonic alignments and formal innovations will or will not, in the long term, change the literary landscape and representations of British identity at large. After all, the novel and its success leave us with several big questions: What happens after Amma stages her production at the National? What changes after Evaristo

wins the Booker Prize? Regardless of future outcomes, Evaristo's work highlights the intersection of subjectivity, national identity, and form, which should serve as a future lens to explore other feminist, particularly Black feminist, literature.

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