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# ”Putting Presence into Absence”: The Politics and Aesthetics of Voice in Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019)

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École Normale Supérieure de Lyon  
Département des langues, littératures et civilisations étrangères  
Parcours études anglophones

Mémoire de recherche de Master 1  
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Sous la direction de Madame le Professeur Vanessa GUIGNERY  
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## Table of contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1. The political project of giving a voice through textual representation ....</b>	<b>14</b>
1. The voice and the text– an oxymoron, a controversy, or a political commitment?.....	14
a. The silent nature of reading and writing .....	15
b. Who gets to tell whose stories?.....	17
c. Literature and politics: can <i>Girl, Woman, Other</i> help reshape the public space? .....	20
2. Voice as a metaphor for presence and power .....	22
a. Power and self in the synecdoche of the voice .....	23
b. Finding agency in silence.....	26
c. The costs of speaking up .....	28
3. Making invisibility visible.....	31
a. The dispossession of Black British women.....	31
b. Who listens when Black British women speak? .....	34
<b>2. The resistance to aesthetic narrative norms relating to voice and silence</b> <b>.....</b>	<b>38</b>
1. “Fusion Fiction”, the rendition of speech acts, and empathy .....	39
a) Fluidity and empathy: the confluence of characters’ voices and the narrative voice ...	39
b) The idiosyncratic representation of silence .....	44
2. The sound of one’s voice: different forms of English in the novel .....	46
a) First-generation immigrant and non-standardised English.....	47
b) The problematics of code-switching.....	51
c) Deconstructing hierarchies through the use of slang .....	54
3. The use of a humorous narrative voice.....	56
<b>3. The decentring effects of polyphony.....</b>	<b>60</b>
1. Challenging singular narrative authority .....	61
2. A pluralism of experiences to defy misrepresentation and racism.....	64
a) Resisting stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities.....	64
b) Challenging racist, essentialist stereotypes .....	69
3. “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 103): a new vision of feminism.....	74
a) A heterogeneous vision of womanhood.....	75



b) The (in)compatibility of motherhood and emancipation .....	77
c) Towards a decolonial feminism .....	81
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>90</b>

## Introduction

When Bernardine Evaristo won the Booker Prize in 2019 for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), the resultant media coverage made it appear as if the prize had kick-started her career as a writer. In fact, Evaristo's literary career had already been a well-oiled machine before she received the prize as she had been writing theatre plays, prose, and poetry for almost 40 years. In addition to the publication of two poetry collections and seven novels, Evaristo has recently set foot on non-fiction ground with *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (2021), a book in which she shares her insight on the art of writing, and *FEMINISM* (2021), an essay about the role that women of colour played in British art that Evaristo wrote for the Tate Britain Look Again series ("The National Collection of British Art Reimagine for Today").

As the authors Ben Okri, Candice Carty-William, and Caleb Azumah Nelson point out in a 2021 interview with *The Guardian* (Iqbal), the use of the label Black<sup>1</sup> literature increases the risk that readers see literature from Black British writers as outside of the literary canon. Yet, they deem it necessary to have a means of emphasising the specificity of Black British literature and hence they suggest referring to literature that deals with Black experiences (Iqbal). Evaristo herself explains that she "embrace[s] the term 'black writer' because in a racialized society, [she] thinks it's important to be focusing on these narratives" (Evaristo, *Manifesto* 176). Thus, a recurrent feature of all her fictional works is her striving to experiment with form and literary conventions and to explore "the hidden narratives of the African diaspora" (Evaristo, "Author Statement"), as she puts it herself. Her first novel *Lara* (1997) can be interpreted as an attempt to explore both sides of her family tree and her identity as a young woman with mixed heritage. Evaristo was born in 1959 in London to a British mother and a Nigerian father and has lived in London ever since. In interviews, she frequently talks about her experiences with racism as a child and her desire to learn more about her parents' origins. Her second novel, *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), tells the story of a young black slave girl at the time of the Romans in London and therefore traces back the presence of African people in the British Isles to over two thousand years ago. In *Soul Tourists* (2005), Evaristo narrates the road trip and love affair of a "mismatched" Black British couple, who set out to explore the South of Europe and parts of the Middle East. Although Evaristo mixes "prose, poetry, prose-poetry, scripts and other non-fiction devices" (Evaristo, "Soul Tourists") in the novel to rewrite the white narrative of European history, the style in *Soul Tourists* foreshadows her journey towards prose writing.

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<sup>1</sup> We have chosen to use the capitalised version of the term Black throughout this work since Bernardine Evaristo herself uses this form when she refers to the women in *Girl, Woman, Other* and to herself. There is also a case to be made for the use of "black" although all three variants (black, "black" and Black) have been criticised. For a more in-depth discussion of this issue, see Courtois.

The theme of the African diaspora is equally present in *Blonde Roots* (2009), a neo-slave narrative that borders on satire and parody as it revises the founding principles of the transatlantic slave trade. *Blonde Roots* not only subverts the black slave/ white slaver narrative but also modifies the geography and historical chronology of the slave trade. Hence the readers play an active part in imagining history upside down as they follow a young white woman being enslaved. In *Mr Loverman* (2013), Evaristo alternates between the perspective of Barrington Jedidiah Walker, a 74-year-old closeted homosexual, and his deeply religious wife Carmel. The novel explores the Caribbean community in Great Britain and exemplifies Evaristo's talent for crafting characters and using humour to write about difficult, political subjects.

Thus, Bernardine Evaristo has a highly experimental approach to writing the past and present stories of the Black diaspora, and her literary style is equally as creative. Moreover, her initial interest in poetry is visible in *Lara*, and *The Emperor's Babe* as both are novels written in verse. Since then, she has published several works of fiction, her most recent novel, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) being a mixture of prose and poetry that Evaristo herself calls "fusion fiction". Apart from commas, question or exclamation marks, and the odd full stop used only to signal the end of a very conclusive paragraph or line, the novel dispenses with punctuation. Sometimes several words are separated by dashes in order to account for a character's overflow of thoughts or emotions; contrarily, when a painful or challenging event occurs, single words occupy an entire line so as to suggest, for instance, a character's loss of words. Nevertheless, *Girl, Woman, Other* could be considered the peak of Evaristo's experimentalism not only for its style but also for its content. The novel narrates the stories of twelve Black British women whose lives are interconnected and who differ in age, class, sexual orientation, and gender. While these women differ greatly, they are all united by the racism and sexism they encounter in their daily lives. Or to put it differently, as suggested by the "Other" in the title of the book, they all share the experience of being othered in British society. Even if Bernardine Evaristo does not consider herself a postcolonial writer, the notion of othering which is strongly related to Great Britain's colonial past in the novel, is one reason why a postcolonial reading of *Girl, Woman, Other* can be valuable. In more general terms, the novel can be said to explore the experiences of Black British women whose lives are shaped by the consequences of the former British Empire in the present and therefore, it testifies to Sathnam Sanghera's claim that

[E]mpire explains the feeling that we are exceptional and can go it alone when it comes to everything from Brexit to dealing with global pandemics. [...] Empire explains how some of our richest families and institutions and cities became wealthy. Empire explains our particular brand of racism, it explains our distrust of cleverness, our propensity for jingoism. Let's face it, imperialism [...] explains nothing less than who we are as a nation. (Sanghera 14)

Accordingly, the novel gains much from a postcolonial reading but should not be reduced to it.

Although in the novel, each woman has her chapter, they tend to make appearances in other chapters as well. The twelve chapters are framed by the opening night of a theatre play one of the characters is directing; yet, there is no single protagonist or rather there are twelve equally important protagonists, and thus the novel can be labelled polyphonic. Taken together, the polyphony of characters' voices and perspectives, the metaphoric value of the women's voices and the innovative rendition of speech acts and the narrative voice in this "fusion fiction" make for a particular aesthetics of the voice in this novel. The role that the voice plays is even more noteworthy with regard to Evaristo's intentions when she wrote the novel: in an interview, the writer explained that her motivation in writing *Girl, Woman, Other* was to give visibility to Black British women by giving them a voice and "put[ting] presence into absence" (Sethi). This phrasing is striking as it unites the two polar notions of absence and presence and suggests an almost mechanical replacement of the one by the other. It is a testimony to Bernardine Evaristo's literary activism through which she has attempted to change the literary institutions from within in the past decades. Starting with the co-foundation of the first all-black, female theatre company in the United Kingdom (Theatre of Black Women) in 1982, she has initiated or participated in several more schemes designed to increase the representation of the marginalised in the literary world. Other examples such as The Complete Works, a mentoring programme for poets of colour or her position as the curator of *Black Britain: Writing Back* (Evaristo, "Activism & Advocacy"), a book series bringing back non-fiction writing from poets of colour that went out of print, show that Evaristo wants to influence literary power relations that determine who is printed, sold, and read. Jointly with Evaristo's resistance to literary conventions and her endeavour to tell the stories of the marginalised, Evaristo's attempts to decentre the institution of literature can be interpreted as a decolonial effort since Walter D. Mignolo maintains that in a decolonial practice it is "not enough to change the content of the conversation, [but] that it is of the essence to change the terms of the conversation" (Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience" 162).

Consequently, we argue that a decolonial reading of *Girl, Woman, Other* can bring out several interesting tensions that come together in the novel and that in attempting to give visibility to Black British women, Evaristo merges politics and aesthetics in her writing. Since we consider that the novel hinges on the polymorphism of the concept of the voice, we would like to study the politics and aesthetics of voice in *Girl, Woman, Other* and the function they

have in transforming absence into presence. An examination of the role that the voice plays in the novel exposes three main centres of interest: the political nature of representation in literature and the political reading of the metaphor of the voice; Evaristo's experimentalism and her destabilisation of literary conventions and traditional narrative techniques; and the challenging of master narratives through polyphony.

In the first chapter, we will therefore study the relationship between the written text and the political conception of voice. This will lead us to wonder whether a written text is capable of giving a voice to somebody and whether literature can have political effects. Even if it is Evaristo's intention to give a voice to Black British women, this does not mean that all her characters actually have a voice in the novel: most of them have lived through the experience of being silenced at one point in their lives and some women even actively choose to remain silent. Can silence be a wilful act of agency and is the act of speaking up always rewarded by society in the novel? In her endeavour to give these women a voice, Evaristo also chooses to address and make visible their invisibility in British society. Thus, we will examine to what extent the representation of silence can foster an understanding of the lives of Black British women and their needs.

The second chapter of our work will be devoted to the aesthetics of voice, without, however, dismissing the political dimensions of Evaristo's resistance to European literary conventions. This resistance can be seen in the workings of "fusion fiction" which makes for an innovative representation of speech acts, but also of silence on the page. Postcolonial studies have shown how language has been an instrument to oppress the colonised and how their native languages have been considered impure as compared to standard British English (Ashcroft et al. 7). As a consequence, another line of investigation will deal with the question of the relationship between standardised British English and other forms of English that can have different implications for first- or second-wave migrants. Evaristo's decision to include variants and slang in the novel is yet another example of how she challenges literary conventions and power relations in British society. A great quality of Evaristo's style is her witty writing which comes out in *Girl, Woman, Other* through the ironic comments of the narrative voice. We will therefore discuss the importance of humour for the political dimensions of the novel.

In addition, polyphony challenges different kinds of what Jean-François Lyotard termed master narratives, as we will see in chapter three. How can the resistance to the generic characteristics of realist novels in *Girl, Woman, Other* be interpreted as a rejection of singular, authoritative narratives? It is indeed difficult to classify the novel in generic terms since it appears to work without a traditional plot or a single, central message, and more generally

speaking, the novel resists such large umbrella terms as prose or poetry. The novel also rejects ideas about the singularism of experiences, identities, and characteristics that often underlie racist assumptions about certain marginalised social groups. Racism tends to see people in essentialist terms and to create narratives that rob people of their individuality. We suggest that *Girl, Woman, Other* counters racist narratives, a claim we will examine through the prism of polyphony. We also consider that the novel takes a stance on feminism because all the women have opinions about and experiences with feminist movements. Even if some of the women never meet throughout the novel, their utterances and their actions in relation to feminism can be said to create a larger dialogue which is only visible to the reader. This dialogue reinforces the impression that these women form a heterogeneous group and it emphasises their relationality, which is especially visible in the last chapters of the novel in which some of the characters meet. Since relationality but also pluralism are important concepts in decolonial theory, we will see to what extent Evaristo may illustrate a decolonial feminism through the use of polyphony in the novel. We will therefore analyse how feminism is portrayed in *Girl, Woman, Other*, and how it may criticise the movement's former tendencies to reject the differences among women and their oppression.



## **1. The political project of giving a voice through textual representation**

In her 2000 essay “The Colour of Silence”, scholar and poet Joan Anim-Addo traces back the presence of Black female writing in British literature, naming the first (and only) Black British women Mary Prince and Mary Seacole who managed to use their voices and be published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her conclusion is that in 2000 the colour and gender of silence was still Black and female, a fact which does not only pertain to the world of fiction but extends beyond since the “published word [...] remains a powerful word in Western society” (Anim-Addo in Newland 42). Anim-Addo therefore calls out for the new millennium to be the era of Black women writers to speak up and fight the omni-present silencing of marginalised people. With *Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo appears to follow Anim-Addo’s directive as she aims to transform the absence of Black British women into presence in her writing. In order to give them a voice, she draws on different narrative devices, but she also explores the silence that some of these women choose and sometimes portrays it as a better alternative to speaking up. Hence, Evaristo offers the reader a wide range of narrative instances that testify to a variety of approaches to the dangers, opportunities, and positive outcomes in the choice of speech or silence, which we suggest to examine in this chapter. We will at first scrutinise Evaristo’s intention to give Black British women a voice from a philosophical and narratological point of view before analysing the voice as a metaphor for presence, self, and power in the novel. Then, we will concentrate on how the novel draws attention to the invisibility of these marginalised women.

### **1. The voice and the text– an oxymoron, a controversy, or a political commitment?**

A closer look at Bernardine Evaristo’s objective to give a voice to Black British women through textual representation reveals that the relationship between text and voice, between the speaker and the spoken for, and between literature and politics generally needs to be scrutinised closely. To what extent can written texts give a voice to somebody? Should all authors be allowed to tell the stories of marginalised communities? Can literature indeed have political ramifications in society? These are the questions that need to be examined to better understand and evaluate the claim that *Girl, Woman, Other* transforms the absence of the marginalised into presence in giving them a voice. In the next sub-chapters, we will draw on narratological and philosophical theories that will help us understand to what extent *Girl, Woman, Other* can and whether it should give a voice to Black British women and whether literature can have political effects.



### a. The silent nature of reading and writing

[N]arratology is [...] caught up in an illogicality, in that, in the concept of voice, it continually seeks to restore the sense of a human presence whose loss or distance is in fact its own founding condition. (Gibson 1)

This quotation taken from Andrew Gibson's article "Silence of the Voice" captures well the inherent contradiction of literature as a written text that tries to represent the voices of people and the sounds of life. Indeed, when the concept of voice is understood at its most literal level as the act of producing the sonorous utterances which allow us to communicate, then it appears evident that a written text cannot be entirely capable of representing this process. Contrary to the artforms of cinematography and drama, in which the audience has direct access to the transmission of sounds and voices, written literature can only work as a transcription and as an impulse for the reader to bring voices alive in his head. The seemingly paradoxical relationship between voice and text is made further ambiguous by the fact that the voice is a polymorphous concept that can take on various meanings as mentioned above.

Different scholars have explored the matter of these contradictions that lie at the heart of the genre of the novel. Dominique Rabaté in *Poétiques de la voix* (1999) states with regard to the voice that "la littérature, depuis le tournant de la Modernité, semble vouée à chercher les modes d'inscription d'une présence qui se fuit dans sa trace écrite" (Rabaté 7). According to him, literature has, in the past century, been trying to find modes of representation that could bring alive the text and thereby bring it closer to real life. Rabaté then develops his argument to suggest that the voice could be such a narrative device as it creates an effect of presence and emphasis in the text. Rabaté concedes that the best writers can hope for in their attempt to represent voices is an effect of presence. Yet, his theory is over all favourable to the possibility that texts can convey the presence that voice stands in for.

In *La Parole muette* (1998) French philosopher Jacques Rancière also examines the question of the paradoxical nature of the written word and asserts that it must be seen in the historical context of the rise of the novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Critics at that time opposed the novel to theatre and poetry, artforms that are capable of representing speech acts acoustically through artists' performance. Since prose cannot bring alive or perform utterances, these critics accused it of being a "petrified" artform (Rancière, *La Parole muette* 18-19). Rancière counters this criticism in asserting that the paradigm of the "living word" in poetry and theatre has not been lost in prose, but that it simply has changed its nature. Furthermore, he contends that the representation of the voice in texts counts as a form of speaking: "[I]a parole éloquente désormais est la parole silencieuse de ce qui ne parle pas dans le langage des mots ou qui fait

parler les mots autrement que comme instruments d'un discours de persuasion ou de séduction" (Rancière, *La Parole muette* 34-37). Consequently, for Rancière, prose might employ a different method of speaking from poetry, but his affirmation that it is an eloquent manifestation of the word implies that it is a (valuable) form of expressing speech.

In the book chapter "How Books Talk" in Bill Ashcroft's *Caliban's Voice* (2009), Rancière's argument is taken even a step further:

The written text is a social situation. That is to say, it has its existence in something more than the marks on the page, namely, the participations of social beings whom we call writers and readers, and who constitute the writing as communication of a particular kind, as 'saying' a certain thing. (Ashcroft 143)

Ashcroft approaches the question of the voice in writing from a postcolonial perspective as he wishes to refute the idea that readers and writers from different cultures cannot understand each other through the written word. With regard to our investigation of the voice in literature, this quote is interesting because it points to the dialogue between the reader and the author through the medium of the text. Although he admits that "unlike spoken discourse, the central problematic of studies of writing is absence" (145), he then claims that the distance between the reader and the writer could also free "the meaning from constraints of speech and [create] a vehicle which at once confirms and bridges the absence of writers and readers" (145). He further develops that "writing does not merely inscribe the spoken message or represent the message event, it *becomes* the new event" (146). In perceiving literature as a mode of communication and as a speech event, Ashcroft appears to defend the idea that, as the title of his book chapter suggests, "books can talk".

The complementary approaches to the contradiction of literature that these theoreticians take bring out that, incontestably, written texts cannot bring the acoustic aspects of speech to live; however they seem to agree that literature can work as a form of speaking or communicating. Consequently, we would like to put forward the argument that various manifestations of the voice in *Girl, Woman, Other* such as the inner monologue, speech acts, or the characters' artistic expression can be interpreted as manners of speaking. Admittedly, Bernardine Evaristo's objective of giving a voice to Black British women through her writing may not give them a platform on which their presence is all-encompassing through the expression of their sonorous and political voices. Nonetheless, the seeming contradiction in the association of voice and written text does not mean that the various forms of expression that these women make use of in the novel, do not constitute a representation of their voices. Whenever these women talk with one another, use monologue in their thoughts, or speak

through their art or their actions, their words create an effect of presence and trigger reactions within the reader just as a conversation would.

Notwithstanding this conclusion, it is Bernardine Evaristo who gives these women a voice in telling their stories for them, which can come with its own conflicts and risks.

#### b. Who gets to tell whose stories?

What is implicit in Bernardine Evaristo's ambition to give Black British women a voice in her writing is the assumption that these women do not have a voice or, to phrase it differently, that they do not have political representation and power. Indeed, Black British women form a marginalised social group that has little visibility in the public space not only in political discourse but also in different institutions such as publishing. This means that there are few Black female writers whose stories get published and therefore, Black women are rarely represented in British novels. As a consequence, their perspectives are seldom considered and this invisibility reinforces their confinement to the margins of society, which explains Evaristo's wish to use her platform as a writer to give these women a voice and to tell their stories. Yet, in times in which cancel culture can lead to the public ostracising of artists and politicians who (allegedly) appropriate the narratives or cultures of people that are different from them, one may wonder whether Bernardine Evaristo is entitled to tell the stories of the women in *Girl, Woman, Other*.

Bernardine Evaristo is a Black British woman who was born into a working-class family and grew up in the suburbs of London. Similarly to many of the characters in the novel, she has faced racial, sexist, and homophobic discrimination in British society and despite her renown as a writer she still faces the experience of being othered today: after having been awarded with the Booker Prize in 2019, which she won jointly with Margaret Atwood, a BBC broadcaster reported that the Booker Prize had been given to "Atwood and another author" (Flood). This omission of her name, which works like a denial of the power and attention that comes with the Booker Prize, by a British institution as impactful as the BBC is emblematic of the othering and silencing that Black British women face in British society. Therefore, when Evaristo attempts to give these women a voice in narrating their lives, dreams, and needs, she does to a certain extent draw on her own experiences. Nonetheless, there are characters such as Morgan, who is a gender-free person, or Bummi, who has left the Caribbean to go live in the United Kingdom, whose experiences Evaristo has not lived through herself. Does this difference in identity make it unethical for Evaristo to tell stories from these women's points of view? In *Other People's Stories. Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* (2005), Amy Shuman elaborates the role that experience plays in this question:

We ask, who has the right to tell a story, who is entitled to it? And we ask, is this representation a sufficient, adequate, accurate, or appropriate rendering of experience? Ethical questions of ownership overlap with cultural conventions for representing experience. This model of entitlement begins with the rights accorded firsthand experience: individuals have firsthand knowledge that grants them a privileged position as knowers and a legitimate stake in the interpretation of their own experiences. (Shuman 3-4)

According to Shuman, the question of whether authors are entitled to tell certain narratives or not depends on whether they have undergone the same experiences as the characters in their stories. This argument brings to mind Gayatri Spivak's seminal 1985 article "Can the Subaltern Speak?". The Indian scholar uses the example of sati (an Indian ritual of widow sacrifices) to complexify the presumption of Western academic discourses of that time that subalterns<sup>2</sup> can speak for themselves. Her argument applies to the specific framework of Indian subaltern studies and claims that subalterns are too heterogeneous a group to speak as one and lack the resources and power for their speech to be actually heard. Moreover, whenever they speak and are listened to, they run the risk of being misunderstood, which shows that Spivak does not deny them the capability to talk but rather criticises the imperial system of obscuring their voices. This theory has revolutionised postcolonial studies as it also problematised the efforts of Western intellectuals to give subalterns a voice in their research, which according to Spivak only maintains the imperial, hierarchical power relations between the (colonial) centre and the margins. Thus, the act of giving marginalised people a voice and telling their (hi)stories for them both in research and in literature is highly controversial as it may maintain oppressive power relations.

Nevertheless, when authors from marginalised communities are confronted with these questions, they emphasise the importance of creative freedom in their writing. In an interview with *The Economist*, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was asked about the role that identity plays in narrative ownership and her impartial answer testifies to the complexity of the question. On the one hand, she acknowledges the need for more diversity in publishing and the many obstacles that marginalised writers face when they attempt to get their stories printed, published, and sold. As a consequence, she considers it necessary to champion the stories from marginalised writers – especially when they write about their communities. On the other hand, she defends that it is less a question of who attempts to write whose stories but of how these stories are written. She points to the importance of empathy in literature as it gives readers the possibility to "inhabit bodies that are not [their] own" and asserts that she does not

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<sup>2</sup> The term subaltern is difficult to grasp as it has been used by several schools of thought and applied to different contexts. Gayatri Spivak herself defines subalterns as "persons or groups cut off from upward [...] social mobility" (Spivak, "The New Subaltern").

constrict her artistic freedom to write about characters different from herself (Nauta). The Black American author Anna Holmes concurs that empathy could be the answer to the difficult question of “Who Gets to Tell Other People’s Stories?” (Holmes). While researchers agree that the concept of empathy in literature is difficult to grasp and apply, we find Alison Landsberg’s attempt at a definition useful for our analysis:

The word empathy, unlike sympathy which has been in use since the sixteenth century, makes its first appearance at the beginning of this century. While sympathy presupposes an initial likeness between subjects, empathy starts from the position of difference. Empathy is “[t]he power of projecting one’s personality into . . . the object of contemplation.” (OED) We might say that empathy depends less on “natural” affinity than sympathy, less on some kind of essential underlying connection between the two subjects. While sympathy, therefore, relies upon an essentialism of identification, empathy recognizes the alterity of identification. Empathy, then, is about the lack of identity between subjects, about negotiating distances. (Landsberg 82)

According to Landsberg, the concept of empathy implies that an individual can identify with somebody different from themselves and is therefore based on differences. Writers who manage to create empathetic narratives can help bridge the differences between people in a society and may render the invisibility of marginalised people visible. Thus, while the decision to write about people from different backgrounds may bear the risk of misrepresentation and appropriation, it can also have the potential of giving marginalised communities visibility.

In *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*, Evaristo approaches the issue of cultural ownership from yet another perspective:

I give myself complete artistic licence to write from multiple perspectives and to inhabit different cultures across the perceived barriers of race, culture, gender, age and sexuality. I am the most rebellious of writers; a freedom lover and disobeyer of rules, which is why I’m curious as to the concept of cultural ownership, which rears its head in discussions about artistic freedom. How can culture be owned by anyone when it is in a perpetual state of movement and metamorphosis, or permeability and responsiveness to global influences? (Evaristo, *Manifesto* 178-179)

Evaristo appears to suggest that the notion of cultural ownership is misleading as cultures and communities are open to different kinds of influences and cannot be considered as stable, impermeable entities. Her argument that barriers of race, culture, age and sexuality are “perceived” (social constructs) further enhances the idea that cultural and social differences do not confine people to impermeable, distinct communities that are inaccessible for other individuals. Thus, if writers narrate the stories of other communities in a respectful and empathetic manner, they may eschew the risk of misrepresentation and appropriation. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo arguably attempts to tell Black British women’s stories and experiences empathetically and respectfully. The question that remains is whether Evaristo can

indeed have an influence on the reality of politics and society through the medium of the written text.

c. Literature and politics: can *Girl, Woman, Other* help reshape the public space?

Time and again, Bernadine Evaristo has affirmed in interviews that she sees herself as a political writer and that to her mind, all writing is political. In a radio interview with WPR she develops on these statements and points out that because there are so few Black women writers, she wants her writing to make amends for the absence of Black women's stories in British literature, which is an endeavour that she herself considers to amount to a rewriting of history. Moreover, she claims that past Black American writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Michelle Cliff, or Audre Lorde have inspired her as they were "writing Black women's stories into being" (Wisconsin Public Radio). This supposed double function of literature to write a marginalised community into history but also into existence shows that Evaristo grants literature political power. With regard to *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo would like the novel to function as a remedy to the silencing of Black British women and their absence from the public sphere which is intertwined with their lack of (political) power in British society. This point deserves a closer look as it is not self-evident that literature is capable of having political effects on society. One may wonder whether a written work of fiction that is drawn from the imagination of a writer and has no obvious implication in the everyday actions of governments or other political institutions can indeed lead to an increase in representation and power for a certain social group.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière is arguably one of the most prolific theoreticians with regard to the link between politics and aesthetics. In *Le Partage du sensible* (2000), he writes:

[Le partage du sensible] fait voir qui peut avoir part au commun en fonction de ce qu'il fait et du lieu où il est. Avoir telle occupation en tel type de lieu définit des compétences ou des incompétences au commun. Cela définit le fait d'être ou non visible dans un espace commun, doué d'une parole commune, etc. Il y a donc, à la base de la politique une « esthétique » [...] un découpage des temps et des espaces, du visible et de l'invisible, de la parole et du bruit qui définit à la fois le lieu et l'enjeu de la politique comme forme d'expérience. La politique porte sur ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on peut en dire, sur qui a la compétence pour voir et la qualité pour dire, sur les propriétés des espaces et les possibles du temps. (Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible* 13)

In these lines, Rancière explains his vision of the public sphere as a "sensible" and argues that the distribution of the access to the sensible determines who can participate to what degree in the visible and the sayable. This distribution of the sensible and the rules for participation that derive from it are what politics boils down to according to Rancière. The link

with literature is that through fiction, the writer can reimagine and reshape the distribution of the sensible, which means that, in their novels, writers can emancipate people who generally do not have the right to participate in the political discourse. Rancière further asserts that the politics of literature does not consist of the political convictions of the writer, but that the written text itself participates in politics, because there is a crucial link between writing as an artistic practice and politics as a collective practice (Rancière, *Politique de la littérature* 11-14). Thus, Bernardine Evaristo's motivation and affirmation that she sees herself as a political writer is not sufficient for her writing to be political in the eyes of Rancière.

Before confronting Rancière's theory to *Girl, Woman, Other*, we would like to mention Emilie Walezak's *Rethinking Contemporary British Women's Writing* (2022) in which she explores, among other lines of analysis, how female British authors make use of realism to write about the challenges that society faces today. She explains that literary history teaches us that the novel has appeared at about the same time as the concept of democracy took over in Europe. In doing so, she insinuates that there is a link between the political concept of democracy and the (realist) novel as a form of literature which soon reflected this political system in representing all kinds of people (1). She then makes a link with the present British literary scene and argues that the number of female writers opting for "realist narrative and stylistic devices demonstrates the current need to rethink our views on reality" (11). Apart from making a strong case for the literary genre of realism, which she associates *Girl, Woman, Other* with, Walezak appears to confer a political function to literature, namely the impulse in the reader to reconsider their vision of reality. This argument joins in with Rancière's theory that literature can initiate a reshaping of the distribution of political power in a society. Her argument is also noteworthy because it emphasises the aptitude of realism, which *Girl, Woman, Other* arguably makes use of, to produce writing with political effects.

*Girl, Woman, Other* does indeed adhere to a realist paradigm in its narration of the stories of twelve Black British women. Thus, the fact that these women for the most part have no voice and no power in society is accurately depicted: there are characters whose voices are neglected, whose voices have no reach, or who choose to remain silent for the most parts of their lives. These women could still be said to be given a voice because the reader has access to their thoughts and feelings, and because the reader's attention is drawn to all their various forms of expression. For instance, Winsome, an elderly Black woman who came to the United Kingdom from the Caribbean when she was a young woman, is neither used to speaking up for herself nor wishes to communicate in general. The reader only has access to her life story because one of her grandchildren asks her about her life before marriage, a question which

Winsome answers in giving a short version of the story of her youth (257). The reader is privy to the rest of her story thanks to internal focalisation as she then continues to further ponder her granddaughter's question in her mind. Her general story points to the fact that Winsome is the kind of woman whose voice is not usually heard in society as she is silenced by her husband, rarely listened to by her children, and mostly invisible in society. In this passage, thanks to the narrative device of internal focalisation and to Winsome's granddaughter who initiates the narration of her life, the reader has access to Winsome's difficult life story as an immigrant and a woman suffering from both racism and sexism. Consequently, the novel can be said to reshape whose perspective and story matter in the public sphere while sticking to a realist paradigm, which has the effect of reminding the reader of the strong link between the story in the novel and the real-life hardships Black British women face.

Although it is difficult to measure the actual political effects of literature, we argue that Bernardine Evaristo's objective of giving a voice to Black British women through her writing can be considered to be a political act. Nevertheless, we deem it necessary to better understand what shape the endeavour to give a voice takes on and hence how absence and presence are depicted in the novel.

## 2. Voice as a metaphor for presence and power

In her well-known 1984 essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action", the Black American poet Audre Lorde explains how, after a diagnosis of cancer, she came to consider in more radical terms the action of speaking up for oneself. In her piece, she starts by claiming that what she most regretted in her life were the moments when she chose silence, when she did not dare to use her voice, or when she hoped that somebody else would speak for her. She relativizes the dangers of speaking up for oneself as she points out that to remain silent also means pain and oppression, reminding her readership that "[their] silence will not protect [them]" (Lorde 30). In *Girl, Woman, Other*, several Black British women are shown to use their voices to defend themselves and their communities, and their actions can indeed have positive outcomes for them. In these instances, the voice becomes a metaphor for presence, power, and the self; yet, Evaristo tells a more conflictual narrative about the action of speaking up than Lorde, as she also attempts to portray the agency that can lie in choosing to remain silent and the potential life-long negative consequences that speaking up can have for these women.



### a. Power and self in the synecdoche of the voice

In their introduction to *Literary Voice: The Calling of Jonah* Donald Wesling and Tadeusz Slawek explain that “[v]oice is mask, grid, metaphor, a phenomenon of delay and remove” (1) and that, as in journalism, the voice in literature can be interpreted as a metaphor for selfhood. To be more specific, the voice is often used as a synecdoche, the form of metaphor which equates a part of something with the whole. Thus, the voice as a part or a function of the body stands in for the person whom the voice belongs to and signals their presence.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, there are some Black British women who use their voices for the pragmatic purpose of communication or the political aim of speaking up for themselves throughout the entire novel. Yet, some of the women are shown to (plan to) make use of their voices in a more specific manner. On the one hand, Yazz, a 19-year-old student reading English Literature, dreams of becoming a journalist. She imagines herself writing a “controversial column in a globally-read newspaper because she has a lot to say and it’s about time the whole world heard her” (42). The alliteration in the plosive <k> in “controversial column” stresses Yazz’s forceful ambition to burst into and stir up public discourse through her writings while the expression “whole world” points to the scope of her project. The more the story progresses, the more it becomes clear to the reader that Yazz is rather blunt and has the courage to speak her mind at all occasions. Thus, she has the habit of correcting, interrupting, and even attacking people’s discourse whenever she senses some kind of injustice. In one of the most powerful passages that give access to Yazz’s story, she is shown talking down her father’s entire career while she is on the phone with him. As he proudly shares with her the news that he has become “the country’s first Professor of Modern Life”, Yazz mercilessly discredits the legitimacy of this title and his three novels, which claim to explain the entire world’s past, present, and future narrative:

really? *all* of it, Dad? [...]  
isn’t that, like, a bit of a tall order? Don’t you have to be an expert  
on everything in a world that encompasses over seven billion people  
and like about two hundred countries and thousands of languages  
and cultures  
isn’t that more like *God’s* purview? Tell me, are you God now,  
Dad? I mean *officially*? [...]  
what about bell hooks? She shot back, quickly scrolling down the  
reading list for her ‘Gender, Race and Class’ module on her phone  
what about Kwame Anthony Appiah, Judith Butler, Aimé Césaire,  
Angela Davis, Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, Julia Kristeva,  
Audre Lorde, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Steinem, V.Y.  
Mudimbe, Cornel West and the rest? (46-47)

In this passage, the phrasal verb “shot back”, which qualifies Yazz’s answers as quick, decisive blows to her father’s discourse, points to the fact that Yazz uses her voice as an instrument, or even a weapon. The repeated direct questions and the irony conveyed through the use of italics emphasise that Yazz wants to question and challenge the power that her father associates himself with. Her attack on her father, performed thanks to Yazz’s rhetorical and argumentative skills, is so fierce that in the end he remains speechless and finds a pretext to end the conversation. Meanwhile, the long list of scholars she confronts her father with, highlights the type of discourse she advocates for, which gives the reader a good idea of what lines of investigation Yazz would go after as a journalist. In these lines, Yazz’s attack on her father embodies the full potential of the voice used to (aggressively) protest oppressive discourse and thereby demonstrates the link between the self and the voice.

Another telling example of the voice as an instrument can be found in the story of the gender-free character Morgan, who, after having come to terms with their gender journey, opens a Twitter account called “@transwarrior”. In their own words, Morgan uses their account “for general trans issues, gender, feminism, politics” as it is good “for lobbying and adding their outraged voice to protests” (333). That their account is successful and gives them a platform is visible not only in the number of cultural events they get invited to comment upon, but also the fact that they are asked to give talks at university about her journey and the marginalisation of trans people. The impact that their written and oral discourse has is further underscored by the positive reaction of the audience after one of their talks as “hands shot up for questions” (337) and a later discussion with some students shows that their efforts to raise more awareness of the needs of trans people have been fruitful. Similarly to what Yazz aspires to as a future journalist, Morgan’s occupation as a Twitter influencer allows them to make use of their voice to advocate for their community. As both characters instrumentalise their voices, which can be read as synecdoches for themselves, to speak up for their communities, the strong connection between the voice and the self that Wesling and Slawek refer to in their quote is emphasised.

Moreover, both the instances that have been analysed above bring out the effectiveness of the voice as a political instrument since both characters’ (modes of) discourse are shown to be successful. Thus, their actions epitomise French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory that there lies power in language (Bourdieu), but there is also a link with scholar Sara Ahmed’s investigation of the mechanisms of power in *Wilful Subjects* (2014): she affirms the importance of resistance in Max Weber’s definition of power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Ahmed 54). This resistance is especially explicit

in the first pages of *Girl, Woman, Other* when Amma recalls her early experiences of protesting discrimination in the theatre world together with her friend Dominique in the 1980s:

[they] developed a reputation for heckling shows that offended their political sensibilities  
their powerfully trained actors' voices projected from the back of the stalls before they made a quick getaway  
they believed in protest that was public, disruptive and downright annoying to those at the other end of it  
she remembers pouring a pint of beer over the head of a director whose play featured semi-naked black women running around on stage behaving like idiots  
before doing a runner into the backstreets of Hammersmith  
howling (2)

Amma's and Dominique's confinement to the margins of the world of theatre is symbolized in this passage by their position at the "back of the stalls" as opposed to those in power "at the other end of it". Contrary to Morgan and Yazz, they do not manage to actually develop their stance, as a disruption of the on-goings in the theatre is the best they can hope for. Nevertheless, they are capable of imposing themselves and challenging the status quo through their voices, which are fittingly described to be powerfully trained, in the practice of heckling. Even when they have to flee the scene, they continue to impose their presence by "howling". The fact that heckling is presented as a form of resistance to these women's exclusion testifies to the power that the voice is shown to have as an instrument in *Girl, Woman, Other*.

Thus, the use of the synecdoche that blurs the lines between the self and the voice comes to show that when Black British women speak up for themselves, they exercise power and reclaim their presence in the public space. This process can take the shape of Amma's and Dominique's disruptive protests, Yazz's aggressive debunking of arrogant, normative discourse, or the attempt to raise awareness through public talks in Morgan's case. Yet, the versatility of *Girl, Woman, Other* lies in its endeavour to also search for signs of power and agency in the choice of silence.

## b. Finding agency in silence

Silence can be a plan  
rigorously executed  
the blueprint of a life  
It is a presence  
it has a history, a form  
Do not confuse it  
with any kind of absence. (Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 5)

This poem by feminist and poet Adrienne Rich expresses the power that lies in silence as a communicative choice and points to the fallacy of equating silence with absence. In the former chapter, we have argued that voice works as a metaphor for presence and an instrument to speak up for oneself in *Girl, Woman, Other*. However, the novel manages to nuance the vision of the voice as power, because it also construes silence as a powerful choice for individuals. The most striking example of this can be found in Hattie's story. Hattie is a ninety-three years old matriarch who lives alone on her farm in the North of England ever since the death of her husband Slim. The reader first meets her during a Christmas celebration with her family and in the opening lines to her chapter, she is described "[sitting] at the head of the banqueting table in the Long Room of Greenfields farmhouse built over two hundred years ago" (341). The figuration of the table which Hattie presides and the association between herself and the might of the farmhouse, illustrated through the use of capital letters and the insistence on its persistence throughout 200 years of time, conveys right from the beginning that Hattie is a forceful person. This is also shown in her strong opinions about almost every aspect of life and the fact that she is adamant to have her will to the very last moment of her life: in response to the recurring request of her children to go to an old people's home and clarify her power of attorney, Hattie contrives the plan to commit suicide should she ever be forced to leave her farm. Yet, despite the expectations that a bold character such as Hattie would not hesitate to raise her voice, she prefers to remain silent whenever her family visits for Christmas:

Hattie sits quietly at these Greedymas affairs  
can't hear above the racket they're making anyway, hates putting  
in those wretched hearing aids that irritate her ears and distort  
sounds  
they carry on without her, amusing themselves, happy to ignore  
her like she's of no consequence, most of them don't listen to what she  
says anyway  
she sinks back, watches their performances, quite content to be left  
to her own devices, nodding off, until people prod her to see if she's  
all right, the equivalent of checking her pulse (344)

In this passage, Hattie draws a distinctive line between herself and the members of her family as she prefers to remain outside of their celebration, which, qualified as "racket",

“Greedyas” and “performance”, brings to mind a superficial, disagreeable cacophony. Since her family does not listen to her, Hattie’s reply is to ignore them as well, refusing to put in her hearing aids and choosing an undisturbed silence as she nods off. Hattie also chooses silence when she decides to not inform her children that she will leave her farm and the territories that come with it to her grandchild Morgan. Knowing that this information would only cause her trouble with her children, Hattie remains silent, which can be interpreted as a strategy to impose her will and to save herself from conflict. With regard to the agency of silence, Bina Fernandez in her article “Silence as a Form of Agency? Exploring the Limits of an Idea” theorised that it is difficult to draw a clear line between repressive and resistive silence. This means that oftentimes, marginalised persons who, for different reasons, are neither allowed to freely speak nor are listened to, transform their silence into an expression of resistance. Even if silence may be the only choice, Fernandez emphasises that it has the capacity to express protest and resistance and testify to the agency of a person. Therefore, despite the fact that Hattie, as an old (Black) woman, feels silenced by her family, she proves her wilfulness and uses her silences against them by excluding them from her intimate opinions and thoughts and important information such as the settling of the inheritance.

Fernandez also considers the action of remaining silent out of a desire for privacy as an expression of agency as she interprets it as the possible “unwillingness to speak about past trauma and thereby re-create the emotional state” (Fernandez 13). Indeed, trauma studies have suggested that while “the ability to remember and integrate traumatic experiences with the entire life story is considered by many clinicians to be crucial for recovery from the trauma—not least because a coherent narrative leads to a sense of self-continuity, which enables a feeling of relatedness with one’s environment” (Welz 10), there is a real risk of re-traumatisation when a person puts into words their traumatic experiences. Since speech is not guaranteed to support “the survivors’ recovery and the healing of their wounds” (1), silence is an alternative that may also allow concerned people to move on. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the reader has access to the Carole’s thoughts and learns of how she has been raped as a thirteen-year old teenager. Throughout the brutal experience, Carole can only find refuge in her mind as she attempts to make sense of what is happening to her and, unable to find words, distracts herself as she thinks of her favourite number (Carole’s favourite subject at school is mathematics). In the end, even the voice in Carole’s head is reduced and disappears, which is shown in the decreasing space her thoughts take up on the page (“then they were gone/and/so/was/she.” (126-127), as the experience is too traumatic to be processed through language. After the rape, Carole suffers from severe depression, but she remains silent about the experience, for various reasons, for the

rest of her story. She does manage to get back on track in school and eventually earns a scholarship to Oxford, which suggests that she was to some extent capable to move on. However, situations such as being searched by unfamiliar persons at the airport in a security room, have the potential to bring back the painful memory of her rape and make her relive the same emotions. This underscores Welz's theory that the wounds from trauma have their own voice that demands to be heard if the wound is not allowed to heal properly. Similarly to Hattie, though for different reasons, Carole chooses silence over speech as it is the only strategy that allows her to move on and to control her life.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo is careful to avoid presenting speech and silence in binary terms of good and bad for marginalised people as she points to the benefits of remaining silent. Likewise, the narrative she creates about characters who use their voice exposes the costs that come with speaking up.

### c. The costs of speaking up

In Evaristo's 2013 novel *Mr Loverman*, the seventy-four-year-old protagonist Barrington Jedidiah Walker has hidden his love affair with his best friend Morris for his entire marriage. He had secretly dated Morris before he met his future wife Carmel back in the Caribbean and before reigniting their relationship once Morris migrated to the United Kingdom. Despite being an outspoken, wilful character, Barrington has never dared coming out to his friends, family, and community as he fears the stigmatisation and the danger that can come from being openly homosexual. In Barrington's case, the decision to not express himself is shown to cause much suffering, but his story exemplifies the dread that people feel at articulating their deviation from patriarchal heterosexual norms.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, characters such as Bummi and Dominique also prefer to remain silent out of fear that their protest or their deviation from norms may bear too many risks. Bummi, a middle-aged widow with Nigerian origins, has at one point of her life engaged in a relationship with another woman. Even if Bummi feels fulfilled and happy in her lesbian relationship, she fears the stigmatisation if somebody found out about her and her lover (as coming out is not even an option she considers), and soon she terminates the relationship and remains forever silent on the subject. Dominique's story plays out slightly different as she is an out-of-the-closet lesbian who starts a relationship with an African-American woman. In this relationship, Dominique loses her voice entirely as she submits to the lifestyle and opinions of her partner. Despite the realisation at one point that she would like to express her dissent, Dominique is not ready to take the risks that come with it, which in her case include physical violence and the end of her relationship. Arguably, all three instances revolve around the

possibility of dissent which Eriks Uskalis in his article “Hegemony, Ideology, and Dissent in Postcolonial Studies” defines as implying two things:

Firstly [dissent] implies the existence of power formations through which some subjects are marginalised and constrained, thereby restricting (determining) the moves in history those subjects may articulate. Secondly it implies some rejection of or resistance, by the subject, to those power formations and therefore some active use of the materials available for the marginalised and constrained. (2)

According to this definition, Bummi and Barrington are restricted in the free expression of their identity by the power formation of patriarchy, which implies that openly dissenting or articulating their deviation from patriarchal norms would come with a certain danger. With regard to Dominique, the norms that her partner imposes on her in their relationship may be interpreted as a formation of power on a much smaller scale, but if her partner’s lifestyle choices and opinions are understood as a power formation, the model applies to their situation as well. This comes to show that the decision to use one’s voice comes with a certain cost, which is especially visible in Penelope’s story in *Girl, Woman, Other*.

Penelope is a white woman who, in her twenties, was influenced by the countercultural movements of the 1960s. Having married at a young age, Penelope becomes a stay-at-home mother, before she even has a chance to use her teacher certification to enter employment. As she increasingly dislikes her confinement to the household, Penelope takes inspiration from the American feminist literature she reads and asks her husband’s authorisation to take on a teacher’s position. Her husband reacts by saying that “it was impractical to have two masters: a boss at work and a husband” (287), which works as a reminder of the power relation that he expects Penelope to follow, in which a woman is subjugated to her husband. Henceforth, Penelope hides her feminist reading material from her husband, until one day she

embarked on a campaign to lobby Giles for her return to work, who still insisted she remain at home as it was the natural order of things going back to time immemorial:  
me hunter – you homemaker  
me breadwinner – you bread-maker  
me child maker – you child raiser (289)

Once more, her husband delineates the “natural course” of things, in which each person’s position in society is strictly defined and therefore their actions constrained. The three binary constructions that oppose men’s and women’s roles, reinforced by the typographical separation marked by the dash (in a novel where signs of punctuation are rare), create the impression that there is no alternative to this system as men can only be “hunters” and women only “homemakers”. Thus, at the slightest sign of protest against the system’s rules, Penelope

is immediately reprimanded. However, Penelope is inspired by the many women who managed to gain more rights for themselves and is determined to continue advocating for herself:

if it's okay for them, why not me? she said, resuming her lobbying  
when she brought him his cup of tea in bed every morning, following  
him around the house as he got ready for work, talking at him through  
the door when he spent far too long on the lavatory (what are you  
doing in there?), continuing her freedom crusade as she prepared his  
breakfast of eggs on toast, *and* while he ate it, *and* while he was put-  
ting on his overcoat for work because somehow, *somehow*, she was  
going to make him change his mind  
until one morning he put his fist through the glass window of the  
front door, shouting that she was lucky it wasn't her face  
before slamming it behind him

she got to keep the house (she'll give him that)  
easily had custody of Adam and Sarah (they were a burden for him)  
she found a childminder and employment at Peckham School for  
Boys and Girls, a new comprehensive down on the road (289)

The long juxtaposition of paratactic propositions in the first part of the paragraph (“resuming”, “following”, “talking”, “continuing”) that give neither the reader nor her husband a moment of break, reflects the way in which Penelope goes on to ceaselessly speak up for herself. This is then reinforced by the anaphoric use of the conjunctions “and” (also emphasised by the italics) as it gives the impression that Penelope’s dissent is omni-present for her husband. However, the passage also demonstrates the high cost that can come with protesting the patriarchal hegemony: angered by Penelope’s refusal to stay put, her husband threatens her with physical violence. Moreover, as hinted at by how her husband slams the front door shut and the blank space that separates the two paragraphs, Penelope’s husband leaves the relationship for good. Thus, although Penelope can finally start teaching and no longer needs to stick to the role of being a stay-at-home mother, she is punished for having spoken out for herself with the loss of her marriage.

In *Critique, Dissent, and Disciplinarily*, Judith Butler theorises that when a subject enters protest, “the norms that establish the modes of intelligibility and recognizability for a subject are themselves queried, called into question, and so the very social basis for the intelligibility of the subject is risked at the moment in which such historical norms are interrogated” (Butler, “Critique” 17). This means that when for instance women do not conform to the modes of recognizability, which in Penelope’s case is the obligation to stay at home with her children, their whole status as a woman or at least a member of the system is destabilised. As a consequence of her revolt, Penelope is punished for her dissent with the loss of her marriage and the stigmatisation of divorce. The narrative further underscores Butler’s argument, because Penelope struggles for a long time with her romantic life and eventually slips



into an alcohol addiction because she is further and further isolated from society. When Penelope finds another chance for a relationship in her sixties, she is ready to put her personal rights as a woman aside and ignores the continuous sexist remarks by her partner as she is ready to “betray the [feminist] cause if it meant finding personal happiness” (442).

Penelope’s narrative brings out the dangers that come with the expression of protest and confirms Bummi’s and Barrington’s fears of further marginalisation if they articulated their deviation from society’s norms. Whereas the narrative does not give a clear answer on whether it is better to remain silent or to speak up, the exposure of the high cost that speaking up can have allows the reader to have a more empathic understanding of why somebody would choose to remain silent. Although Evaristo’s principal objective is to turn absence into presence, this concern for the different forms of silence are an integral part of the novel.

### 3. Making invisibility visible

In postcolonial theory, the aim to draw attention to the omissions of history is important as slaves and the formerly colonised have been deprived of their voices and the opportunity to contribute their narratives to society. Today, it is difficult to retrieve these voices and oftentimes the only choice is to point out these omissions and to draw attention to the absence of coloured men and women from the literary institution. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo can be said to apply the same strategy, as she uses narrative devices such as internal focalisation to make the stories of silenced women accessible and to render their invisibility more visible. The absence of narratives about (and from) marginalised communities can be interpreted as a form of colonial wound because it is a consequence of the oppressive, silencing politics of the British Empire. Walter D. Mignolo asserts that “[d]ecoloniality [is] a process of recognizing the colonial wounds that are historically true and still open in the everyday experience of most people on the planet” (Mignolo, “Decolonial AestheSis”). Evaristo’s effort to make visible the invisibility of Black British women is therefore an important step in the process of healing colonial wounds, which is why we will analyse it in the following sub-chapters.

#### a. The dispossession of Black British women

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo gives a voice to Black British women in order to represent their silencing and invisibility. As mentioned above, the action of giving a voice does not necessarily only encompass narrative techniques such as dialogue and monologue, which feature the actual voices of the characters. Rather, the depiction of the needs these women have and the problems they face, can be seen as a complementary form of expression that the novel

provides them with. For this reason, we would like to investigate the representation of invisibility and silencing in *Girl, Woman, Other*.

In *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), philosophers Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou delineate the meanings and contradictions of the concept of dispossession. While remaining cautious about the notion that only possession, that is ownership of something material or immaterial, can make a person a fully emancipated subject, they nevertheless assert that dispossession implies that “somebody has been deprived of something that rightfully belongs to them” (Butler and Athanasiou 6). Dispossession can entail the loss of territory, of basic human rights, or the ownership of one’s body, and the two theoreticians lead it back to contexts of “slavery, colonization, apartheid, capitalist alienation, immigration and asylum politics, postcolonial liberal multiculturalism, gender and sexual normativity” among others (10). Black British women, who are widely excluded from the public discourse and face the intersectional discrimination of being Black and female, are often deprived of their basic human right to be considered as full citizens. Thus, they are either othered by mainstream society as being too different and inferior, or their presence is ignored and their voices remain powerless. The little power and representation they enjoy in society can also be theorised as a form of invisibility. Similarly to dispossession, the concept of invisibility is difficult to grasp not only because of its negative conception as the absence of visibility, but also because it can be caused by economic, political, or social factors according to Françoise Král’s in her 2014 book *Social Invisibility and Diasporas in Anglophone Literature and Culture* (41). Král acknowledges that it is hard to separate these various forms of invisibility as they are mostly entangled. Moreover, they have the common effect of “posing a threat to [the individual’s] integrity as a human being” (22) and therefore “exclude [them] from the mainstream of society” (28).

Whether the state of being silenced is theorised as dispossession or as invisibility, *Girl, Woman, Other* manages to demonstrate the hardships that individuals have to face because of it. One of the characters named Shirley, who is a young history teacher in London, exposes how the process of othering and silencing are intertwined. Shirley’s early days at being a high school teacher contrast the success she meets in the classroom with a less favourable situation in the staff room. While other teachers enjoy their “cheese and tomato sandwiches or pork pies or Cornish pasties” for lunch, Shirley sticks to her heritage with Caribbean food. She appears to feel uncomfortable at the difference these culinary choices reflect as she hopes that no one will notice her eating this kind of lunch (223). Her perceived otherness is further emphasised by the fact that Shirley has to content herself with the friendships of the few colleagues that “accept

her” since other colleagues walk away whenever Shirley approaches them, slam the doors into her face, or ignore her greetings, one of them “sweeping imperiously past her like a Dowager Grand Duchess from Imperial Russia passing a lowly peasant” (225). The colonial implication in the adverb “imperiously” and the clear hierarchy in the analogy of the duchess and the “lowly peasant” insinuates that Shirley’s colleagues’ behaviour is a colonial residue that establishes her as an inferior “Other”. As such Shirley’s presence is either not acknowledged or hardly appreciated and she has to content herself with the indifference of some of her colleagues towards her difference.

While these lines epitomise what social invisibility can look like, Shirley is also shown to face very concrete silencing due to her invisibility. At staff meetings, Penelope, a white teacher, usually is the only character “whose superior voice slices through the booming alpha-male teachers” (225). Through the use of the adjectives alpha and booming, this line stresses that male teachers and their voices are the dominant force in the staff room. Whereas Penelope manages to use her “superior” voice as a weapon (as implied by the verb “slice” that brings to mind the image of a sword) to compete with them,

[...] when Shirley and the other women  
try to interject, their less assertive voices struggle to be heard, are cut  
off by the alphas before they’ve even finished making their points [...]  
resigned to letting the men, and Penelope  
make decisions for them (225)

The verbs “interject” and “cut off” create the impression that there is an imbalance in the sharing of communication space as male teachers do not naturally let women speak who therefore have no other option but to try and interrupt them. Also, even if they manage to speak up, they are prevented from fully participating in the conversation with the result that the others make decisions for them, which furthers their lack of power. In this vicious circle of silencing, Shirley is shown to suffer the same treatment as the other female teachers. Yet, a few lines further, Shirley follows the urge to speak up for the coloured pupils of her school as Penelope uses racially charged language when advocating for stricter expulsion rules for “thick and badly behaved students” (226). Although Shirley manages to make her case and participate in the conversation, her argument taking up almost half of a page, Penelope entirely dismisses her perspective as naïve. Shirley does not get a chance to rebuke this reproach as Penelope regains full verbal control, which is visible in the final lines of the paragraph: “now/as/I/was/saying.” (227) The line breaks make her contentless utterance take up space on the page, which is a metaphor for her more impactful presence in the staff room, and the full stop underlines her successful effort to silence Shirley. Whereas the former example brought out a power

disbalance between men and women, these lines show that Shirley, as a Black woman, also has to cope with being silenced by white women. In giving voice to the different shapes that discrimination can take on, *Girl, Woman, Other* articulates the complexity of intersectional discrimination that Black British women face on a daily basis. The French philosopher Guillaume Le Blanc, who is known for his works on social invisibility, has theorised the process of being silenced thus:

La logique sociale de cette invisibilité perceptive n'est plus celle de l'oubli ou de la répression mais celle d'un défaut de perception. Ce « défaut » selon lequel nous ne voyons pas même l'autre comme une chose mais selon lequel nous ne le voyons pas du tout suppose une économie du visible et de l'invisible qui suscite des formes autorisées de perception et en rejette d'autre. C'est ainsi que le système colonial tend à produire le « défaut » de perception de l'autre race en ne considérant tout simplement pas qu'il puisse faire l'objet d'une perception qui réintègre le colonisé dans un rapport de participation aux autres vies humaines et au monde en général. (Le Blanc, "L'Invisibilité sociale" 4)

Shirley embodies the part of the system whose visibility is "rejected" as her presence is not acknowledged by the colleagues who slam the door in her face and ignore her greetings. Moreover, whenever she attempts to manifest herself, her presence is not granted any power or authority. This concurs with Le Blanc's argument that the Other is simply not considered as an equal participant in human life.

The fact that Le Blanc links this invisibility to what he calls the "colonial system" is clear in the novel not only in Shirley's example, but also in the narration of Winsome's (Shirley's mother) and Bummi's lives. These two characters are first wave immigrants, Bummi from Nigeria and Winsome from the Caribbean, and their stories bring to light the marginalisation that Black British women face. Both women's lives give insight into the hardships that come with being an immigrant in the United Kingdom and yet neither of them is very vocal about her experiences. Having become habituated to the fact that their word counts for little in society, the reader has access to their stories mostly through the narrative technique of internal focalisation. Hence, Evaristo's choice to represent absence despite her desire for more presence for these women is less paradoxical than one might assume at first sight since silence can be an expression of agency. However, silence can also refer to the lack of an audience that Black British women have to deal with.

#### b. Who listens when Black British women speak?

As a result of Bernardine Evaristo's Booker prize win in 2019, the sales for *Girl, Woman, Other* more than doubled within a mere week of the ceremony from 4,391 to 10,371 copies (Flood). Evaristo herself repeatedly stated in interviews that apart from feeling honoured

to have won the award for her art, she was especially happy at the prospect of reaching a wider readership consisting of people who normally would not buy her novels. The considerable rise in sales testifies to the power of literary prizes, but it also reveals how artists such as Evaristo, even after 40 years in the business, still struggle to reach a wide audience. A comparison with Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019), which also won the Booker Prize that year, shows that Atwood's work sold 13,400 copies during the week after the ceremony. However, Atwood starts from a different position as her novel had already sold 191,108 copies before being awarded the prize. While it is difficult to measure one author's success against another's, it is safe to assume that Bernardine Evaristo's marginalisation as a Black (British) woman plays an important role in the reception of her works. Despite being an innovative and creative storyteller and despite taking the risk of speaking up for her political convictions, Evaristo reached a relatively small audience before the Booker win. This demonstrates that her success does not depend entirely on her own work, but also on the willingness of the audience to pay attention. The idea that speaker and listener play an equally important part in all forms of communication concurs with Mladen Dolar's assertion in his work *A Voice and Nothing more* (2006) that

[by] using one's voice one is also "always-already" yielding power to the Other; the silent listener has the power to decide over the fate of the voice and its sender; the listener can rule over its meaning, or turn a deaf ear...

The voice cuts both ways: as an authority over the Other and as an exposure to the Other, an appeal, a plea, an attempt to bend the Other. It cuts directly into the interior so much so that the very status of the exterior becomes uncertain, and it directly discloses the interior, so much so that the very supposition of an interior depends on the voice. (80-81)

Dolar points to the interdependency between speaker and listener and the fact that power not only resides with the speaker, who decides to take up space and express themselves, but also with the listener, who can decide whether an utterance is granted attention or not. Dolar's argument joins in with Jonathan Rée's theory that voices are co-dependent as they rely on each other for "confirmation and support" (Rée 5). Thus, what is implicit in Bernardine Evaristo's hope for a wider audience is the awareness that the effectiveness of her writing depends on whether it is perceived by society or not.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Amma is arguably the character that presents the most links with Evaristo's own biography. Just as Evaristo, Amma was among the first Black British women to open a theatre in the United Kingdom and her youth was marked not only by her protest against the exclusionary practises of the institution of the theatre, but also in her engagement in the fight against discrimination. In a turn of events that Evaristo could not have foreseen, there is a further parallel between the

women, as the reader meets Amma at a point in her life when she has finally earned wide recognition for her career (similarly to Evaristo's Booker Prize win): she has been asked to direct one of her own plays for the National Theatre in London, the opening night of which ends with accolades by critics. In the same way as Evaristo, before her breakthrough, Amma has remained true to her political principals and worked hard, but she seemed to be stuck at the margins of the theatre world. Even once she manages to fully enter the institution, symbolised by the National Theatre in London, Amma is still haunted by the possibility that her work will be "dismissed with a consensus of one-star reviews" (5).

What her dread points to is the conflation of art and voice as Amma's artistic creation becomes a metaphor for her own person. The title of the play that she wrote and directs is *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* and it tells the story of an African community of female warriors who are mostly played by Black women. The subject of this play embodies Amma's objective as an artist to write Black women into existence, which is necessary because their stories have neither been told nor paid attention to. In his article "To be perceived is to be, to not be perceived is to not be", Guillaume Le Blanc insists on the fact that some voices are structurally not listened to and that the norms that fix whose voices deserve attention are part of a social construct. Furthermore, he defines the refusal to listen to somebody as a form of violence:

If, according to Berkeley's phrase, to be is to be perceived, and if, therefore, not to be is not to be perceived, then not to see or hear a person precipitates this person into the non-being of social death. If this is the case, ethical violence can be understood as the simultaneous refusal to see and hear someone who truly is a neighbour, although I don't want to see or to hear them as a neighbour. [...] To no longer hear the other is to define them as a stranger: someone appears in my visual field, yet their voice is no longer perceived as significant, and is not the object of any transaction. [...] Not hearing a voice, not seeing a face, leads to depriving a subject of her actual capacities, of her art of doing as well as of her narrative abilities. The unliveable life is then the life made unliveable, impossible, by the absence of perceptual consideration and even more of perceptual care: this constitutes the heart of ethical violence. (Le Blanc, "To be is to be Perceived" 3-4)

Amma's exclusion from the institution of theatre is therefore part of the systematic silencing of marginalised people which means that, in addition to it being difficult for her to break free from the systematic silencing of Black women, her voice is categorically not listened to. The consequence is that these women remain stuck at the margins of society as only voices conforming to society's norms manage to come through. This oppressive mechanism robs individuals of their capacity to create their own narratives as they are neither accredited nor integrated in the wider narrative of a society and remain in an almost spectral position: they are physically present, but

society's refusal to acknowledge their existence, leads to their social death according to Le Blanc.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the parallel between Evaristo's career and Amma's story brings out the fact that even when Black British women use their voice, they run a high risk of not being listened to. Thus, Evaristo's narrative points not only to the absence in the form of silencing that Black British women suffer from, but also the absence of response on the other side of the conversation. To conclude we would like to quote Le Blanc on his suggestion of how the way out of this double invisibility must look like:

[L]et us broaden the discussion to conclude: the defence of the minimal ethics that is due to all lives must deconstruct the violence of the moral order if we want to enter into the depths of a life in order to understand its arts of living. It is only under these conditions that invisibility can become a way of life and not determine the social destiny of precarious lives. It is only under these conditions that silence can be the condition of emergence of the voice and not what makes it impossible. (Le Blanc, "To be is to be Perceived" 7)

In his argument, he points to the importance of deconstructing the norms and conventions that lead to different forms of violence against the marginalised. One way of destabilising these norms can be the creation of narratives that defy the rigid rules of the literary institution that only reinforce the dominant parts of society. In *Girl, Woman, Other* Bernardine Evaristo's experimentation with the narrative voice and the representation of voice can be interpreted as such an attempt at deconstructing "the violence of the moral order".

## **2. The resistance to aesthetic narrative norms relating to voice and silence**

In her article “Processus décoloniaux dans l’art : institutions et savoirs”, Marie-Laure Allain Bonilla ponders the direction that decolonial theory and art have taken in recent years and detects a general wish to disrupt master narratives, “[une] volonté de déranger les récits établis et d’interroger la persistance des inégalités sociales, épistémiques et représentationnelles héritées du colonialisme” (Bonilla 1). These trends and objectives of the decolonial approach concur with scholars Walter D. Mignolo’s and Catherine E. Walsh’s theories in their seminal work *On Decoloniality* (2018). Mignolo and Walsh argue for the necessity of “delinking from coloniality”, which they define as “a matrix of power [which] came to operate [...] in multiple spheres, exercising control over humanity, subjectivity and being, gender and sexuality, spirituality, knowledge production, economy, nature, existence and life itself. Coloniality, in this sense, involves and affects us all.” (Mignolo and Walsh 23) Similarly to Bonilla, they trace current (global) inequalities back to the system of colonialism which they claim to be closely intertwined with modernity. Besides, they see a deep connection between the delinking from colonial knowledges and narratives and the need to find new forms of narratives, knowledge production, and conversations through creativity (146). This ties in with Bonilla’s argument that decolonial art must employ such strategies as “réparer les blessures du passé [*colonial wound*], repenser la place du métis dans la société, mêler les langues, décoloniser la pratique de l’acteur/actrice (sa gestuelle, son phrasé), ou encore faire de la pédagogie, se réappropriier les narrations et les moyens de production, développer une esthétique propre, se soustraire, fuir, prôner l’hospitalité.” (Bonilla 2) Consequently, the effort, on the part of writers, to transform existing forms of narration, create new means and modes of narration, and experiment with language can be interpreted to participate in the decolonial approach. In the following chapter, we are going to concentrate on the political dimensions of the innovative formal features of *Girl, Woman, Other* and how they are linked to Evaristo’s endeavour to transform Black British women’s absence into presence. Throughout this analysis we would like to suggest how Evaristo’s aesthetic creativity and resistance to (literary) conventions can be interpreted as a decolonial (and therefore political) effort with the effect of transforming absence into presence. We will start by analysing the representation of speech acts and narrative voices as well as the tension between standard British and different variants and registers, before examining the effects of humour and irony in the novel.



## 1. “Fusion Fiction”, the rendition of speech acts, and empathy

In the introduction to *On Decoloniality*, Mignolo and Walsh explain that one of the objectives of their work is to “challenge the reader to think with (and not simply about) the peoples, subjects, struggles, knowledges, and thoughts present” (Mignolo and Walsh 17). This idea of thinking with other people rather than about them is central to the formal dimensions of voice in fiction since the nature of the narrative voice and the speech act representation can either reduce or increase the distance between the reader and the characters. In her article “Les Voix interdites prennent la parole” Monica Michlin appears to suggest that the question of voice in (realist) literature is always a political one since the answers to such questions as “qui raconte ? quoi ? pourquoi à qui ? pour qui ? pourquoi ? et comment ?” give insight into the power relations between characters of a novel but also society more generally (Michlin, “Les Voix interdites” 1). In creating “fusion fiction”, the unique writing style of *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo has made the effort to represent the voices (and silences) of the characters in the novel in an experimental way that not only destabilises literary norms but also evokes empathy within the reader.

### a) Fluidity and empathy: the confluence of characters’ voices and the narrative voice

The significance of the polymorphous concept of voice in *Girl, Woman, Other* is underscored not only by different uses of its metaphorical sense but also by the idiosyncratic representation of the characters’ speech acts and of the narrative voice. Thanks to Evaristo’s creativity and experimentation, the formal aspects of both the narrative voice and the characters’ voices are unconventional. When interrogated on the innovative form of the novel in an interview with *The Guardian*, Bernardine Evaristo explained the wider significance of her experimental style in the following terms:

I have a term I came up with called fusion fiction – that’s what it felt like, with the absence of full stops, the long sentences. The form is very free-flowing and it allowed me to be inside the characters’ heads and go all over the place – the past, the present. For me, there’s always a level of experimentation – I’m not happy writing what we might call traditional novels. There’s a part of me that is always oppositional to convention – not only counter-cultural and disruptive of people’s expectations of me, but also of form. (Sethi)

In this statement, Evaristo points to three characteristics of “fusion fiction” that we consider particularly interesting for our analysis of voice: the fact that “fusion fiction” produces an effect of fluidity (due to its scarce use of punctuation), that it gives the reader access to the characters’ intimate thoughts and feelings, and that the writer conflates her general opposition to conventions with her aesthetic experimentalism. Even though Evaristo desires a break with literary norms, the transcription of the characters’ voices in the novel bears some similarities

with free indirect and direct discourse. The influence of free indirect speech is visible, for example, when Amma is plagued with self-doubts on the day of the opening night of her play at the National Theatre:

forty years of first nights and she's still bricking it  
what if she's slated by the critics? dismissed with a consensus of  
one-star reviews, what *was* the great National thinking allowing this  
rubbishy impostor into the building?  
of course, she knows she's not an impostor, she's written fifteen  
plays and directed over forty, and as a critic once wrote, Amma  
Bonsu is a safe pair of hands who's known to pull off risks  
what if the preview audiences who gave standing ovations were  
just being kind?  
oh shut up, Amma, you're a veteran battle-axe, remember? (5)

In the first the first four lines, the narrative voice renders Amma's doubts and fears in as style similar to free indirect speech. While the absence of an introductory verb and dialogue punctuation hint at the retreat of the narrative voice, the mimesis of Amma's voice is not complete, which can be seen in the use of the third-person pronouns "she" instead of "I". The narrative voice could be said to imitate Amma's voice and to reduce the distance between reader and character, which emphasises how Amma's doubts push her to think increasingly badly of herself: in the first direct question Amma is still the subject of the sentence which is signalled by the pronoun "she". In the following sentence ("dismissed with a consensus of one-star reviews") the subject disappears, before she then imagines herself being called a "rubbishy impostor" by critics. The narrative voice then transitions to a form closer to reported speech from lines five to seven due to the introductory verb "knows", before using free direct speech in the last line ("oh shut up, Amma").

This similarity with free indirect speech in the first lines suggests that "fusion fiction" may also share some of its effects. In "Le Discours indirect libre dans le récit de fiction", María Muñoz Romero argues that with free indirect discourse the reader has the impression that the characters' words, thoughts, feelings, and general perceptions are rendered in their own words because the narrator reproduces them in the deictic system of the character (286). These effects could also be observed in *Girl, Woman, Other*, which means that the representation of the characters' speech acts through a system similar to free indirect speech reduces the distance between reader and character since the mediation of the narrative voice becomes less evident. In the passage above, Amma is overcome by severe doubts which make her question her value as an artist. The absence of the narrative voice makes possible the juxtaposition of several doubtful questions that has the effect of decreasing Amma's confidence without giving her a

break. Therefore, this form of representation of speech acts is used to buttress the content of the writing.

Munoz calls this narrative strategy a confluence of the narrative and the character's voice, in which the reader cannot (or hardly) distinguish one from the other. This chimes in with Evaristo's insistence on fluidity and her attempt to create a free-flowing experience in which the transition from the narrative voice to the character's voice functions seamlessly. The fusion in "fusion fiction" could therefore not only refer to the mixing of the formal features of prose and poetry, but also to the fusion of narrator and character. Despite the choice of a heterodiegetic invisible narrator, who is typically used to give an objective perspective, this flexibility allows the novel to adopt a more intimate style when it suits the narrative. In the example above, the use of free indirect speech could be interpreted to enhance the reader's understanding of the risks that come with the unconventional, creative expression that artists such as Amma (and Evaristo) have to accept.

Moreover, Evaristo does not restrict herself to a uniform style in representing the characters' voices, and in some instances, the distance between characters and readers is further reduced as the narrative voice is even more mimetic of the characters' thoughts and words. Similarly to direct discourse, in these instances, the narrative voice uses the characters' spatial and temporal deictics and pronouns as is the case in this dialogue between Yazz and her friend Nenet (except for the first five lines):

Nenet, who was getting off on being in her natural habitat and  
the centre of attention, confided that she wasn't planning on doing any  
reading for her Art History course because – guess what?  
she blurted out that she didn't need to  
and this is confidential so pleeeeeease don't tell a soul, especially  
not Waris, the truth is that I commission my essays from a retired  
academic  
she turned to face them, expecting admiration, approval,  
Yazz was stunned, replied quietly, you're supposed to work for  
your degree like everyone else, I didn't know you were one of the  
cheats  
it's not cheating when everyone else is doing it  
that doesn't make it right and not everyone is at it (71)

In this passage, the narrative voice at first introduces Yazz's and Nenet's speech through verbs such as "blurted out" or "replied", before retreating entirely in the last two lines. Combined with the use of the first-person pronouns "I" and "you" and of the present tense, the relative absence of the narrative voice gives the impression that the reader hears (or reads) the characters' "authentic" and unmediated voices. This corresponds to Munoz's explanation that in free direct speech, the voice of the character dominates the narrative voice, which makes it

very expressive of subjectivity (294). Therefore, the increasing tension between Nenet and Yazz due to their varying opinions is conveyed as much by the unmediated, paratactical juxtaposition of their (subjective) arguments as by the words themselves.

As a result, one effect of Evaristo's style, which sometimes resembles free direct and sometimes free indirect speech, is that the reader has the feeling of entering the characters' intimate thoughts and of hearing their "authentic" voices. According to Argus Fletcher and John Monterosso this closeness to the characters' minds can "improve the imaginative empathy"<sup>3</sup> of the reader and help them become more attuned to perspectives outside of their own as they argue in their article "The Science of Free-Indirect Discourse: An Alternate Cognitive Effect." (Fletcher 85). Concurrently, in "Voices that Move us" Monica Michlin claims that this intimacy with the characters

[makes] us active participants in what we read, redefining our humanity through our capacity to share another's expression of what it means to be alive, sometimes in ecstasy, more often in pain. [...] Literature that wishes to move us does not sacrifice ambitious aesthetics; whatever their style—dazzling pyrotechnics or seeming artlessness, simple address or choral construction—by redefining reading as not merely hearing another's voice, but allowing oneself to be moved, these works perform a bridging of self and other, perhaps beyond the reading experience itself. (Michlin, "Voices that Move us" 82)

Michlin defends that literature is capable of provoking empathy for the lives of other people in the reader and she highlights that aesthetics can play an important role in creating this bridge between people. The effect of empathy is certainly one that Evaristo strives for in her novel as her attempt to give Black British women visibility is also a question of creating awareness and understanding of their invisibility, but also of their lives more generally. Thanks to the flexibility of "fusion fiction", Evaristo can reduce (or increase) the distance between reader and character according to whose voice she wants the reader to hear and identify with.

Yet, the writing style in "fusion fiction" cannot be entirely ascribed to either free direct or indirect speech but also to the particular use of punctuation and the poetic layout of the page. In its representation of speech acts the novel not only renounces quotation marks but also full stops and capitalisation. This makes for seamless transitions between sentences and gives the writing a run-on quality which is in line with Evaristo's endeavour to create fluidity in her novel. This fluidity causes not only the characters' and the narrator's voices to mingle, but it also creates an ambiguity about which of the characters is speaking. As a result, this style enhances Evaristo's innovative, but also empathetic approach to the theme of voice: the story

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<sup>3</sup> In this work we rely on the definition of empathy by Alison Landsberg which has been cited in chapter 1.1.b.: "Empathy is '[t]he power of projecting one's personality into . . . the object of contemplation.' (OED) [...] Empathy, then, is about the lack of identity between subjects, about negotiating distances." (Landsberg 82)

of Dominique, whom the reader meets at the point in her life when she enters a relationship with an African-American woman, is a case in point. Dominique's love interest is called Nzinga and she expects Dominique to completely and unquestioningly adopt her lifestyle. Dominique is ready to move to the United States and become a "teetotal, vegan, non-smoking, radical feminist lesbian housebuilder on wimmin's land Spirit Moon" (85) out of love for Nzinga, but after several years she realises that she is trapped in a dysfunctional, abusive relationship. The following paragraph, which tells of Dominique's increasing doubts about Nzinga's regime, exemplifies the particular style of "fusion fiction":

Dominique began to regret allowing Nzinga to do everything and make decisions for her [...] should she really have to cover up instead of being 'provocatively dressed' as Nzinga accused her why should she wear her hair (usually a thick, wavy mixture of Afro and Indo) almost shaved to her scalp, cut Nzinga herself with the barber's clipper she bought for this very purpose? why shouldn't she have a chat with the gentle community baker, Tilley, when she went to collect bread in the mornings? because the women who appear the nicest are the most passive aggressive and ultimately the most dangerous because they will come between us, don't you realize that people want to sabotage our great love affair? and why shouldn't she read books by men that she'd picked up in the library in town? you can't live a womanist life and have male voices in your head, Sojourner that doesn't make sense it's taking things too far why don't you shut your goddam mouth (97-98)

Throughout the whole passage, the reader has access to Dominique's thoughts who appears to quarrel with Nzinga in her mind: the lines alternate between Dominique's arguments and Nzinga's imagined or remembered repartees. Their voices are only differentiated by the use of pronouns ("she" for Dominique's voice and an imperative "you" in Nzinga's case) which help the reader distinguish the two women. Nevertheless, the seamless transitions from Dominique's thoughts to Nzinga's dicta expose that Dominique has lost her voice in this relationship and has to find the limits between Nzinga's and her own will again. Nzinga's voice not only predominates in this passage, but it appears to colonise Dominique's thoughts, who refers to herself with an insecure, distant "she" as if she were not the subject of her own thoughts. Evaristo could be said to willingly impede the dissociation of Dominique and Nzinga for the reader through the mingling of their voices because it echoes Dominique's struggle to separate herself from Nzinga. The fluidity and flexibility of "fusion fiction" allows Evaristo to create this ambiguity and to represent this form of silencing in a creative manner or to foster the empathy of the reader for the characters more generally. While Evaristo's resistance to

formal conventions is therefore essential in her objective to transform these women's absence into presence, it also allows her to creatively represent their silences.

#### b) The idiosyncratic representation of silence

As we have pointed out in the first chapter, Bernardine Evaristo approaches the theme of silence from different angles in her writing since she addresses the injustice of the silencing of Black British women, but also portrays silence as a form of agency. With regard to the aesthetics of voice, the writing style of "fusion fiction" generates a particular representation of silence on the page through the use of blanks and line breaks. Hence, when characters are struck by (negative or positive) intense emotions, when they are reticent to speak, or when they are not allowed to speak, their silence is visually translated through blanks and line breaks on the page. In the following example, Amma is shown to be satisfied with the good reception of her theatre play as she takes in the many compliments she has received after the opening night:

Amma feels herself melting against the wall as the flattery seeps  
into her  
this is just what she needs  
everything is perfect  
just  
perfect. (432)

This is the last paragraph of one of the sections in the last chapter (which focuses on the afterparty) and therefore, the end of this paragraph has a double function: it separates one storyline in the narrative of the afterparty from the next and the brief retreat of the narrative voice in this blank space signals a form of thematical closure within the paragraph. In addition, the line breaks create a specific layout on the page in which silence increasingly takes up more space than words. Together with the repetition of "perfect", these blanks may suggest that Amma's satisfaction cannot or need not be put into further words as she is more concentrated on soaking in her success. The rare full stop reinforces the feeling of closure which ties in with Amma's satisfaction at having made the breakthrough that she always longed for in her artistic career. Amma's silence is therefore not a sign of oppression, but rather a testimony to her success in her fight to make her voice heard by British society. Thus, Evaristo's representation of silence is not only unconventional because the line breaks create a unique pro-poetic patterning of the page but also because she portrays it as something good in passages similar to this one. This joins in with her effort to creatively deconstruct the binary of silence as negative and speaking as positive and to challenge reductionist literary norms that support such binary views.

In more conventional forms of literary writing, blanks can be said to “designate a vacancy in the overall system of the text” according to Wolfgang Iser, who, in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1980), concentrates on semantic blanks in writing that can occur between two paragraphs, in fragmented writing, or in passages in which the narrator withholds certain pieces of information from the reader. Iser explains that these blanks,

by impeding textual coherence [...] transform themselves into stimuli for acts of ideation. In this sense, they function as a self-regulating structure in communication; what they suspend turns into a propellant for the reader’s imagination, making him supply what has been withheld [...]. By definition, however, they can clearly have no determinate content of their own. How, then, is one to describe them? As an empty space they are nothing in themselves, and yet as a ‘nothing’ they are a vital propellant for initiating communication. (Iser 194-195)

While Iser admits that blanks cannot have content on their own, he still defends that blanks have the function of communicating meaning and that they produce a reaction on the part of the reader, who attempts to fill the gaps with their imagination thanks to their knowledge of the text and their general reading experiences. In the example cited above the reader understands the significance of the compliments that Amma receives from the context and they can therefore deduce meaning from the empty space as well as from the text itself. Michel Morel, who writes about silence in his article “À Propos des silences du texte narratif”, has a similar approach to the concept even though he concentrates on typographical and syntactic blanks. His discussion of the issue brings to light the different shapes that silence can take on, from interruptions by full stops and paragraph and chapter endings, to aposiopesis on the part of characters who do not finish their sentences for different reasons. While he argues that the typographical blanks at the end of sentences and paragraphs give the reader a pause to evaluate and process units of meaning, he has a different approach to aposiopesis: he claims that it usually hints at subjects that are unsayable and unthinkable and therefore these kinds of blanks are symbolic of a (forced) silence. With regard to stream of consciousness writing, Morel argues that it paradoxically has an effect of silence due to the overwhelming, incessant load of information which keeps the reader from processing the information and organising it into units of meaning (Morel 2-8).

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, blanks can be said to incorporate several of the above-mentioned characteristics, but due to the unique and experimental writing style of “fusion fiction”, they do not precisely correspond to pre-established categories such as the ones outlined by Morel and Iser. Thus, in some instances, the visual representation of silence seems to correspond to a form of aposiopesis, for instance in the stories of LaTisha and Carole when they undergo a rape. On the one hand, in Carole’s case, the blanks that surround her thoughts during the brutal event

convey the fact that the young woman struggles to process what is happening to her - “then/her/body/wasn’t/her/own/no/more” (126-127) - as the experience of rape is unthinkable. On the other hand, the blanks in the narration of LaTisha’s rape express something different as LaTisha’s protest signalling that she does not want to engage in sexual intercourse with her date is wholly ignored. The line breaks (I don’t want to, not yet, get off me, please, Trey, she said/ out to deaf ears/ so she gave up/ couldn’t stop him (210-211)) hint at the lack of power of LaTisha’s voice which takes up less and less space on the page. Besides, blanks have yet another significance in examples in which characters are overcome by positive emotions such as the above-quoted passage about Amma’s success or in the case of Bummi who attempts to reconcile with her daughter Carole after a fight: “I be your mama/ now and forever/ never forget that, abi?” (158). Here the silence that surrounds these affectionate words hints at the inadequacy of words to capture Bummi’s strong feelings for her daughter and therefore reinforces the significance of her proof of affection. Consequently, while the examples cited above demonstrate that Evaristo’s use of silence is conventional in so far as she makes these “manipulative informational gaps” speak (Toker 14), which is a function of silence that Leona Toker confirms in *Eloquent Reticence* (1993), Evaristo’s use of blank spaces is too flexible and unique to be neatly put in some of the categories established by Morel and Iser. Her resistance to the conventional aesthetics and purposes of blanks in writing can be interpreted as a challenge not only to pre-established literary norms and categories but also to “conventional modes of thought and speech” (Bucknell). As has been mentioned, Evaristo’s attempt to give Black British women a voice relies to a certain extent on her effort to make their silence more visible. Yet, her resistance to conventional modes of representing silences has decolonial effects as it aims to change the terms of the conversation, as well as the content (Mignolo and Walsh 113). These conventions are however also upset by a delinking from the privilege of standardised English in the novel.

## 2. The sound of one’s voice: different forms of English in the novel

With regard to *Girl, Woman, Other*, the discussion of the formal aspects of the voice necessitates a closer look at the kind of language that the Black British women speak: the variety of origins, age, and occupation of the characters is echoed by the different forms of English that are represented, which is an important element of the rendition of their “authentic” voices. The fact that standardised English was the norm that was imposed on colonial subjects of the British Empire and the fact that even today it is more advantageous to speak this form of English within the United Kingdom (whether it be in the professional world or educational institutions) exposes that language is a political issue. In her article “Les voix interdites



prennent la parole”, Monica Michlin argues that “le fait que l’auteur(e) choisisse un narrateur ou une narratrice refusant toute littérarité conventionnelle permet à la fois un jeu délibéré de transtextualité subversive, et l’irruption politique de réalités jusque-là ‘refoulées’ en littérature, si elles n’étaient pas tout simplement censurées.” (Michlin, “Les Voix interdites” 1) Thus, the representation of variants or informal versions of English alongside the use of standardised English in *Girl, Woman, Other* has political implications, as it deconstructs (linguistic) hierarchies and enhances Evaristo’s project of giving Black British women a voice.

#### a) First-generation immigrant and non-standardised English

In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), a landmark study of postcolonial literature, the role that language played in subjugating and oppressing colonial subjects of the British empire is repeatedly emphasised:

One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities. [...] Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice. (Ashcroft et al. 5)

The British version of English was considered the “standard” language which all subjects of the Empire had to aspire to since their native languages, but also their variants of English, were deemed inferior. Even though the political and economic dominance that Great Britain had over its former colonies has supposedly been put to an end through the declaration of independence of these countries, the cultural and linguistic hierarchy of standard British English appears to be still intact today both in the United Kingdom and in its former colonies. This is especially visible in the case of migrants in the United Kingdom whose variants of English are stigmatised and whose marginalisation is furthered by this implicit linguistic hierarchy. Ashcroft et al. argue that the power of standardised English can be challenged by the creation of a “post-colonial voice” through literature. The creation of such a post-colonial voice should lead to “the abrogation or denial of the privilege of ‘English’ [which] involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. [...] Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in the words.” (Ashcroft et al. 37)

In the context of *Girl, Woman, Other*, Ashcroft’s theory can be applied to the language that is used to represent the speech acts of two specific characters. Both Bummi and Winsome are first-generation migrants - the former from Nigeria, the latter from the Caribbean - who

come to the United Kingdom as young adults and make it their new centre of life. English is a mother tongue for both Bummi and Winsome and while the chapters that narrate their stories are generally written in standard English, they also feature multiple speech acts from the two women and the people from their communities in Nigerian or Caribbean variants. Michael Percillier and Catherine Paulin explain in an article that the representation of non-standardised English can be organised into four different categories namely “‘phonology’, ‘grammar’, ‘lexis’, and ‘code’” (Percillier 1). Each of the first three categories designates a deviation from the grammatical, phonological, or lexical norms of standardised British English while the category “code” refers to the inclusion of non-translated words or passages from another language than English. In *Girl, Woman, Other* Bernardine Evaristo frequently relies on all of these categories to transcribe the variants that Bummi and Winsome speak and to represent their speech accurately.

As has already been mentioned in chapter one, Winsome’s story is for the most part told by the narrative voice which focalises on her thoughts. Nonetheless, there are instances in which Winsome’s actual words can be heard by the reader and while she speaks standardised English, she is shown to resort to her Caribbean idiom in situations in which she is overcome by anger or exasperation. In one passage, Winsome remembers thinking “get off de dam bus” (251) when she worked as a ticket seller on London buses and struggled to get people who refused to pay the fare off the bus. A few pages later, she thinks of her husband Clovis’s idea to leave London for the South of England as a “dam chupid” idea (259). In both cases, her idiosyncratic speech is depicted through spelling which imitates her pronunciation in turning the definite article “the” into “de” and stupid into “chupid”. The abbreviation of damn to “dam” is an example of what Percillier and Paulin call “eye-dialect” since the word is not really pronounced differently, but the graphic difference is used to add to the general representation of the variant.

In the following passage, the representation of Winsome’s Caribbean idiom is embedded in a larger argument about the hierarchies in English language and literature. When Winsome and her husband return to live in the Caribbean after their retirement, she joins a book club with other women who have also come back to their home country after years or decades abroad. In a conversation that edges on *mise-en-abyme*, the women agree to concentrate on writings from Caribbean female authors since women “don’t even get a chance to speak” (254) in the novels of male authors. This introduces the issue of whose voices are valued in literature, which is also underlying their subsequent debate about whether only literary critics can decide on the value of poems. Winsome agrees with one of her friends that it is the prerogative of literary critics to declare the value of writing since she argues that “she wasn’t no expert” on

the matter. The double negation in “wasn’t no” is a deviation from grammatical rules and the same mechanism is present in the reply of Winsome’s friend Dora:

Dora said there was no such thing as objective truth and if you  
think something’s good because it speaks to you  
it is  
why should Wordsworth or Whitman, T.S. Eliot or Ted Hughes  
mean anything special to we people of the Caribbean? (255)

In the last line of Dora’s utterance, the use of the personal pronoun “we” instead of “us” and the absence of the definite article “the” is a grammatical deviation from standardised English. This passage operates on an interesting interplay between form and content as Dora does not acknowledge the supposed superiority and universality of English literature. Dora implies that Caribbean writers may actually be more interesting for these women and therefore deconstructs the literary dominance of European writers that was established during the time of the British Empire. The idea that these women themselves should choose what kind of literature speaks to them is reinforced by the epiphora “you” in the first two lines and the important position of “we the people of the Caribbean” at the end of the passage. More importantly, the cultural dominance that the British Empire relied on deeply linked the transmission of European values through literature with the imposition of standardised British English as the only “pure” language in the Empire. Her argument is underscored by the representation of her idiom, which is a narrative strategy that also challenges colonial hierarchies. Thus, the abrogation of standardised English in the passage operates not only through the use of Winsome’s and Dora’s variants but also through Dora’s argument that acknowledges the value of Caribbean literature and flattens the hierarchy between English and other literatures. As a consequence, the decision of Evaristo to represent the Caribbean variant can be interpreted as a simple “show of support for local language forms in defiance of exo-normative standards” or a desire to “realistically render the oral speech of characters” according to Percillier and Paulin (Percillier and Paulin 1).

In Bummi’s case, the importance that her Nigerian variant holds for her is clear right from the opening lines of the chapter narrating her story. Bummi regrets that her daughter Carole has adapted to the standard British English as she speaks “out of her nose like there was a sneeze trapped up it instead of using the powerful vibrations of her own Nigerian vocal power” (150). While Winsome mocks the standardised English by associating it with the sound of a person who holds back a sneeze, she transposes her appreciation of her Nigerian variant on the “powerful” sound of the Nigerian voice. Her difference from British-born people is partly signalled through the narration of her childhood in Nigeria and her desire to stick to a Nigerian

community in London. Throughout Bummi's story, she is shown to cling to her Nigerian heritage as she repeatedly quarrels or even fights with her daughter who accepts the English culture. These fights have the effect of reminding the reader of Bummi's difference as they generate strong contrasts between Bummi's Nigerian (cultural) and Carole's British perspectives. Carole's confession that she is engaged to a white man it is the final straw for Bummi who cannot hold back her agitation:

why you like to dey like cause so much wahala for me, eh? na play  
you dey play, abi? you don spit on top your papa life! You don spit  
on top your people! which kain shame you wan bring on this family?  
you don disgrace me! I no sabi you at all, at all at all (153)

In these lines, Bummi's variant is signalled through the use of several of the categories of deviation from standard norms that Percillier and Paulin define in their article: Bummi's accent is represented in words such as kind ("kain") or want ("wan") and grammatical deviation is present in sentences such as "why you like to [...] cause so much wahala for me?" which abbreviates the "correct" phrasing of questions "why do you like to...". There are also some untranslated words ("abi" or "sabi") taken from Ibo (which is Bummi's mother tongue) which further impede the comprehension of Bummi's speech in this passage. Hence, her strong emotions are not only conveyed through the seriousness of the reproaches she makes Carole, but also her challenge to the norms of a language she associates with her daughter's "betrayal" of her Nigerian culture. When considered jointly with Bummi's feelings of alienation at the British customs, the representation of Bummi's variant could be interpreted to signify her difference from the British culture. This is especially visible in the use of the untranslated Ibo words, since, according to Ashcroft et al., "they signify a certain cultural experience which they cannot hope to reproduce but whose difference is validated by the new situation. In this sense, they are directly metonymic of that cultural difference which is imputed by the linguistic variation." (Ashcroft et al. 52) This means that the text affirms Bummi's culture through the use of untranslated words in a context in which her difference has historically been seen as inferior and her voice has been silenced.

In both Bummi's and Winsome's cases English variants are used to "initiate an act of resistance against superimposed culture" (Borch 255) as they validate difference and deconstruct cultural and linguistic (colonial) hierarchies. Even if Evaristo is a British writer whose only mother tongue is English and who inscribes herself into a British literary scene, she could be said to follow up on Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o's directive to decolonise the mind through resistance to standardised English as the norm that everyone should strive for (wa

Thiong'o). A closer look at the case of second-generation immigrants in the novel reveals that Evaristo gives visibility to different dimensions of the tensions between formal English and its variants.

#### b) The problematics of code-switching

Despite Evaristo's effort to challenge linguistic power hierarchies in her novel through the inclusion of variants and informal language, she also implicitly draws the reader's attention to the discrimination and constraints that Black British women can face because they deviate from linguistic norms. Since standardised English is considered more legitimate and socially superior to non-standardised English, Black British women who do not speak standardised English may have disadvantages in the economic market. This means that accent and expression can be important factors that determine whether pupils (are given the chance to) continue their studies at university and what kind of jobs they can apply for. Language is therefore part of cultural capital which Elizabeth Anderson defines this way:

'Cultural capital' refers to knowledge of and facility in the often informal or little-publicized norms, conventions, and codes of conduct that govern access to advantages. It is transmitted through families and informal social engagement more than through formal education. College-educated parents transmit cultural capital to their children when they teach them how to polish their resume's and personal statements, how to make a good impression in an interview and on the job, how to ask for a raise or promotion, how to get the inside track on good internship opportunities. Rules of etiquette, body language, proper modes of dress, decorum, and taste, an "educated" accent and avoidance of slang, facility in the art of "small talk" within elite circles, and innumerable other subtle and often unarticulated skills, habits, and expectations attached to better opportunities remain hidden from the disadvantaged insofar as they are socially segregated from those who possess such cultural capital. This impairs the ability of the disadvantaged to successfully navigate more privileged social settings. (Anderson 8-9)

Anderson explains that forms of expression such as body language, accent, register, and even the ability to small talk (among other factors) can greatly impact an individual's chances to access privileged parts of society. For this reason, the question of whether Black British women (manage to) adapt to standardised English is intricately linked with their marginalisation and more concretely with their financial prospects. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, these (linguistic) power relations are visible in Carole's story who, in her attempt to climb the social ladder, has to learn to speak a more formal, standardised version of English.

When Carole first starts her studies at Oxford, she struggles to integrate into what seems to be a community of elite students of whom many already know each other from their public schools. Carole regrets that the "only voices she heard" belong to the posh students who talk the loudest, while she remains silent because "nobody talked loudly about growing up in a council flat on a skyscraper estate with a single mother who worked as a cleaner" (131-132).

These lines subtly convey that those who are allowed to talk are the privileged students while “nobodies” such as Carole are too different for their voices to have value and power. While Carole is shown to suffer from her position as an Other due to her different cultural and socio-economic background, her mother encourages her to persevere and she ends up making friends thanks to her boyfriend. However, this integration into her boyfriend’s (white) social circle is symbolic of the transformation that Carole has to undergo to fit in and demonstrates that the kind of register one speaks also impacts the power and social acceptability of one’s voice:

Carole listened and learned from her new social circle  
what would you like? instead of whatdayawant?  
to whom were you speaking? instead of who was you talking to?  
I’m just popping to the loo instead of I’m gonna piss (136)

The use of the modal verb “would”, the propositional relative “to whom” and the formal lexical field in the expressions on the left side exposes the deep connection between language and the British culture of politeness. These expressions stand in for the version of English that Carole should aim for to ascend the social ladder and they are opposed to the expressions on the right side which display characteristics of non-standardised English: the grammatically incorrect auxiliary in “who was you talking to” and the oral contractions of “going to” and “do you” in “gonna” and “daya” together with the lexical choice of “piss” fall into a category of what would be called informal or even incorrect language. Since Carole is shown to navigate university life and her career more easily once she has learned to use more formal expressions, the narrative emphasises and acknowledges the power that standard English has in British society and testifies to the “political reality [...] that English sets itself apart from all other ‘lesser’ variants” (Ashcroft et al. 7).

Following M. Morton’s argument in “Cultural Code-Switching: Straddling the Achievement Gap”, Carole’s behaviour can be classified as a form of code-switching which Morton defines as a person’s “ability to adapt one’s behaviour as a response to a change in social context much like bilingual speakers switch languages in response to a change in linguistic context.” Moreover, she suggests that “[t]he case of upwardly mobile minorities is interesting because they exhibit an ability to switch between comprehensive and potentially conflicting value systems” (Morton 259). This implies that even if individuals have a cultural or linguistic heritage that differs from the mainstream society they live in, they can develop the ability to switch from one value system to another. In the novel however, although Carole seems to still enjoy listening and dancing to Nigerian music, she appears to have given up most of the other elements of her Nigerian heritage in favour of the customs she has adopted at university:

she enjoys Western cuisines and fashion and she has taken to (posh) hobbies such as horse riding and clay-pigeon shooting. With regard to her language, the chapter focalising on Carole's mother Bummi shows that Carole does not switch code when she speaks with her mother as she sticks to the formal language she has got used to which we suggest to interpret thusly: firstly, since Carole is portrayed to have had no choice but to adapt to standardised English (and the corresponding cultural customs) in order to succeed in her studies and her job, she is not free in her decision to switch codes. Even if Carole had the ability to switch codes, she no longer makes use of her former linguistic and cultural customs, which might suggest that she has interiorised its inferior status. This goes along with the fact that Carole can no longer picture herself with a Black or working-class husband. Thus, the strategy of code-switching helps her to improve her financial situation, but the narrative implicitly posits that code-switching can be non-deliberate and lead to the rejection of one's own culture. Secondly, Carole's transformation leads to several conflicts with her mother, who is distressed by Carole's rejection of her Nigerian heritage. Bummi's increasing irritation at Carole's use of standardised English is visible in these two passages:

in her second year [at university Carole] barely came home at all and by her final year she was spending weekends and holidays at her friend Rosie's family manor in the countryside, which had more rooms than a housing estate, she said, it's simply divine, *Mother*, simply divine (*Mother* – was she being ironical?) (151)

[...]

Carole said, I have something to share (typical English, all this *sharing* preamble instead of just speaking directly about the matter at hand)

[...]

I've got engaged to be married, Mother (153)

In these lines, Carole is shown to employ very formal language to tell her mother about her weekend trip and her engagement. This is visible in the lexical field with such words as "divine" and the apostrophe "Mother", the formal expression "I've got engaged to be married" and the way in which she announces that she has something important to tell to her mother. The brackets have a "truth-telling" function in that they reveal Bummi's negative reaction to her daughter's way of expressing herself. Together with some of Carole's new habits, her switch to a different code distances her from her mother and creates conflicts between them. Moreover, since Bummi is no longer sure whether her daughter is being ironic or not, Carole's switch to formal English is even shown to impede their communication. As a result, the novel gives a nuanced vision of the strategy of code-switching: on the one hand, Carole's story appears to

suggest that code-switching can be an effective strategy in helping immigrant children to move from the margins to the centre of society. On the other hand, the novel emphasises the risks of this strategy namely that people may internalise the stigmatisation of their cultural and linguistic background, which can lead to conflicts with their families. However, some women might even seek to deliberately provoke conflicts and challenge conventions through their use of informal language, as is the case with the two youngest characters in the novel.

### c) Deconstructing hierarchies through the use of slang

Out of the twelve characters in *Girl, Woman, Other* only two women belong to the younger generation: Yazz, a 19-year-old student, and Morgan who is probably in their mid-twenties. Both characters introduce not only a set of cultural signifiers and the mindset representative of their generation, but their youth seems to be also emphasised by the use of slang. Especially Yazz's speech is characterised by her use of informal and sometimes obscene language, which could be categorised as slang, even if, according to scholars, the concept of slang is hard to grasp and therefore definitions vary greatly. In his article "We're Cool, Mom and Dad Are Swell: Basic Slang and Generational Shifts in Values", Robert L. Moore explains that the consensus seems to be that it is "a variety of speech 'used in situations of extreme informality, often with rebellious undertones or an intention of distancing its users from certain mainstream values'" and that it is used to "express informality, identify group membership, and oppose established authority" or to "[promote] solidarity for members of a group." (Moore 61-62) This means that slang is characterised as being informal (which is a relatively vague quality) and that it has the purpose of expressing dissent with mainstream culture and contesting different forms of authority.

This vision of slang chimes in with Yazz's character traits and her ambitions for her future since she is a rebellious young woman who wants to denounce all kinds of injustice once she becomes a journalist. Moreover, Yazz's friend group at university, which calls itself the "Unfuckwithables" (41), relies to a certain extent on the unifying function of slang as each of the four girls has the right to the title "sistah" (65). Most importantly, however, Yazz employs slang when she criticises the values and the behaviour of her parents and their generation. Thus, she regrets the "crazy competition for jobs" and the fact that "the planet [is] about to go to shit" (42), which are problems that have been caused by the former generation in her opinion. She also thinks herself capable of "[seeing] through the parental bullshit" (44), which may be why she is not afraid to bluntly decry (and sometimes disrespect) her parents' behaviour:



her girlfriends *du jour*, as Dad puts it, (hey, why speak English when you can speak French?), are two white women, Dolores and Jackie, although Mum has been with every ethnicity known to humankind (it's called multiracial whoredom) (51)

In these few lines, Yazz manages to both mock her father's habit of including French expressions in his speech, which is visible in the italics in "*du jour*" and in the irony of the rhetorical question between brackets, and judge her mother's sexual life in evoking the idea of "whore". In general, Yazz's language in these examples can be classified as slang since she recurs to swearwords ("shit", "whore", "fuck" etc.) and her language deviates from standard grammar and pronunciation which the text makes visible in the spelling of words such as "sistah". This defiance of linguistic rules is also what leads Yazz to create new word combinations such as "whoredom" or "Unfuckwithables", which could be considered to be typical slang neologisms.

The interrelationship between slang and the endorsement or defiance of certain cultural values can also be found in Morgan's case, albeit in a different shape. Through their project of documenting their journey from their assigned gender to labelling herself gender-free, Morgan has become a Twitter influencer with a significant reach. They are frequently asked to give reviews on cultural productions on their Twitter account and when they are invited to Amma's theatre play, they endorse it in the following way:

Just seen #TheLastAmazonofDahomey @NationalTheatre.  
OMG, warrior women kicking ass on stage! Pure African Amazon  
blackness. Feeeerce! Heart-breaking & ball-breaking! All hail  
#AmmaBonsu #allblackhistorymatters Book now or cry later,  
peepalls!!! @RogueNation (334)

Again, the speech type of slang is conveyed through several strategies: firstly, in the spelling which is used to mimic the pronunciation of words such as in the case of "feeerce" instead of "fierce" or "peepalls" instead of "people". Secondly, the lack of nouns ("Just seen") or other syntactical elements ("Pure African Amazon blackness." is a sentence that consists only of nouns and adjectives) makes for grammatically incorrect sentences. Thirdly, Morgan displays creativity in the invention of word combinations such as "heart-breaking & ball-breaking". This quotation is noteworthy because it testifies to how social networks, in this case, Twitter, have allowed slang to pass from a mostly oral use to a written existence. In addition, in this instance, although slang is not so much used to rebuke a certain mindset as to support values that are rejected by mainstream culture and society, Morgan challenges oppressive power relations in society and therefore employs slang in a similar way to Yazz. For this reason,

Evaristo could be said to use slang to reinforce the expression of her younger characters' resistance to certain dominant or mainstream values.

Yet, a closer look at the connotations of slang reveals that its use in the novel has further implications. In his article "Some Thoughts on Slang", Jonathon Green describes the connotations of slang in this way:

Slang is the language that says no. Born in the street it resists the niceties of the respectable. It is impertinent, mocking, unconvinced by rules, regulations and ideologies. It is a subset of language that since its earliest appearance has been linked to the lower depths, the criminal, the marginal, the unwanted or even persecuted members of society. [...] Yet if such negatives are true, then they are imposed from the outside. From the prejudiced, the ignorant, the fearful, the censorious. The reality of the language is that it is vibrant, creative, witty, and open to seemingly infinite re-invention. [...] Its dictionaries offer an oral history of marginality and rebellion, of dispossession and frustration. (Green 154)

Similarly to Peter Moore, Green emphasises that slang has the quality to express resistance. He then adds that slang is associated with "lower" parts of society, which is meant to refer to the marginalised, and that this negative classification of slang comes from the dominant parts of society. This means that the speech type of slang (and its speakers) is considered to be inferior to more formal and standardised language or, as Moore puts it, slang is seen to "[undermine] the dignity of verbal exchange and [charge] discourse with an unrefined and often aggressive informality" (Moore 62). In the context of the pejorative connotations that slang has, the fact that Bernardine Evaristo includes slang in her writing is noteworthy since it could be interpreted to lower the acceptability of her writing. Consequently, we would like to argue that there is an echo between Yazz's and Morgan's use of slang to rebel against society's cultural values and Evaristo's inclusion of slang in her novel to challenge literary (as well as societal) conventions and expectations. Furthermore, the use of slang joins in with the flexibility and creativity of "fusion fiction" which similarly defies different kinds of norms and attempts to represent these women's authentic voices. This desire to destabilise society's conventions, which lead to a disbalance of power in politics and society, reveals Evaristo's activist commitment. However, the politics of voice are also present in the idiosyncratic narrative voice of the novel, which fosters the empathy of the reader and provides comic relief.

### 3. The use of a humorous narrative voice

In an interview with the *Irish Times*, Bernardine Evaristo talked about the importance that humour has in her writing and explains that "[w]hen you're writing serious books with humour, if you open the reader up to humour, you're also opening them up everything else that's in the book." (Self) This means that Evaristo holds the conviction that writers can make literature of a certain gravity more accessible to a wider audience through the use of comedy.

Concurrently, Juha Ridanpää asserts in his article “Politics of literary humour and contested narrative identity”, that [h]umour is commonly approached as an apolitical antidote to seriousness” (Ridanpää 711). Yet, he underlines the political dimension of humour as he considers it a political tool to criticise social power relations in literature and claims that the way stories are told is equally as important as the (political) subjects they centre on. The use of narrative strategies such as humour can therefore impact and buttress the politics of literature.

This is visible in Bernardine Evaristo’s novel *Blonde Roots* (2009), a subversive, experimental neo-slave narrative that satirizes the history of the transatlantic slave trade. In this novel, Black and white people switch roles, Europe is in the Global South while Africa is in the North, and current social conflicts resulting from (racist) immigration politics coexist with the oppressive system of slavery. Since the novel does not shy away from pointing out the atrocities of the slave system, humour (in the form of satire) could indeed be seen as both a way to offer comic relief to the reader and to bring out the absurdity and insanity of slavery. In her article “Humor as Deconstructive Apparatus in Bernardine Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots*”, Julie Ironmuanya concentrates on different forms of humour in *Blonde Roots* among which the use of hyperbole and incongruity. She argues that in “[t]aking into account the significance of humor used as a deconstructive device, we can see that hyperbole, by nature, is predicated on surplus value; that is, the exaggerated quality of one or both of the determinants in the ratio and the resultant incongruity elicits humor.” (Ironmuanya 178)

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo resorts less to hyperbole and more to incongruities and irony to produce humour and comic relief. For instance, the striking discrepancy between how the sole male (secondary) character Roland, an excessive mansplainer and Professor of Modern Life, sees himself and is perceived by others adds to the comedy of the novel: during the opening night of Amma’s theatre play, Roland congratulates himself on having “decided long ago to align himself with *L’Établissement*, which is why he’s a winner and a household name” (406). However, in the stories of several other characters, Roland is being mocked for “being a media-whore [...] corrupted by celebrity” (47), and his “intellectual showmanship” is understood more as a performance than a sign of success. The comic effects of the contrast in how important Roland takes himself and how little others think of his self-proclaimed success help to make the political debate of “selling out” to the establishment by members of minorities that Roland stands in for more digestible for the reader. More importantly, this form of irony is especially visible in the novel in the comments by the narrative voice that emphasise contradictions in the perceptions that characters have of themselves and reality. These comments typically stand out visually on the page as they are written in brackets (or in italics),

which helps the reader distinguish them from the characters' thoughts and speech acts. This creative representation of narratorial comments testifies to the flexibility and experimentalism of "fusion fiction" as Evaristo appears to adjust her writing style to the specific needs of the novel without restricting herself to literary conventions around the form of the narrative voice (Self).

Shirley's narrative offers several instances in which the narrative voice supplements the narrative that characters create of events or reality more generally. In the following example, Shirley, who is a history teacher, thinks of a pupil whom she judges quite severely thanks to "confidential" rumours:

the third member of the gang was Lauren McDonaldson who had an STD, according to a very good (confidential) authority (the school nurse), on account of her promiscuity with the (older) boys in the school, including one of the (younger) caretakers, if rumours (toilet walls) were to be believed (246)

At first, the narrative voice points out the incongruity in the statement that Shirley knows from a "very good authority" about the sexually transmissible disease of one of her pupils through the comment "confidential". This remark is ironic since Shirley may consider the school nurse a confidential source of information, but the nurse's primary concern should be to keep "confidential" information about her patients a secret. Moreover, Shirley admits that her belief that Lauren is a promiscuous girl is based on rumour, but only thanks to the narrative voice does the reader understand that she has learned this from a toilet wall. Thus, the narrative voice gently mocks Shirley's debasement of one of her pupils in bringing out the discrepancy between reality and Shirley's version of it. Similar to Roland's case, Shirley's narrative deals with politically controversial and heavy themes such as racism, poverty, and other problems in the education system. The use of comedy could therefore be seen to help avoid cynicism or pessimism and contribute to the light tone of the novel.

In addition, Bernardine Evaristo herself points out that "humour arises from recognising the contradictory nature of who we are as people" (Self), and this irony brought about by the narrative voice is also crucial in creating relatable, human characters who have the right to be conflictual and imperfect. For instance, at one point in Penelope's story, the narrative voice contradicts her idyllic version of an afternoon she spends with her grandchildren and their relationship:

she cajoles them on to the sofa by holding two lollipops in her hands and once they've fallen for it, snuggles them under an arm each (without obviously throttling them), and proceeds to read them a story

about a talking train

Sarah's gang live in a second-floor flat in Brixton, which Penelope only visits when it's unavoidable, such as the twins' (unfortunately *annual*) birthday party (305)

From the rest of the narrative, the reader understands that in fact Penelope is quite attached to her children and her grandchildren. Nevertheless, in this instance, the comments between the brackets demonstrate that she can also be annoyed by them, even if she cannot express her feelings due to societal norms and expectations. Hence the narrator gives a voice to feelings and thoughts that Penelope would not dare articulate herself. While the image of Penelope half-hugging, half-throttling her grandchildren and her pretence to correspond to a cliché of an ideal, merry grandmother has comic effects, it may also make her more relatable to female readers who have themselves experienced occasional annoyance with the children in their care. Therefore, the use of humour and more specifically irony in *Girl, Woman, Other* does indeed bolster the treatment of serious, political themes in providing comic relief and fostering the identification with and empathy for relatable characters. This function of the narrative voice is predicated on the flexibility of “fusion fiction” which allows for the unique use of brackets that bring to light the characters' flaws or unconventional feelings.

Thus, the experimental aesthetics of voice – whether it be the ironic narrative voice or the idiosyncratic representation of the speech acts and variants of the characters – are intricately linked to Bernardine Evaristo's political motivations in the novel. In this chapter we have aimed to show that Evaristo does not only want to give Black British women a voice in representing their needs, opinions, and experiences, but also in finding new narrative modes that “change the terms (assumptions, principles, rules) of the conversation” (Mignolo and Walsh 113). In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo manages to find empathetic, unconventional ways to represent speech acts, challenge linguistic hierarchies, and to create a unique narrative voice that provides comic relief and counterbalances the serious, political undertones of the novel through “fusion fiction”. The resistance to literary (and societal) conventions is therefore crucial in the understanding of how Bernardine Evaristo uses the aesthetics of voice to transform absence into presence in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Yet, the aesthetic and politic dimensions of voice are also visible in the polyphonic nature of the novel and its challenge of master narratives.

### **3. The decentring effects of polyphony**

Apart from Evaristo's desire to explore the African diaspora and to challenge conventions creatively, polyphony is another recurring feature of her writing, which may be defined as a plurality of voices and perspectives that are granted equal validity in a narrative. In novels such as *Blonde Roots* and *Mr Loverman*, Evaristo enriches the narrative by proposing the perspectives of two different characters while her verse-novel *Lara* grants a voice to all of the eponymous character's family members. In *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*, Evaristo explains that she likes to create several equally strong characters in her writings as it allows her to counterbalance varying perspectives (Evaristo, *Manifesto* 140-141). With regard to *Girl, Woman Other*, she mentioned in an interview that she initially wanted to include as many as a thousand women in the story before downsizing the number to twelve (Waterstones). An important characteristic of the novel is that through narrative strategies such as internal focalisation, the reader has access not only to the voices and points of view of characters who are outspoken, but also to the internal voices of silenced or silent women. Therefore, even if some women are more vocal than others, their voices and perspectives are on an equal footing.

Mikhail Bakhtin, who was the first to theorise the concept of polyphony, saw clear political implications in the heterogeneity and pluralism that comes with it. In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), he theorises the workings and objectives of the novel and contrasts it with the ancient tradition of poetry. He claims that poetry plays into the project of "centralizing [...] the European languages [and creating] one reigning language (dialect) over the others, the supplanting of languages, their enslavement, the process of illuminating them with the True Word, the incorporation of barbarians and lower social strata into a unitary language of culture and truth, [and] the canonization of ideological systems" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 271). The novel, on the other hand, can put forward a diversity of speech types (what he names "heteroglossia") and ideologies through the creation of characters from different social and cultural backgrounds. Bakhtin argues that this multiplicity finds its fullest realisation in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's writings which produce a "polyphony of fully valid voices" and a "plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights [that] combine but are not merged". This multitude of voices and consciousnesses has decentralising effects (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* 7) as it counters oppressive political forces that rely on singular, ideological narratives.

These master narratives can take the shape of literary genres that put forward universals about life, the practices of political movements such as (white) feminism that ignore the differences among women, or racist discourse that is based on essentialising stereotypes. In this chapter, we would like to examine how polyphony is used in *Girl, Woman, Other* and analyse

the way in which it might be a tool to eschew metanarratives. Then we will concentrate on how Evaristo challenges racist practices, which often rely on essentialist narratives, and in which ways she creates a pluralist, feminist discourse.

### 1. Contesting singular narrative authority

When François Lyotard defined postmodernism as the incredulity toward metanarratives in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1985) he also declared “the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation” and the end of narrative functors such as the “great hero”, the “great dangers”, the “great voyages”, or generally the “great goal” in literature (Lyotard XXIV). What he refers to are some essential generic characteristics of the realist novel which often features one (hero-like) protagonist and a chronologically organised story following some variation of the five key stages of the novel (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution) as Gustave Freytag defined them in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Postmodernist writers set out to break with these generic traditions to create stories that challenge universals and a singular vision of reality. In this endeavour, polyphony can be a suitable narrative instrument according to Mariano d’Ambrosio in his article “Fragmentary Writing and Polyphonic Narratives in Twenty-First-Century Fiction” where he argues that “the choice of polyphony [...] is the principal agent of the collapse of the traditional single authoritative voice of the narrator, still predominant in realist fiction” (d’Ambrosio 19).

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo has created a narrative with as many as twelve protagonists whose lives are intertwined and whose stories feature a multitude of secondary characters. One effect of this multiplicity of voices is that there is no narrative authority: the equal length of the chapters which represent the women’s voices and experiences together with the heterodiegetic, invisible narrative voice which gives access to all the women’s thoughts put the women on an equal footing. The choice of a third-person narrator allows the reader to access the different perspectives while providing an objective distance from which the blind spots and flaws of the character are visible. Thus, the women do not function like the heroes of traditional realist novels whose actions, perspectives, and utterances embody a certain ideology of life that the reader should aspire to and hence Evaristo eschews the fallacy of creating universals or supporting metanarratives in *Girl, Woman, Other*.

One instance that illustrates the absence of any singly narratorial authority can be seen in the way in which the novel gives insight into the contradictory views of Amma and Roland. These two characters have diametrically opposed opinions about whether it is a valuable strategy for marginalised people to give up on their political agenda to integrate institutions of power. Roland is one of the few characters who is well-off financially and has come to a

noteworthy celebrity and influence in society through his books and interviews on television. He is convinced that his decision to “align himself with *L'Établissement*” makes him a “winner and a household name/ among the educated classes/ where it counts” (406). On the opening night of Amma’s play, he informs the playwright that she could have reached success much more easily if she had “directed a few multi-culti Shakespeares, Greek tragedies and other classics, instead of writing plays about Black women which will never have popular appeal” (406). In opposing the significance of canonical European theatre, embodied by William Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks, to the invisibility of Black women’s theatre, Roland seems to confirm Black women’s position at the margins. According to Roland, artists should pander to the tastes and expectations of mainstream society instead of remaining loyal to their political convictions and artistic style. By contrast, Amma spent her youth loudly protesting the exclusionary and racist ways of the British theatre scene and consequently “spent decades on the fringe, a renegade lobbing hand grenades at the establishment” (2). Contrary to Roland, Amma decided to stay true to her political agenda, which consolidated her position at the margins of society. She sticks by her decisions and thinks that

[Roland has] become a media-whore [...] he was such a great guy before he became famous and was corrupted by celebrity, he used to believe in something, now he only believes in himself, [he] is very establishment [...] that’s why they lionize him (47)

Amma associates Roland’s decision to align himself with the establishment with corruption and judges that he chose his own good over his community. While both characters’ opinions are quite extreme and their opinions may stand in for polarised positions, the narrative remains impartial to their perspectives. Their stories implicitly bring out the advantages and disadvantages of their choices and in the end, both manage to access the mainstream in their respective ways. Besides, Amma’s and Roland’s opinions not only compete with each other but also with the stories of the other protagonists and secondary characters. Therefore, Evaristo avoids imposing universals in her narrative and the reader has to weigh up the characters’ arguments and draw conclusions from their stories themselves.

Similarly, the lack of chronology and linearity in the stories of the twelve women involves the reader in the construction of meaning. Although the twelve chapters are held together by the occasion of the opening night of Amma’s play, there is no structural, temporal, or spatial uniformity to their stories. While most narratives feature key moments of the characters’ lives, these memories or anecdotes of their childhood and youth are woven into their stories in different manners. In her article “Reconfiguring Feminism: Bernardine Evaristo’s



*Girl, Woman, Other*” Merke Sarikaya-Sen defines the novel’s structure as a “‘network’ as opposed to the modern notion of the ‘centre’ and the postmodern idea of ‘dispersion.’ Instead of a linear and progressive chronology, the novel moves back and forth in time, interweaving events from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, and spans numerous geographical places.” (Serikaya-Sen 305) She further claims that the model of the network allows writers to connect temporally or spatially disparate stories and to show the interconnectedness of a novel’s characters all the while respecting their heterogeneity. This chimes in with Mariano d’Ambrosio’s assertion that apart from resisting to the authority of a singular narrative voice, polyphonic novels often make use of

heteroglossia, the democratic arrangement of disparate parts, non-linearity, lack of chronological order [...] the lack of a cause-and-effect relationship between consecutive passages, which ‘forces the reader to focus maximum attention on the scattered formal or thematic connections’<sup>4</sup> (d’Ambrosio 23)

In this passage, d’Ambrosio underlines that the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate chapters can be interpreted as a democratising effort. More importantly, he argues that the reader’s attention is drawn to the formal or thematic correspondences in the different parts of a novel. This means that, because the narrative abstains from imposing a singular interpretation onto the reader, the latter is encouraged to find links between sections, for instance in relation to the debate of aligning with the establishment that involves Roland and Amma. Therefore, polyphonic novels such as *Girl, Woman, Other* admit a multiplicity of readings and eschew the creation and endorsement of master narratives and universal truths. This narrative strategy is akin to what Mignolo and Walsh advocate as complementarity and relationality in *On Decoloniality* (Mignolo and Walsh 64). Instead of making the totalising claims about reality that characterise Western Modernity, Evaristo chooses to present varying perspectives on reality that complement and stand in relation to each other through her characters. Thus, the way Evaristo expresses a postmodernist scepticism toward metanarratives through polyphony can also be interpreted as a decolonial effort. This strategy allows her to deconstruct racist narratives about the singular vision of the British nation and counter stereotypical representations of marginalised characters in British literature.

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<sup>4</sup> d’Ambrosio relies on the following article in the cited passage: Drag, Wojciech. "Heteroglossia and Fragmentariness in the Absent Therapist by Will Eaves" *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, vol.51, no.4, 2017, pp.53-65. <https://doi.org/10.1515/stap-2016-0019>.

## 2. A pluralism of experiences to defy misrepresentation and racism

Whereas the polyphonic nature of *Girl, Woman, Other* does not make it a unique work of contemporary literature, it is rare to find as many as twelve main characters and even rarer for them to be from an ethnic minority background in British novels. The pluralism of experiences that are narrated in *Girl, Woman, Other* exposes the diversity among the characters since they are presented as a group of individuals rather than a homogenous collective. This representation not only counters a unifying singular vision of Black British women but also implicitly challenges the narrative of a singular British identity. Evaristo's repeated emphasis that she depicts twelve *British* women in the novel posits their claim to British nationality, a right they are often denied by racist discourse. She thereby creates an inclusive, heterogeneous narrative of what it means to be a British citizen, which testifies to the instability of a singular vision of nationhood that Homi Bhabha related to the paradoxical nature of the nation: "a 'nation' is coherent specific, and local; yet a person, the atomic essence of a nation ('I'm a nation'), does not constitute a population [therefore n]ations require plurality" (Bhabha 335). According to Malachi McIntosh in "Post-Colonial Plurality in Fiction", Evaristo's endeavour can be inscribed within the tradition of British literature about characters in postcolonial positions that deals with the "instability and indeterminacy of social identity, the volatility and perspectivalism of truth, the narratorial constructedness of history, the ineluctable subjectivism of memory and experience [and] the violence implicit in the universalist discourse of the nation" (McIntosh 196). On a smaller scale, this pluralism also has the effect of destabilising stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities in literature and of challenging the cultural racism that is based on an essentialising vision of these minorities.

### a) Resisting stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities

In *White Fragility*, the American sociologist Robin DiAngelo asserts that to understand race relations, the concept of white supremacy is key. She defines white supremacy as a "socio-political economic system of domination based on racial categories that benefits those defined and perceived as white" (DiAngelo 30). She goes on to show how this system relies in great part on media representations which deeply impact and shape the way we see the world. Since most media productions such as films, books, series etc. are written and produced by white people, their point of view dominates these cultural narratives and is perceived as the norm or even as universal in a country like the United States.

With regard to the United Kingdom, there are as of today few studies that could give insight into how white supremacy shapes whose novels are read and printed, and who is represented in these novels. One existing study is the Lit in Colour report commissioned by

Penguin Books UK and The Runnymede Trust, a race equality think tank, in 2020, which examines the English literature curriculum for schools in the UK. It found that although 34,5% of British students are Black, Asian, or from other ethnic minorities, only 0.7% of students were asked questions about novels written by writers of colour at their GSCE exams, and only 0.1% of questions concerned women writers of colour (Elliott et al. 26). This study demonstrates that novels written by white authors make up the majority so that pupils are almost always asked to adopt a white perspective when reading and analysing these novels in class. Another study from 2018 done by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education found that only 4% of children books include an ethnic minority character and only 1% had a protagonist with an ethnic minority background (Elliott et al. 15). This means that white children encounter mostly children whom they resemble in their books whereas children from ethnic minorities read or listen to stories about children whom they differ from in looks and social and cultural background.

Even from the scarce evidence available, it becomes clear that the white gaze dominates the literary institution in the United Kingdom. When Bernardine Evaristo speaks of putting presence into absence, she might think of the few opportunities that people of colour have to identify with the protagonists in a novel, with the story being told, or with the writers themselves. While Evaristo has written many novels that could be said to challenge the domination of “white” stories in the UK, *Girl, Woman, Other* stands out in that it tells a multiplicity of Black British (female) stories in one novel. The twelve protagonists are all Black British women (even if one of them only finds out late in her life about her origins), and Evaristo also includes several other minor characters from varying backgrounds. We argue that it is this multiplicity which allows the novel to challenge white supremacy effectively and to offer a narrative which foregrounds Black perspectives.

Before examining these Black perspectives, we need to consider how ethnic minorities are represented under the white gaze and what alternative representations they ask for. Both the Lit in Colour report and a report done by the Runnymede think tank on race relations underline the need for novels that include characters from minority backgrounds, are written in a diversity of genres and tackle a variety of topics. Ideally, there should be many more novels written by authors coming from minorities themselves to represent these communities accurately (Byrne et al. 179–82). This should counter the status quo which too often sees ethnic minority characters involved in violence and crime, or caricatured through racialised tropes and stereotypes. Another problem is that in the few stories by white authors that include ethnic minority characters, the only aspect of their lives which is usually given attention is their

experience of racism. What pupils and teachers seem to further call for are novels in which ethnic minority characters are not constantly confronted with dehumanising experiences such as slavery, colonising, or lynching (Elliott et al. 14–17).

*Girl, Woman, Other* could be said to meet most of these requests as it includes a variety of ordinary characters living through different sets of experiences in which racism sometimes, but not always, plays a role. For instance, the chapters focalised on Amma, Carole, and LaTisha tell the story of how Black British women achieve professional success in their lives. The reader meets Amma on the day of the opening performance of her play at the National Theatre, which is an opportunity she has waited and worked for her whole life. Although she is nervous at the prospect of harsh criticisms, she is also at a point in her career where she has confidence in her skills: “of course she knows she’s not an impostor, she’s written fifteen plays and directed over forty” (5). Carole has risen even higher on the social ladder after earning a scholarship to Oxford which helped her reach a top position at a London banking firm after graduation. While she is shown to have met multiple obstacles linked to racial discrimination during her education and in her daily life at work, Carole is presented as a woman who excels at her job and is in for her next promotion. LaTisha’s professional success story may play out on a different level as she works for a supermarket chain, but her portrait also gives the image of a Black British woman who is full of ambition and skilfully does her job:

LaTisha  
is wearing her uniform of navy blue trousers with a crease down  
the front, navy blue cardigan, fresh white shirt, hair gelled down and  
side-parted  
very smart and professional, because that’s what she is now,  
after she crawled her way out of the horror movie of her teenage  
years  
to begin climbing the giddy heights of retail supremacy  
winner of Colleague of the Month six times in three years  
Supervisor of the Month three times in six months (190-191)

After having cared little for her professional career as she was too absorbed by personal problems, LaTisha is now striving for professionalism. This is visible in her immaculate uniform and appearance, which almost evokes a military setting through the repetition of “navy blue” and her neatly “gelled-down” hair, and the pride she takes in having been elected Colleague and Supervisor of the month. While it is implicitly made clear that all three women met numerous obstacles and suffered racial microaggressions in their professional lives due to their ethnic backgrounds, these experiences do not take the upper hand in the story. Each woman is portrayed as confident in their skills and aware of the fact that they have earned their success. This makes for a representation which takes into account racial discrimination without letting

it define the characters' lives and identities, and which presents the reader with humane and relatable persons. The sheer multiplicity of characters that are shown to be leading ordinary professional lives in the novel underscores the idea that these three women are no exception to the rule.

Apart from these instances which revolve around the professional world, the novel generates many more examples of Black British women leading what could be called ordinary lives. For instance, Yazz, a young student who reads English literature to become a journalist, is grappling with a problem many people of her age know well. She worries about the ever-rising cost of university fees and rents which may push her to move back in with her mother once she starts working after university (42). Her mother Amma on the other hand is shown to have difficulties adjusting to her daughter's departure to university:

Amma misses her daughter now she's away at university  
[...] she misses the Yazz who stomps about the place  
who rushes in as if a hurricane's just blown her into a room-  
where's my bag/phone/bus pass/books/ticket/head?  
the familiar background sound when she is around (39)

The juxtaposition of several mainly monosyllabic nouns that are only separated by a slash makes for a long block of words that passes over the reader like a hurricane and helps them understand the stillness that Yazz leaves behind during her absences. These lines speak of an experience that most parents have dealt with and can probably identify with. This moment of a child leaving their parents' home is a situation that may sound so familiar to readers that they could imagine replacing Amma's and Yazz's names with their own family members' names. While similar lines could be found in a multitude of novels, the difference here is that Amma and Yazz are Black British women who are either misrepresented or not represented at all in literature. The multiplicity of these every day, humane experiences of Black British women that *Girl, Woman, Other* narrates, could be said to challenge and counterbalance racialised and stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities which only associate them with crime or poverty.

Whenever racism is directly thematised in a passage, the effects of this black gaze become even more evident. This comes not only from the fact that Evaristo herself has had to deal with racism but also from the way she makes the reader familiar with how characters perceive themselves as opposed to how society perceives them. The result are scenes which allow the characters to keep their dignity without ever sugar-coating the atrocity of racist attacks. One striking example that brings out how frequently Black British women are racially

abused is the story of the minor character Waris. Waris, one of Yazz's university friends, is a Black Muslim woman wearing a hijab and as such she has faced a multitude of racist slurs, shown in this long list of typical statements she gets confronted with:

that terrorism is synonymous with Islam  
that she's oppressed and they feel her pain  
if anyone asks her if she's related to Osama bin Laden  
if anyone tells her she's responsible for them being unemployed  
if anyone tells her she's a cockroach immigrant  
if anyone tells her to go back to her jihadist boyfriend  
if anyone asks her if she knows any suicide bombers  
if anyone tells her she doesn't belong here and when are you  
leaving?  
if anyone asks if she's going to have an arranged marriage  
if anyone asks her why she dresses like a nun  
if anyone speaks slowly to her like she can't speak English  
if anyone tells her that her English is really good  
if anyone asks her if she's had FGM, you poor thing  
if anyone says they're going to kill her and her family (60)

The anaphoric repetition of the conditional "if anyone..." in this long list gives the impression that Waris has encountered each of these racist interpellations many times in her life. The choice of presenting these comments in the form of a list might also aim at ridiculing the people who utter them: on the one hand, Waris could hardly embody all of these stereotypes at the same time; on the other hand, the length of the list and the different directions these comments take make it appear as if there were no limits to the assumptions that people make of Waris. Furthermore, in this list, the people behind the racist comments are not given a name or identity as they conflate and disappear behind the anonymous "anyone". This anonymisation could be interpreted as a reversal of the mechanism in which racism ascribes negative qualities to the members of a social group at the cost of the identity of the targeted individuals. Traces of this can often be found in literary depictions that do not grant the people at the receiving end of racism the opportunity to express or manifest themselves, remaining instead as anonymous as the attackers in this passage.

When the reader reaches this passage which directly addresses the issue of racism, they have already learned enough about Waris's life to understand that while she is frequently racially abused, the experience of racism does not shape her whole existence. She is a young student who likes to draw cartoons, has political ambitions, and has a clear vision of how she wants to live out her religious confession. Waris is not a faceless side character who remains a passive victim of racist attacks, and it is important to her to not be seen as such. This is demonstrated in the way she rejects Yazz's empathy when explaining: "I'm not a victim, don't ever treat me like a victim, my mother didn't raise me to be a victim." (61). Her assertive

statements marked by the epiphora of “victim” preceded by powerful negations are followed by one of the few full stops in the novel, which conveys the idea that what she has just said is not open for debate. The reader understands that the way she sees herself is more important than what others might project onto her. Thus, Waris is shown to be in control of the narrative of her own life and of the role she plays in it.

This passage, in which racism is the central theme, allows for a representation of ethnic minorities which points to the discrepancy between how they perceive themselves or how they are perceived by their friends and family, and how society chooses to perceive them. Passages like this one are relatively rare in the novel as Evaristo mostly depicts her characters living ordinary lives which are indeed impacted but not dominated by racial discrimination. Hence the novel could be said to present the reader with a black perspective that counters stereotypical representations and fills the void of ordinary stories about Black British people. Besides, it asks readers to identify only with characters from ethnic minorities throughout a whole novel, which encourages white readers to become aware of perspectives that differ from their own. The polyphony of voices and perspectives in *Girl, Woman, Other* does not only destabilise stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities in literature, but it also hints at the incoherence of cultural racism that essentialises them.

#### b) Challenging racist, essentialist stereotypes

Recent research into racism has shown how complex not only the history of race and racism is, but also how difficult it is to find a single model to describe the workings of racism. On the one hand, there appears to be a consensus on the fact that race is a social construct, and that racism needs to be considered as a system rather than isolated individual actions. On the other hand, the changes that the conception of race (as being based to different extents on biological, cultural, or even religious traits) has undergone in the last centuries, complexifies definitions of racism and suggests that it might be more appropriate to speak of racism in the plural. One concept that helps elucidate the workings of prevalent current forms of cultural racism is essentialism. This sociological concept refers to the assumption that there is an immutable essence underlying social groups which predicts how their members behave and which shapes their identities (Rattansi 104–05). This essentialism is the basis for racial prejudice which “consists of thoughts and feelings, including stereotypes, attitudes, and generalizations that are based on little or no experience and [...] are projected onto everyone from that group”, as Robin DiAngelo explains in *White Fragility* (DiAngelo 19). The concept of essentialism proves interesting for the analysis of racism in *Girl, Woman, Other* since the women whose stories are told could be perceived as forming one such social group and as such

be shaped by a common cultural essence. However, the polyphonic nature of the novel could be said to challenge essentialist racism since it enhances a vision of identity as pluralistic, dynamic, and heterogeneous. We argue that this challenge to essentialist racism can be observed in the multiplicity of individual stories but also in the interactions between characters that centre around the theme of identity.

In the introduction to *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1995), Stuart Hall argues that deconstructive practices in social sciences have led to the redefinition of many key concepts. In the case of identity, “anti-essentialist critiques of ethnic, racial and national conceptions of cultural identity” have found that the “notion of an integral, originary and unified identity” cannot be upheld (Hall 1). In *Racism: A Very Short Introduction*, Ali Rattansi approaches the question of identity from such a perspective that is sceptic of the concept of singular identity as he points to several fallacies in essentialist racism: first of all, it denies individuals the possibility of personal progress and therefore an identity open for change. Secondly, it ignores the fact that identities are rarely singular or coherent which means that individuals can live out different aspects of their identities depending on the context or their mood (Rattansi 116). Both fallacies could be said to be implicitly pointed out in the narration of *Girl, Woman, Other* through the examples of LaTisha and Carole.

LaTisha is a character who undergoes profound personal development in the novel. Although the chapter which focalises on her opens with a description of LaTisha as a responsible, organised mother and supervisor of a supermarket, the reader soon learns that her past played into many of the stereotypes about women from marginalised social groups. From being a sassy but happy child, LaTisha went on to lose control both in school and at home after the traumatic event of the loss of her father, who left her family to live with another woman and a child he had kept secret from them. A party LaTisha threw when aged 13 is one instance that showcases her derailment:

then she threw the legendary party when she was thirteen, except  
her mother came home too early the next morning when she was *sup-*  
*posed* to return home that evening

when the house would've been cleaned up, so whose fault was it  
really?

LaTisha was asleep with a boy in her bed (name? can't remember)

furniture was upturned, drink and sick stains, smoke burns, a  
ripped curtain, a broken lamp, plastic cups, scattered ash and cigar-  
ette butts because as the party had progressed deep into the night,  
with a load of strangers piling in, she'd given up trying to make  
people behave and not get waved

what the flamin' heck

she joined them (200)



As LaTisha's mother later suggests, the party is a turning point in the teenager's life: the moment when LaTisha ceases to care about good order in her home is symbolic of how she gives up control over her life after the loss of her father. The chaos in her home is reflected in the lines that describe the broken or dirty furniture as the narrative voice gives up syntactical rules and simply juxtaposes nouns. As LaTisha's resistance to the chaos shrinks so does the space she takes up on the page until she joins in the party. Besides, the fact that she shares her bed with a stranger foreshadows her later carelessness in her choice of sexual partners. From here on LaTisha enters a downward spiral and she becomes a teenage mom, who has three children from three different men once she is twenty, and who works at a supermarket without a secondary school diploma. As such, LaTisha's life could be said to correspond to racist stereotypes about young women from marginalised social groups. However, Evaristo's portrayal of LaTisha suggests that her difficult position in life was triggered by a traumatic event in her childhood rather than preconditioned by culturally typical behaviour.

Moreover, these stereotypes are only conjured up to be then transcended by LaTisha, once she is capable of seizing control over her life and steering it in another direction: she manages to access a higher position in the employee hierarchy at the supermarket; she passes two A levels at an evening school which allows her to take on an online retail management degree at an evening school; she chooses her relationships with greater care. Even if LaTisha cannot change her past or things outside herself, this personal progress testifies that her identity and life are neither static nor defined by an underlying cultural essence determining the behaviour of the social group she belongs to.

LaTisha's former school friend Carole has grown up in similarly difficult conditions as her immigrant mother had to raise her on her own after the death of Carole's father. At LaTisha's party mentioned above, Carole gets group-raped, a traumatic experience that still haunts her many years later. As has been mentioned in chapter two, Carole earns a scholarship at Oxbridge university, and although she finds it hard to integrate into the school at first, she soon understands the cultural codes and behaviours of her more privileged fellow students and manages to integrate their world. This influences the way she talks and dresses, and what kind of activities she enjoys during her free time. Even if she sticks to most of the cultural signifiers of upper-class Britain, she still lives out certain aspects of her Nigerian cultural heritage:

[...] she's got Vivaldi's Four Seasons as her ring tone, the  
public face of her musical taste  
sometimes  
Carole loves dancing like a warrior queen to frenzied beats of the  
war-painted shamanistic godfather,  
Fela Kuti

loves the way he rips apart her emotions with his polyrhythmic percussions and unashamedly flatulent horns blasting away all pretence at nicety-niceness with his anti-corruption-lyrical-political broadsides (141)

In these lines, the delicate sophistication of classical music is conveyed in the short, simple sentences and the underlying rhythm that reminds the reader of an iambic meter (“the public face of her musical taste). This contrasts with the description of Fela Kuti’s music, which hints at its exuberance and richness through the use of (compound) adjectives such as “polyrhythmic” or “anti-corruption-lyrical-political” and the alliterations in the explosive consonant “p” (“polyrhythmic percussions”, “pretence”, “political”) express the imposing volume of the instruments. While Carole wants her ring tone to evoke a sophisticated taste for classical music, she also enjoys music from the country her parents come from. Even if Carole is not always entirely free in her negotiation of these different aspects of her identity, the fact that she can choose from more than one culturally determined identity counters essentialist racism. The assumption that there is an underlying essence to the identity of the members of a social group does not allow for this pluralism in identity that many migrant children such as Carole experience. The way in which identity is represented in this chapter, which focalises on Carole, aligns with Rattansi’s explanation that “identities [...] are rarely coherent and integrated [...] [t]hey are prone to *inconsistency* and *contradiction*, depending on the context” (Rattansi 116–17).

The challenge to essentialism is reinforced by the polyphonic nature of the novel since Carole and LaTisha are not isolated instances of transformation and multiplicity in identity. Throughout the twelve stories, the reader encounters several other examples that emphasise the heterogeneity and dynamism of identity. Therefore, polyphony helps to debunk essentialist racism as it demonstrates that LaTisha and Carole are not mere exceptions to the rule and that the twelve women’s identities are too complex to be reduced to a single essence that they share.

Polyphony also works against cultural racism in the way it allows for interactions between the characters, which the reader can consider from varying perspectives. These various points of view can deepen the reader’s understanding of explicit conflicts about identity and offer a wide range of visions of what it means to be a Black British woman. The juxtaposed chapters narrating Carole’s and her mother Bummi’s stories exemplify how differently two generations approach the question of identity as they argue about Carole’s choice of her fiancé. As mentioned above, Carole is a second-generation immigrant and as such navigates between two cultural identities depending on either her personal preferences or the context. From a passage in which Carole reflects on what qualities a partner should ideally have, the reader

learns that professional and social status plays an important role for her (147). Her mother Bummi's identity could be said to be mostly rooted in her earlier life in Nigeria. In addition, the rough conditions she has faced as an immigrant in the United Kingdom have made her averse to British people and cling to her Nigerian heritage. For her, it is clear that her daughter should marry a man of Nigerian origins and after Carole has finished university, she even attempts to bring her "to church to meet the three young Nigerian men she had picked out for her, all with good degrees and varying degrees of handsomeness" (152). It seems evident to Bummi that origin is more important than professional status and attractiveness, and that it should be one's priority when choosing a partner. For this reason, she feels betrayed when she learns of Carole's engagement to a white man:

Carole, she said, sitting back down, come, listen to me, you hardly know this Freddy-come-lately character whereas I have known you your entire life, who is he to you when you are everything to me? There is no point getting on in this country if you lose who you really are, you are not English or did you give birth to yourself?  
you are a Nigerian, first, foremost and last-most (155)

The use of pronouns and determinants in this passage brings out the tension between Bummi, Carole, and Freddy. While Bummi refers to Freddy with a distancing "this Freddy", she emphasises the personal pronoun "I". This opposition runs through the line "who is he to you when you are everything to me?" which conveys Bummi's desire to prove her claim to Carole's cultural identity). This imperative attitude towards Carole's identity is also visible in the increasing use of the pronoun "you", including the isolated "yourself" which stands out visually. Although Carole was born in the United Kingdom and has spent her entire life there, Bummi argues that she is above all Nigerian and not British, as if one excludes the other. To her, Carole's embracing of some elements of an English identity that has helped her climb the social ladder came at the expense of what she sees as her true (Nigerian) identity. Moreover, marriage appears to be such a foundational element of this Nigerian identity that marrying outside of the collective endangers one's claim to this cultural identity. However, Carole perceives things differently and does not see her engagement to a white man as a threat to her Nigerian heritage or as an issue that influences her identity at all.

This generational clash that revolves around the question of identity demonstrates several things. Firstly, it points to the complexity of any discussion about racism and identity. While white people might simply regroup Black people in one collective, to Black people there exists a multitude of subdivisions such as Nigerian or Caribbean. This exposes the discrepancy between which social groups individuals identify with and which social groups they are

assigned to by society. Secondly, it demonstrates that even the members of one family do not see themselves represented in a single identity and that, as with Carole, identities are often pluralistic. Due to the lengthy focalisation on both characters, the reader understands the motives behind each woman's perception of identity, and neither character's vision appears more justified than the other. The novel, therefore, allows for a pluralism in the identities of Black British women that racist essentialism makes impossible. Thirdly, the progress from a rather restrictive perception of what it means to be a Nigerian woman living in the UK to a more open-minded and pluralist vision of identity by Carole comes back to the idea that identity is not static but rather ever-changing.

Thus, the polyphony in *Girl, Woman, Other* exposes the incoherence of essentialist racism and offers a multitude of relatable characters and experiences to ethnic minority readers. While the diversity among the twelve Black British women in the novel brings out their diverging views on the question of identity, it could also be seen to contest a singular vision of feminism.

### 3. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 103): a new vision of feminism

In interviews, Bernardine Evaristo frequently underlines the influence that Audre Lorde's poetry and activism had on her ever since she discovered her as a young woman in the 1980s (Waterstones). Audre Lorde was among the group of Black American women who revolutionised feminism and anti-racism in the 1980s by protesting the movements' ignorance of Black women's needs. In her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", Lorde argues that feminism needs to turn women's differences into strengths to avoid a power hierarchy that resembles patriarchy within the feminist movement itself (Lorde 103-104). Her critique of the exclusion of coloured women can be read as a precursor to more recent feminist, decolonial theories that similarly attack the (still prevalent) idea of a singular, white feminism. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, feminism is a central theme because several characters are engaged in feminist protest and because the polyphony of women's voices addresses some issues such as womanhood and motherhood that define women's experiences. Evaristo's portrayal of a pluralist feminism takes on a dialogic quality in that the women's experiences and opinions about feminism can be read as one large dialogue. In literature, dialogism is deeply linked with polyphony and, as noted by Laurent Perrin:

[s]elon Bakhtine, le sens des énoncés subit une double influence, respectivement interdiscursive et interlocutive [...]. D'une part, les énoncés entrent systématiquement en résonance interdiscursive (ou intertextuelle) avec ce qui a déjà été dit à l'aide des mêmes

mots ou à propos du même objet ; ils font écho et réagissent à d'autres paroles ou points de vue qu'ils intègrent. [...] Et d'autre part, au plan interlocutif cette fois, les énoncés non seulement répondent, mais ils anticipent aussi sur les interprétations, annoncent les répliques potentielles d'un destinataire, réel ou virtuel, auquel ils s'adressent. (Perrin 8-9)

We argue that this concept of dialogism is crucial in how Evaristo creates a pluralist narrative of feminism which emphasises the heterogeneity of women and turns their differences into assets of the movement.

#### a) A heterogeneous vision of womanhood

Although Judith Butler has theorised that gender is a form of improvised performance and therefore not an inherent essence of men or women in her 1990 work *Gender Trouble*, activist feminism still needs a definition of what it means to be a woman for its movement to function: who can call themselves a woman? Can women form a unified social group? What are the needs of women? These are some questions that need to be answered (or at least considered) for feminism to be a functioning, practical movement. In "Gender as Seriality", Iris Marion Young acknowledges the pragmatic advantages of seeing women as a unified social group among which the fact that feminism would lose its specificity (and efficiency) without a conception of women as a collective. Yet, "any effort to identify the attributes of that collective appears to undermine feminist politics by leaving out some women whom feminists ought to include" (714). The issue of inclusiveness is important in *Girl, Woman, Other* since the novel attempts to give visibility to marginalised women who were long silenced within a predominantly white feminist movement. For many decades now, Black women, transgender and transsexual women, and women from other minorities have attempted to challenge this hierarchy and find a better definition of womanhood.

Thanks to the use of polyphony in *Girl, Woman, Other*, the novel can be said to reflect on the conflict of finding a unified definition of the term woman. As has been mentioned, Black (female) individuals are often essentialised and their heterogeneity tends to be ignored in society. Nonetheless, when Bernardine Evaristo talks of giving Black British women a voice, she does not think of them as a homogenous collective, which is visible in the novel in the following ways. Firstly, *Girl, Woman, Other* covers a wide span of ages from 19-year-old Yazz to 93-year-old Hattie. The generational gaps between the women expose their different perceptions of what it means to be a woman, which is especially visible in mother-daughter relationships. Shirley, who is at the end of her teaching career when the reader meets her, still has resentful feelings when she thinks of how her childhood differed from those of her brothers:

[they were the ones] who didn't have to do any housework or even wash their own clothes, whereas she had to spend her Saturdays mornings doing

both

who were given first helpings at meals they never had to cook, and extra portions because they were growing lads, including mega-helpings of the most desirable desserts

who weren't punished for speaking their mind, whereas she was sent to her room at the slightest sign of insurrection, keep your thoughts to yourself, Shirl

and while it's true that they got the strap and she didn't – for going out without permission or not coming home on time from school – it was only because she never broke the rules (218)

In this passage, expressions such as “mega-helpings” and “most desirable desserts” give the impression that the reader hears Shirley's voice as a child who is outraged by the negative consequences of being a girl. The anaphoric repetition of the pronoun “who” in these lines emphasises the frequency of these incessant daily discriminations as well as the opposition that the differential treatment of Shirley's parents created between her and her brothers. However, that this injustice is not only based on Shirley's perception as a child is visible to the reader in her mother Winsome's story. Whenever Shirley visits her mother in the West Indies during the summer, Winsome is frustrated at her daughter's refusal to help her in the household. Yet, she does not comment upon her son's reticence to offer help. As a consequence, Winsome's and Shirley's indirect dialogue on the duties of a woman testifies to the generational gap as one potential source of conflict about the definition of womanhood.

Secondly, Shirley's friendship with Amma brings to light her critical and even homophobic views about homosexual women as she appears to believe in heteronormativity. When Amma as a teenager confided to Shirley that she was a lesbian, Shirley secretly felt disgusted and scared that her reputation would suffer from association with her friend (223). Even as an adult she dislikes homosexual relationships and resents Amma's past and present feminist activism. While Amma thinks of Shirley as a friend that has supported her in her decision to come out of the closet, only the reader knows about Shirley's true feelings. Thus, the novel shows the limits of Shirley's progressivism and demonstrates that she has a restrictive vision of womanhood with regard to the question of sexuality.

Thirdly, Amma and her friend Dominique, who is also a lesbian, disagree on the limits of the term woman for a different reason. After having ended her abusive relationship with Nzinga, for whom Dominique moved to the United States, she became an organiser for female art festivals in America. When Dominique announces that one of her festivals is exclusively for “women-born-women as opposed to women-born-men” (437), she faces a considerable backlash on Twitter and is angry at being accused of transphobia. In her conversation with Amma, she argues that this difference matters since men are raised differently and might not have the same needs as “women-born-women” once they identify as women. Amma counters

that “the trans community is entitled to fight for their rights” (437) and adds that “we should celebrate that many more women are reconfiguring feminism [...] and [that] millions of women are waking up to the possibility of taking ownership of our world as fully-entitled human beings” (438). Hence Amma does not see the trans community as separate from the feminist movement and acknowledges their entitlement to the term woman. Moreover, the fact that she celebrates how women reconfigure and redefine feminism per se may suggest that she has a more flexible vision of womanhood itself. Nevertheless, her disagreement with Dominique about the inclusion of trans people into feminism demonstrates that gender and biological sex can be yet another reason that makes a singular definition of womanhood difficult.

Therefore, Evaristo not only hints at the heterogeneity of the term woman through the differences in age, occupation, class, and origin of the twelve women but also through the women’s explicit opinions on what it means to be a woman. As noted by Mariano d’Ambrosio, polyphony makes possible “[t]he adoption of disparate standpoints and identities in relation to a chaotic and problematic reality [which] may spring from the search for a more appropriate representation of life and the ways it is experienced” (d’Ambrosio 19). The problem that womanhood cannot be defined in a singular way testifies to a chaotic reality which calls for a mode of representation that allows for the inclusion and complementarity of different perspectives. Besides this destabilisation of a singular vision of womanhood, polyphony also allows Evaristo to highlight the emancipatory potential of motherhood.

#### b) The (in)compatibility of motherhood and emancipation

While the chapters in *Girl, Woman, Other* are disparate parts that are juxtaposed without a chronological progression, the presentation of the chapters follows a certain structure: there are four regroupings of three characters who know each other through family, friendship, or professional ties. One recurrent pattern in these regroupings is the relationship between mothers and daughters. Amma and her daughter Yazz both have their chapters as do Carole and Bummi, Shirley and Winsome, and Hattie and Grace. Therefore, motherhood is a central theme of *Girl, Woman, Other* and the women’s different experiences with mother- and daughterhood creates an extended dialogue on the matter, which is visible only to the reader. The heterogeneity in the representation of motherhood counters an essentialised, restrictive vision of what it means to be a mother. Thus, Evaristo not only includes mother figures that do not correspond to idealised, motherly characteristics but also gives expression to the hardships and pressure that result from a patriarchal conception of motherhood.

In her article “Motherhood, Feminism and Identity”, Margaret A. Simons argues that the institution of motherhood implies multiple norms that women are expected to live up to.

First and foremost, women's worth is intricately linked with their roles as mothers so that a woman who does not want to be a mother or does not experience motherhood as a thoroughly blissful experience, is often punished by patriarchal society. Hence mothers need to make proof of such qualities as cheerfulness with their children and "not being cheerful becomes another instance of a mother's failure" (Simons 353). In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Grace's story gives insight into the suffering that these expectations of women can cause. Grace was born in 1895 to a working-class woman called Daisy who reared her by herself. Later in life, Grace married a farmer in northern England, but when they tried to have children, Grace sank into depression after several miscarriages and stillbirths. When she gives up on the dream of having children, her husband, who does not acknowledge her needs, forces her to keep trying and does not shy away from marital rape in his endeavour. Grace eventually gives birth to Harriet (Hattie), but because she still suffers from depression, she cannot build a relationship with the baby. In the following passage, Grace considers taking her own life as she can no longer cope with her husband's expectations:

she thought of walking out of the house, down the fields at the  
back and entering the lake until the water closed over her head  
Joseph threatened her with the asylum, they'll chain you naked  
to a wall where you'll sit in your own toilet for the rest of your life  
she didn't care, she was already in hell, she took to sleeping in  
another bedroom, that part of our lives is over, she told him  
don't worry, he replied bitterly, I was only doing my duty, and you  
are now failing in yours  
Grace remembered how he used to look at her with a love so  
powerful she could only return it, now he refused, just as she refused  
to touch the thing she'd given birth to  
when Joseph thrust it under her nose, she pushed past him  
don't you dare walk away from your daughter, you're a wicked  
woman, Grace Rydendale (399)

The lack of emotion in Grace's thoughts and words, which is visible in her rational, detached discourse ("thought", "remembered", "the thing", "refused"), expresses her incapability to care for the demise of her marriage and her own health. Her husband Joseph's speech has a policing tone due to the repeated "you" and such imperatives as "don't you dare walk away" and "don't worry". The alliteration in "wicked woman" emphasises the force of the insult which brings out that in order to be a good woman, Grace needs to show cheerfulness and devotion toward her child. His threats to send Grace into an asylum hint at the fact that in the past, women who did not comply with (patriarchal) society's expectations were often labelled mad and locked away. Grace's story is still relevant to women today, even if they are no longer sent to asylums because they still face stigmatisation when they express no desire to have children, or simply allow themselves to show that they do not enjoy every aspect and



moment of motherhood. Most importantly, however, once Grace is no longer chronically depressed, she does find a way to have a meaningful relationship with her daughter on her own terms. This illustration of the negative impact of a restrictive vision of motherhood on women is complemented by Winsome's story. Winsome's and Shirley's relationship features one of the most intense instances of dramatic irony in the novel. While Shirley believes that she has found the perfect husband in Lennox and has taken their happy marriage as a given throughout her life, the reader later learns that Shirley's mother Winsome has had an affair with Lennox. Winsome, who is not only sexually but also emotionally attracted to Lennox, feels no remorse at her betrayal as she is convinced that "she deserved to have this/him" (273). As Merve Sarıkaya-Şen points out in her article, Winsome's story shows that "being a mother and a wife cannot fully satisfy all women" (Sarıkaya-Sen 312). The prevalent image of motherhood is generally seen as incompatible with the existence and expression of women's sexuality, which is a constraint that can lead to much frustration as in Winsome's case and the betrayal of her daughter.

Therefore, polyphony allows Evaristo to point to different problems that result from an idealised vision of motherhood. Besides, through the heterogeneity of the twelve Black British women, the novel also represents several mothers, among who Bummi, Amma, and Dominique, who have loving and satisfying relationships with their children but who do not correspond to society's norms. Dominique is a lesbian married to Laverne and together they rear two adopted children. Amma is also a lesbian who has a child with a male homosexual friend and brings up Yazz as a single mother. Bummi also becomes a single mother after the death of her husband Augustine and she is shown to (secretly) enjoy homosexual love affairs. All three of them work full-time jobs, whether it is out of love for their career or the necessity to sustain their families. Even though they do not correspond to the ideal image of a heterosexual, married, stay-at-home mother, Evaristo portrays them as successful and worthy of being deemed good mothers.

Moreover, their motherhood is illustrated as a means for women to empower not only themselves but also their children. In her 1976 work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich asserts that motherhood is a source of two kinds of power for women. On the one hand, there is "the biological potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life" and on the other hand "the magical power invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women" (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 12). The idea that women are powerful because their role as mothers gives them a chance to influence or overthrow society's expectations through the upbringing of their children is especially present in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Bummi epitomises

this ability to empower her daughter when she pushes her to continue to fight for her place at Oxford. As one of the few Black female students at the prestigious institution, Carole is frequently otherised by her fellow students and thinks of giving up her studies. Thanks to the consolation and encouragement she finds in her mother, Carole eventually succeeds in climbing the social ladder to find a way out of poverty. Hence, her effort to challenge society's hierarchy which keeps marginalised people from accessing privilege was successful. Amma is even bolder and more consciously dissenting in her objective to empower herself and Yazz as a mother:

she breastfed her wherever she happened to be and didn't care  
who was offended at a mother's need to feed her child  
she took her everywhere, strapped to her back or across her front  
in a sling, deposited her in the corner of rehearsal rooms, or on the  
table at meetings  
she took her on tour on trains and planes in a travel cot that looked  
more like a carry-all, once almost sending her through the airport  
scanner, begging them not to arrest her over it  
she created the position of seven godmothers and two godfathers  
to ensure there'd be a supply of babysitters for when her child was  
no longer quite so compliant and portable

Yazz was allowed to wear exactly what she liked so long as she  
wasn't endangering herself or her health  
she wanted her to be self-expressed before they tried to crush her  
child's free spirit through the oppressive regimentation of the educa-  
tion system [...]

Yazz was never told off for speaking her mind, although she was  
told off for swearing because she needed to develop her vocabulary (37)

In this passage, Amma or Yazz figure as the subjects of every single sentence which is expressive of how Amma's emancipation from society's norms and expectations allows them to be independent and self-determined. Whereas traditional conceptions of motherhood uphold the illusion of the separation of the private and the public, Amma takes Yazz everywhere with her: she displays her motherhood at work meetings and travels around the world with her child. Together with her decision to breastfeed wherever she needs to, Amma reclaims the public space and visibility that mothers are often denied by society. Instead of seeing her single motherhood as a problem, Amma defies the idea that "mothers are the people best equipped to raise their own children" (Davies 416), which is a notion that Bronwyn Davies' and D'arne Welch's deal with in their article "Motherhood and Feminism: Are They Compatible? The Ambivalence of Mothering", and creates a network of godmothers and godfathers in case she needs a break or wants to put herself first now and then. For all these reasons, Amma exits the framework in which mothers need to put their needs second and are confined to rearing their children in a nuclear household, which leads to many conflicts for women (Davies 412).

Moreover, both Bummi's and Amma's relationships with their daughters show that "social and political change is possible by raising empowered children whereby women can develop the powers denied them by the constraints of patriarchal motherhood" (Serikaya-Sen 311). Hence, Evaristo not only uses polyphony to undermine a singular, restrictive narrative of womanhood, but she gives several examples of how women can find power in their roles as mothers – for the benefit of themselves and their children. Feminist activism and motherhood are therefore shown to be compatible in the novel, which is an integral part of Evaristo's representation of the direction that the feminist movement should take.

### c) Towards a decolonial feminism

In the novel, Bummi and her husband Augustine are well-educated Nigerian migrants who come to Great Britain with high expectations for their futures. Soon they understand that their accents, their different-sounding names, and their skin colour will make it hard for them to find the good-paying jobs they dreamed of and so they have no choice but to accept working as a taxi driver and a cleaning agent. When Bummi's husband dies from a heart attack, she makes the resolution of attempting to make Augustine's and her dreams come true and decides to open her own cleaning company:

that night she dreamed of employing an army of women cleaners who would set forth across the planet on a mission to clean up all the damage done to the environment

they came from all over Africa and from North and South America, they came from India and China and all over Asia, they came from Europe and the Middle East, from Oceania, and from the Arctic, too

she imagined them all descending in their millions on the Niger Delta and driving out the oil companies with their mop and broom handles transformed into spears and poison-tipped swords and machine-guns [...]

she imagined the government unable to mobilize the poorly paid local militia because they were terrified by the sheer numbers of her Worldwide Army of Women Cleaners [...]

afterwards, she imagined legions of singing women sifting the rivers and creeks to remove the thick slicks of grease that had polluted them, and digging up the land until they'd removed the toxic sublayers of soil

she imagined the skies opening when the job was done and the pouring of pure water from the now hygienic clouds for as long as it took for the region to be thoroughly cleansed and replenished (171-2)

The ballistic undertones of this passage, which are visible in such terms as "army", "mission", "spears", and "legions", convey Bummi's determination to clean up the world and to bring about change. She appears to see the responsibility and ability to effectuate change with women from all over the world and her dream subverts the low reputation of being a cleaner as they are portrayed as the heroes that will save the world simply by doing their job.

Bummi's vision of the importance and potentiality of women in cleaning jobs echoes the introduction of Françoise Vergès' work *Un Féminisme décolonial* (2019). She highlights that society depends on the work of marginalised, exploited women who uphold the infrastructure and whose health and lives are endangered by their jobs as cleaners (among other occupations) (Vergès 1-2). She is highly critical of white feminism ("féminisme civilisationnel") which she sees as a product of colonialism and which ultimately only reinforces the oppression of coloured women around the world. This point is well illustrated by Penelope's story in *Girl, Woman, Other* as she is a white feminist whose advocacy of women's rights is quite exclusive: as has been demonstrated earlier on, she silences her coloured female colleagues at work while speaking up for herself. Moreover, when she hires Bummi as a cleaner one day, she others her by implying that Bummi could steal from her. Power relations between women like this one are the reason why Vergès advocates a decolonial feminism which needs to fight racism, capitalism, and imperialism as they are oppressive systems that are contingent on each other (Vergès 8-9).

This is however not the only way in which *Girl, Woman, Other* can be said to hint at the necessity of a decolonial feminism. In *On Decoloniality* Mignolo and Walsh explain that decoloniality is a contextual practice which aims to create relational ways of seeing the world. The concept of relationality allows for a "distancing from the universalizing and totalizing claims of Western modernity" (Mignolo and Walsh 30; 64) as "different local histories and embodied conceptions and practices of decoloniality [...] can enter into conversations and build understandings that both cross geopolitical locations and colonial differences and contest the totalizing claims and political epistemic violence of modernity" (Mignolo and Walsh 1-2).

This practice of relationality could be said to be present in *Girl, Woman, Other* as the women's voices and the narration of their experiences create a more extended dialogue on several themes among which is feminism. Each character's specific positionality is contextualised through the chapters that focus on them and their differing opinions on feminism and their experiences with the movement are represented as equally important. Throughout the novel, it is up to the reader to link these different perspectives on feminism and to perceive them as a dialogue. Thus, Yazz's and her friend's discussion of privilege has several resonances in the stories of other women. While Yazz believes in a hierarchy of privilege ("in five categories: black, Muslim, female, poor, hijabbed" (66)), her white friend Courtney replies that

[...] Roxane Gay warned against the idea of playing 'privilege Olympics' and wrote in *Bad Feminist* that privilege is relative and contextual, and I agree, Yazz, I mean, where does it all end? Is Obama less privileged than a white hillbilly growing up in a

trailer park with a junkie single mother and a jailbird father? is a severely disabled person more privileged than a Syrian asylum-seeker who's been tortured? Roxane argues that we have to find a new discourse for discussing inequality (66)

Courtney's direct questions convey that she doubts that feminism (and other movements) should rely on totalising narratives as "privilege Olympics" as they hinder people from grasping the specificity of individual positionalities. Later in Yazz's story, this debate is implicitly alluded to as Courtney and Yazz (both depend on summer jobs to finance their studies) are shown to have a quite different experience of university and free time than their rich, Egyptian friend Nenet, whose financial privilege allows her to cheat in exams. Similarly, Carole faces blatant sexism at work despite her upward mobility to the British upper class (financially and culturally) and although Hattie should theoretically be quite low in the privilege hierarchy as a Black, elderly woman working as a farmer, she is one of the most independent and self-determined characters in the novel.

Likewise, Yazz points out the shortcomings and obsolescence of feminism to her mother Amma arguing that it too often reinforces a binary vision of gender (39). This critical vision of feminism right from the beginning of the novel has multiple repercussions in later stories. Dominique's narrative shows that women are capable of oppressing each other in the name of feminism as her girlfriend Nzinga pretends to free Dominique from patriarchal influences while in fact operating a similarly oppressive regime in her relationship. More importantly, Yazz's declaration dialogues with Morgan's story which illustrates the difficult journey of freeing oneself from the man/woman binary and reclaiming space within feminist discourse. Hence, the polyphony in *Girl, Woman, Other* creates a narrative in which the twelve characters (and their experiences) dialogue with each other and feminism (among other subjects such as motherhood) is shown as being relational and contextual.

This relationality is however not only implicit and dependent on the reader's perception of the interdiscursive elements in the novel as the last chapter called "The Afterparty" materialises their interconnectedness. In this chapter, which is dominated by the characters' actual dialogues, several of the twelve British women meet at the afterparty of Amma's theatre play. The importance of relationality is then further emphasised by the ending of the novel when Penelope, who was adopted as a child and identified as a white person throughout her life, reunites with her Black mother Hattie after eighty years. Penelope is overjoyed to finally meet her mother which makes her forget about her racist beliefs and their differences. The enigmatic last words of the novel "this is about being/together." (452) round off this optimistic ending which suggests that relationality is the key to harmony and progress.

Thus, *Girl, Woman, Other* creates a relational dialogue on feminism that emphasises the contextuality of women's experiences and opinions and therefore showcases a decolonial feminist practice. This relationality, which is implicit in the women's dialogues and explicit in the final chapters of the novel, is a strategy that makes possible the delinking from singular narratives about feminism that may reinforce the oppression of women affected by racism, ableism, classicism, or transphobia. As a result, polyphony is not only a crucial element that structures the stories in *Girl, Woman, Other*, but it also allows Bernardine Evaristo to comment on key notions of feminism such as womanhood, motherhood, and inclusiveness. Moreover, through polyphony, Evaristo challenges different metanarratives that support an oppressive division of the sensible. Hence it is one manifestation of how Bernardine Evaristo combines aesthetics and politics to give Black British women a voice.



## Conclusion

In *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*, Bernardine Evaristo explains that her art and activism “spring from the same fountain of intention, and in a sense, [her] art embodies [her] activism” (Evaristo, *Manifesto* 176). This connection of politics and aesthetics that *Girl, Woman, Other* epitomises has been the basis for our analysis of how Evaristo makes use of the polymorphous concept of voice to put presence into absence. In *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1908-2018*, Kevin Brazil ponders the evolution that form and fiction have undergone in British literature in the past decades and argues that

the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solution” to unresolvable social contradictions”. This inverted the formal tradition, beginning with Kant and Schiller, of using form to name what distinguished literature in a positive sense from other uses of language. (in Boxall 89)

While Evaristo’s novel remains within the realm of realist fiction, her novel exemplifies how literature can invent or imagine solutions to social conflicts and unbalances. Thus, Evaristo makes great use of voice as a metaphor for presence and the absence of voice for invisibility. The stories of Yazz, Morgan, and Amma show how voice can be both a metaphor for the self and an instrument to disrupt discrimination, point out misrepresentations, and raise awareness about the needs of marginalised communities. The voice can also be a metaphor for presence and self when all the reader hears are the internal voices of some characters: the narrative strategy of internal focalisation is crucial in giving women a voice who do not naturally seize the opportunity to speak up or who dread the consequences of challenging an oppressive system. Besides, in addition to Evaristo’s objective to transform absence into presence, she also attempts to bring out the agency and power that resides in silence. The 93-year-old character Hattie embodies the fact that remaining silent, withholding information, and being highly selective in one’s conversation partners can strengthen one’s self-determination and independence. Evaristo further problematises the binary way of thinking of silence as something negative and speaking up as something positive through characters who pay a high price for speaking up. Penelope’s feminist advocacy for her rights has deeply impacted the course of her life and it is up to the reader to decide whether her life has changed for the better or not. Whenever absence (of voice) does reinforce the marginalisation of Black British women, Evaristo is adamant to depict and draw attention to their invisibility. Hence the novel presents Amma’s life-long struggle to move her art and herself from the margins to the centre of society in a realistic light as it underlines how the value of Amma’s art is decided upon by the dominant



parts of society. As a result, Evaristo reminds the reader of the contingency of voice and audience, which she knows all too well from her own career.

Whether their voices are represented as loud, silent, or silenced, “female ‘black’ British voices [...] become the new point of reference for the reader. This destabilises the (Occidental) reader’s expectations, which therefore constitutes both an aesthetic and political act. In a similar way, the reader can be destabilised by what Bernardine Evaristo herself has called ‘fusion fiction’.” (Courtois 13) As we have attempted to suggest in our second chapter, Evaristo’s experimental writing style can be said to have decentring effects. The reader has to become accustomed to the idiosyncratic quality of the narrative voice which is characterised by fluidity and flexibility. As Evaristo explained in *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*, “this form allowed [her] to flow freely – from interiority to exteriority, from past to present, from one character’s narrative to the next” (Evaristo, *Manifesto* 142). This liberty to seamlessly transition from one character’s thoughts or words to the next and from the narrative to a character’s voice is a crucial aspect of Evaristo’s creativity. Together with the idiosyncratic representation of silence on the page, this experimentalism enhances the empathy of the reader for the Black British women in the novel. Besides, whether it be the presence of Caribbean or Nigerian variants, the sound of ever-changing, contesting slang or the hybridity of code-switching, the heterogeneity of language types in *Girl, Woman, Other* can have destabilising effects on a literary scene that is dominated by normative English. Since writing “in its everyday sense, such as in establishing regulations to remove native peoples from their land, and in its specific, literary-artistic sense of the novel – readily functions as a tool of domination” (George 21), it is only natural that the practice of decoloniality is intricately linked with narratological concerns such as the representation of speech acts, language, and the narrative voice.

This combination of politics and aesthetics brings to light that Evaristo thinks of putting absence into presence not only as giving Black British women a metaphorical voice. Rather, she uses her creativity to change not only the content but also the terms of the conversation (Mignolo and Walsh 149) and therefore resists the practice of Western Modernity that silence these women. As a consequence, the *polymorphous* concept of voice is made to operate on different levels to transform absence into presence in the novel.

The forceful image of putting presence into absence finds its clearest expression in the multitude of women that are usually invisible in the public space but that are given visibility in the novel. We have interpreted this polyphony of twelve voices in *Girl, Woman, Other* as a strategy to counter different master narratives that are fundamental in keeping certain communities oppressed and others in power. Thus, racism in the literary world and in society

itself is debunked by the polyphonic narrative as it brings out the heterogeneity of Black British women. This diversity works against different forms of essentialism that assume the homogeneity of social groups and justify negative stereotypes. However, Evaristo not only presents the reader with a diversity of Black perspectives, but she also points to the need for a pluralism in the feminist movement. The themes of womanhood and motherhood are shown to define these women's lives both in positive and negative ways. The unique approach of white feminism to these issues is a form of silencing that only slows down the movement but also reinforces the oppression of certain marginalised communities. Evaristo's vision of what presence could look like in literature, therefore, creates a narrative that exits the double bind of neglecting either the individual or the community. Despite the continuous emphasis on the diversity of these women and the contextualisation of their needs and oppression, Evaristo manages to bring out their relationality through dialogism: the women's experiences with feminism and their opinions about the movement create a larger dialogue which is only visible to the reader. This relational way of seeing exemplifies what Mignolo and Walsh define as decolonial practice.

We defend the idea that *Girl, Woman, Other* gains much from a decolonial reading as the aim of transforming absence into presence in the novel can be interpreted as a decolonial endeavour and because Evaristo's creative writing epitomises decolonial practices. According to Peter Boxall, "many of the most influential developments in the British novel of the 1990s were bound up with forms of regionalism, nationalism and decolonisation, which were conceived, quite directly, as a practice of resistance to the development of neoliberal globalisation" (Boxall 7). We argue that his statement holds true for more recent developments in British literature and society. This can be observed in movements that seek to decolonise the British literature curriculum in universities and schools which is why *Girl, Woman, Other* has been included in the syllabus for British A levels in 2021 (OCR). In an interview with the BBC, Bernardine Evaristo stated:

You know I'm a very positive person; I try not to be cynical. And I hope that some of the consciousness raised that happened around George Floyd, is sustained and that people actually start to change their practices. If that happens, then I think in two to three years time, you will start to see a very different society. But I think it's always incremental, and we'll just have to see what happens. But I think the status quo doesn't really transform itself without a lot of pressure and a lot of lobbying and I feel that we have to keep that up in order to see the deep structural changes that we need to see in our very discriminatory society. (BBC)

In this statement, the writer underlines the importance of hope and fierce activism in order to achieve sustainable change in society. In her literature, Evaristo certainly makes proof

of such political engagement as her astute and creative execution of the forceful project of putting presence into absence in *Girl, Woman, Other* demonstrates.

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