"Being / together": Bernardine Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other and the Black British women's movement

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NICOLA ABRAM

Abstract

This essay locates Bernardine Evaristo's Booker Prize-winning novel Girl, Woman, Other (2019) within the sociopolitical history and written lineage of the Black women's movement in Britain. It identifies contextual resonances with the 1970s and 1980s praxis of collaboration and collectivity and traces intertextual connections with Evaristo's own early writing (including theater, verse fiction, and the radio story from which the novel evolved) and the periodicals, anthologies, and organization newsletters of the time. These references illuminate the novel's structure, lineation, and narrative mode. I argue that Girl, Woman, Other reanimates the rallying call "we are here," affirming the presence and diversity of Black lives in Britain, while its distinctive "fusion fiction" form actively engages readers, realizing the Black feminist political principle of "speaking out."

When Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* won (alongside Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*) the Booker Prize in 2019, critics sought to locate the genre-defying novel in a literary genealogy. Several reviewers reached to African American playwright Ntozake Shange as a referent (Garner, Sy-Quia, Tepper, White), perhaps prompted by Evaristo's own comments about the influence of seeing a production of *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* in 1979 (Evaristo, "Shelfie"). Other responses referred instead to the work of Guyana-born British poet Grace Nichols, pursuing a quotation within the novel from Nichols' collection *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* (Sarkar; Bucknell). Still others saw Evaristo as speaking the silences left by Samuel Selvon,

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centering female characters in answer to the mostly male migrants written by the Trinidad-born British author sixty years prior (Manyika). These various responses all celebrate Evaristo's formal and thematic creativity, whilst recognizing that her work comes from somewhere, thoughtfully connecting it with existing traditions of Black writing. However, there has so far been little critical acknowledgment of the novel's direct lineage—that is, Evaristo's previous work—nor its extraliterary heritage.[1] This essay situates *Girl, Woman, Other* in relation to some of Evaristo's earlier and lesser-known writings, recognizing the internationally acclaimed novel both as part of a substantial oeuvre and as an adaptation of a previous piece. Further—and in line with Evaristo's own acknowledgment of her inheritances (*Manifesto*)—I read the novel's structure, use of free indirect style, and polyphonic construction of "voice" as continuing a deeply political praxis of collaboration and collective writing that characterized late-1970s and early-1980s Black feminism in Britain. As I will show, this popular novel has a very particular and illuminating history.

1 Following the Booker win, Evaristo articulated her desire to be recognized for the full extent of her work: "I'm not a bitter person and I'm not resentful. Instead of thinking, 'I've been around a long time; you weren't paying attention,' I'm just thinking, 'Well, now you are and you've got seven other books of mine to read'" ("Bernardine").

Mapping a Lineage: Radio, Stage, Anthologies, and Periodicals

Girl, Woman, Other evolved from a short story in verse called "London Choral Celestial Jazz," which Evaristo wrote for BBC Radio 4 Extra and read at the 2014 Laugharne Live Festival. Evaristo's "urban pastoral" was commissioned to mark the centenary of Dylan Thomas' birth and responds to the Welsh poet's *Under Milk Wood* (1954), which Evaristo has appreciated since playing the part of Captain Cat in a school production (Evaristo, "Putting History" 436). Subtitled a "Play for Voices," *Under Milk Wood* enters the inner worlds of various inhabitants of a fictional Welsh fishing village; by contrast, Evaristo locates "London Choral Celestial Jazz" in the UK's capital city and eschews Thomas' guiding narrator to speak with an expansive observing "we." The fifteen-minute piece profiles three characters: Carole Claxton, the stilettoed twenty-five-year-old daughter of highly educated but disillusioned Nigerian immigrants, who builds a stellar career in the City; Mary, the troubled daughter of a white Englishwoman and Malawian man, who we meet in her later years as a "gold-toothed bag lady" shuffling along Liverpool Street; and Lakeesha Tanisha Jones, of Trinidadian descent via Lewisham: first glimpsed as a fifteen-year-old playing in a steelpan band on the south bank of the Thames, she survives sexual abuse by her stepfather and later becomes a midwife and much-loved foster carer, only to die of cancer at the age of sixty.

Carole Claxton is an earlier version of Carole Williams, the character who fronts chapter two of *Girl, Woman, Other.* Her "no-nonsense jewellery of platinum and pearls" (*Girl* 115) features in both the radio story and the novel, as does her parents' employment as a cleaner and taxi driver. Evaristo also borrows the limited life experience of the teenage Lakeesha for the novel's Carole, making her a composite of those earlier characters: Lakeesha has "never seen the

countryside, or a cow, never seen a play, eaten in a restaurant, with waiters, never been in a plane, taken the train out of London, seen the sea," much as the novel's Carole hides her worldly naivety when surrounded by the rich and privileged at the University of Oxford, considering herself "nobody" (132). Lakeesha and Carole Williams also have in common the trauma of sexual abuse and the work of rebuilding their lives. Mary and both Caroles are associated with the location of Liverpool Street Station, though it marks the characters' differences: in "London Choral Celestial Jazz," the homeless Mary is barred from this busy site in the City, whereas Carole Claxton is among the "economic soldiers crashing through the battalion of barriers," and Carole Williams passes with practiced confidence under the station's "inter-galactic glass and steel ceiling propped up by Corinthian towers" (*Girl* 113). Details of Mary's life also find their way into *Girl, Woman, Other* in the form of her English and Malawian heritage, which anticipates some of the mixed ancestry of the novel's Megan/Morgan (311), though they are of different generations, with Mary born in the 1930s and Morgan—very much a millennial—in the 1990s (307). The novel, then, repurposes several details trialed in the radio story to compose some of its many characters.

By centering three women in turn, Evaristo's short piece for radio anticipates the plurality that characterizes *Girl, Woman, Other*. As Evaristo has said, "What is important to me is exploring the multiplicity... of how we exist in this world" ("An Adventure" 341). *Girl, Woman, Other* has been described as telling the stories of "twelve women" (Rhodes) and "twelve (mostly) black women and one non-binary character" (Thomas-Corr), though these attempts to quantify and categorize misrepresent the novel's actual practices, which give voice, story, and narrative agency to many more than twelve characters, as I will go on to show. Among its key figures are a range of ethnic heritages, family/migration histories, social classes, religious beliefs and practices, vocations, political affiliations, life stages, and personalities. The characters emerge through a mix of memories, interactions, and focalized narration: we are privy to their thoughts, feelings, and secrets; we watch as they bear the effects of happenstance and history, make choices and live the consequences, reflect, reason, and regret, wrestle with contemporary norms and familial expectations, and even exploit and betray one another. Evaristo has said that she wrote the book as a "celebration of black womanhood" ("Shelfie"), and has highlighted its nuanced portrayal of gender by adopting the term "womxn" to describe its diverse characters (Evaristo "What a Time"; Donnell 99).[2] Whilst compelling and deftly drawn, these characters are not picture-perfect portrayals of idealized Black people; Evaristo's portraits are charged with all the complexity and imperfections of the human. By democratically offering page space to multiple figures—just as "London Choral Celestial Jazz" profiles three women in fifteen minutes—*Girl, Woman, Other* foregrounds the diversity of Black lives in Britain.

This principle of representation has been important to Evaristo since her early days as a playwright and literary activist.[3] She studied Community Theatre Arts at Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama from 1979 to 1982, during which she

2 The term "womxn" entered use as an alternative to the centering of "man"/"men" in the words "woman"/"women." "Womxn" is often claimed to be more inclusive of nonbinary people and people of color—though alternative views perceive the term as transphobic.

3 For a full account of Evaristo's development in theater, see Evaristo, "Theatre of Black Women: A Personal Account." For analysis of some of her playscripts, see Abram, *Black British Women's Theatre* 23-84.

devised the play *Coping* (1980) with the four other Black women on the program: Patricia Hilaire, Paulette Randall, Barbara Robinson, and Joan Williams (Abram, *Black* 24, 28). Modeled on Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, which consists of twenty poems depicting the lives of seven characters, *Coping* featured five Black female characters who tell of their experiences through monologue and song. This exploration of the commonality and diversity of Black women's lives continued in Evaristo's later work for the stage.

In 1982 Evaristo, Randall, and Hilaire cofounded Britain's first Black women's theater company, Theatre of Black Women, seeking to produce plays and create acting opportunities beyond the limited, often offensive portrayals of Black women available at the time. Their solution to silencing and stereotyping was not inclusion into existing structures but control of their own media: in Stuart Hall's terms, "changing... the relations of representation" (442). Capturing this spirit of self-determination in *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo gives Bush Women Theatre Company the motto "On Our Own Terms / or Not At All" (14). The fictional company draws directly on Evaristo's and Hilaire's experiences in Theatre of Black Women. Amma—the first character to appear in the novel and the one to whom many others are centrifugally connected—was born to an African socialist father and British mother and is a fifty-something playwright, political radical, and one-time rebel, now on the fringes of the establishment. This is conspicuously a version of Evaristo's own biography, as others have noticed (Donnell 120; Tolan 420)—indeed, Evaristo was fifty-nine years old when *Girl, Woman, Other* was published. To indulge one particular biographical detail, Amma 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" (Evaristo, *Girl* 2), which recounts an occasion on which Hilaire poured a drink over Charlie Hanson, the white British cofounder of Black Theatre Co-operative, in protest against a production he directed at the Riverside Theatre (Abram, *Black* 37). Like their fictional counterparts Amma and Dominique, Evaristo and Hilaire recognized the social and political responsibilities inherent in acts of creative representation, holding themselves and others to account.

In another expression of the commitment to representing Black women's wide-ranging realities, Evaristo cofounded the publishing collective Black Womantalk in 1983 to promote and publish writing by women of Asian and African descent.[4] Addressing prospective writers and readers, the founders of Black Womantalk appealed, "We feel there is an urgent need to see more publications available by Black women living in Britain to express our experiences and history" (Black Woman Talk Collective). The collective ran workshops and public readings to encourage women to write and to build confidence in prospective authors and released two anthologies: *Black Women Talk Poetry* (1987) and *Don't Ask Me Why: An Anthology of Short Stories by Black Women* (1991). The anthology form is not incidental; its collation of varied works by multiple contributors is especially

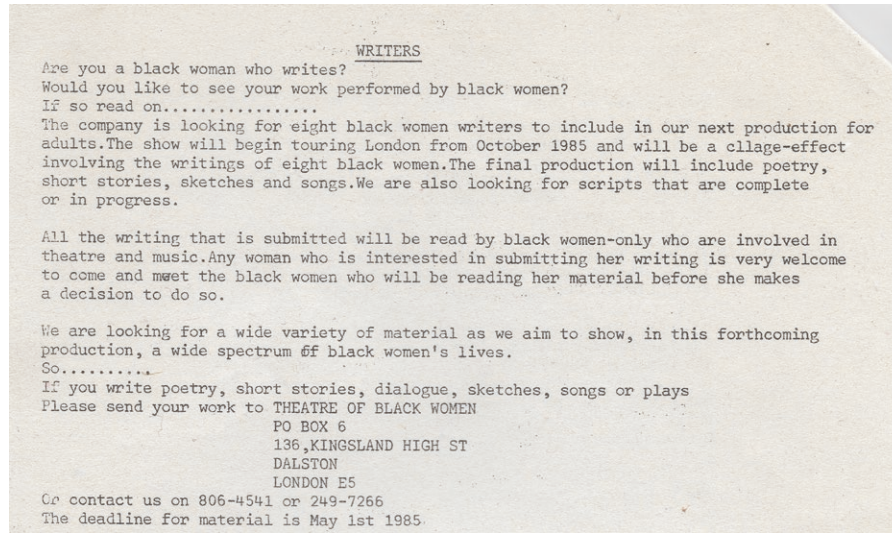
4 Black Womantalk was founded by Evaristo with Da Choong, Olivette Cole Wilson, and Gabriela Pearse, later joined by Sylvia Parker. I follow the compressed presentation of the name "Black Womantalk" as given in the front matter of the two anthologies, though it appears in the group's initial communications as "Black Woman Talk."

valent in the history of Black and Asian cultural production in Britain and speaks of bringing together difference (Abram, "Forging Connections" 416). The same principle informs *Girl, Woman, Other* in both form and content—indeed, the Adinkra symbol appearing on the novel's title page is Funtumfunafu, picturing two conjoined crocodiles, which signifies "unity in diversity" (Owusu 49).

In an attempt to bring the values of the anthology to the stage, Theatre of Black Women planned a collage production featuring the work of eight women writers to tour London in October 1985 (Fig. 1). Evaristo and Hilaire appealed for Black women to submit writing of various kinds, envisaging a final piece that would "show... a wide spectrum of black women's lives" (Theatre of Black Women).

Sadly, this production was never realized, perhaps displaced by the company's receipt of an Arts Council project grant in October 1985, which saw Theatre of Black Women develop and stage Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* (Abram, *Black* 41). However, *Girl, Woman, Other* answers this call over thirty years later, collating multiple stories in different voices to stage the "spectrum" of Black women's lives. In both its thematic focus on diverse Black "womxn" in Britain and through the form of its layered, looping, jostling "herstories," the novel continues Evaristo's early efforts to create space for and amplify Black women's many voices. That her work has now reached the popular market, achieving global visibility through the publisher Penguin (of which Hamish Hamilton is an imprint) and thanks to the Booker win, brings to a wider audience the verve that graced community venues and self-published anthologies in the 1980s.

Evaristo came of age as both an artist and literary activist during a period of intense activity for the Black women's movement in Britain. The formation of



WRITERS

Are you a black woman who writes?
Would you like to see your work performed by black women?
If so read on.....
The company is looking for eight black women writers to include in our next production for adults.The show will begin touring London from October 1985 and will be a cllage-effect involving the writings of eight black women.The final production will include poetry, short stories, sketches and songs.We are also looking for scripts that are complete or in progress.

All the writing that is submitted will be read by black women-only who are involved in theatre and music.Any woman who is interested in submitting her writing is very welcome to come and meet the black women who will be reading her material before she makes a decision to do so.

We are looking for a wide variety of material as we aim to show, in this forthcoming production, a wide spectrum of black women's lives.
So.....
If you write poetry, short stories, dialogue, sketches, songs or plays
Please send your work to THEATRE OF BLACK WOMEN
PO BOX 6
136,KINGSLAND HIGH ST
DALSTON
LONDON E5
Or contact us on 806-4541 or 249-7266
The deadline for material is May 1st 1985

Fig. 1. A clipping from a typewritten newsletter, advertising for Black women to submit their writing for a planned theater production (Theatre of Black Women).

numerous grassroots organizations and arts collectives in the 1970s and 1980s saw women come together to share knowledge, skills, and resources and to find solidarity and strength in the face of racism, sexism, class-based oppression, and other intersecting forms of discrimination. Dorothea Smartt recalls around thirty such groups active across the UK in the 1980s (SuAndi, Smartt, and Leeming 141). This history of collective organizing is referenced in *Girl, Woman, Other* when a young Amma attends a meeting of a Black women's group in Brixton (Evaristo, *Girl* 12-13), no doubt modeled on Brixton Black Women's Group, which ran from 1973 for over a decade and in which Evaristo participated (Bryan, Dadzie, Fajemisin, Bridglal, Lawal, Lewis, Mama, Morris, Scafe, and Wolfe 368).

Common among such organizations was the theme of "speaking out," as enacted in the various newsletters and periodicals they produced. This phrase titled the newspaper of Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out* (1977–83), and *We Are Here!* magazine (1988–89) carried a regular opinion section of the same name.[5] Such publications were crucial to the formation of Black feminist community and politics; Lola Young recalls that "many women of my age-group lived with and through these arguments [about what Black feminism is and should do] in one way or another, whether through active participation in one or other of the key or minor groups, or through reading newsletters" (52–53). Indeed, such publications discursively constructed Black women as a collective. Some delimited their audience explicitly: the *Black Feminist Newsletter* carried the animated cover note "Blackwomen only!," and its later incarnation, *We Are Here!* magazine, described itself on its front cover as "by and for Black women only." More subtly, editorials and articles in the *Black Feminist Newsletter*, as well as in the Asian women's journal *Mukti* and other publications, addressed their audience as "Sisters," convening a Black female readerly community. Alternative spellings of this address also circulated, as when The Daughters of Harriet Tubman—a Manchester collective formed in the 1970s—produced a photocopied zine called *Wha 'appen Sista*.[6] Evaristo invokes this politicized tradition of address in the expansive dedication in *Girl, Woman, Other*: "For the sisters & the sistas & the sistahs & the sistren & the women & the womxn & the wimmin & the womyn & our brethren & our bredrin & our brothers & our bruvs & our men & our mandem & the LGBTQI+ members of the human family." Here Evaristo acknowledges—and, through the sheer number of variants, gently sends up—the faction-defining function of terminology, whilst also counting herself among the implied Black feminist community through the first-person plural possessive "our."

As well as the internal address to "sisters," 1970s and 1980s Black feminist organizations spoke outwards: fighting for Black women's visibility in response to the absences and stereotypes in mainstream British media and culture, in male-dominated Black Power organizations, and in white feminism. Both literally and figuratively the many newsletters and periodicals announce "we are here," affirming the postcolonial pronouncement "we are here because you were there," coined by Ambalavaner Sivanandan in the 1980s (Younge). The *Black*

5 Copies of these Black women's periodicals and newsletters are held in the Feminist Library, Sojourner Truth Community Centre, 161 Sumner Road, London, SE15 6JL. The contents of *Speak Out* have recently been collected in an edition by Milo Miller (2023).

6 Only one issue of *Wha 'appen Sista* appears in the archives: twin copies of an issue dated April 1974 are held at the British Library (Andrew Salkey Archive Dep 10310, Box 24) and at the George Padmore Institute (JOU/55).

Feminist Newsletter made this declaration explicit in the alternative title *We Are Here*, which features on the cover page of several issues; this assertion was made more prominent when the publication was relaunched in March 1988 with a more polished printed aesthetic as a quarterly magazine resolutely titled *We Are Here!* (Thomlinson 440). The title's abbreviation of the migrants' mantra both constitutes Black women as a speaking collective, "we," and makes a declaration of presence to a watching (white, male) world.

Few such community publications survived for long, given challenges with funding, securing contributions, and distribution, as well as the effects of internal discord and sociopolitical change. Evaristo references their common fate in *Girl, Woman, Other* with the brief existence and seemingly inevitable demise of the "monthly *Bush Women* samizdat" (15), and even the long-running *Spare Rib* (1972–93) is consigned to distant history in the novel as Morgan reads the "defunct second-wave feminist magazine" in an online archive (338). Albeit relatively short-lived and largely ephemeral, the vibrant textual tradition of Black feminist periodicals illuminates several distinctive formal features of *Girl, Woman, Other*, as we will see.

"Fusion Fiction": Crafting a Hybrid Form

Girl, Woman, Other is a text with a complex form, deserving of some descriptive positioning. It constructs its collage of lives through five chapters and an epilogue: four chapters each contain three subchapters named for their primary figure, forming a total of twelve named sections, while the fifth chapter depicts an event in the narrative present, a party, which brings many of these figures together. The epilogue then pursues a plotline raised earlier in the novel, reuniting two characters who were previously profiled in their own subchapters. Numbered sections subdivide each named subchapter, with a dinkus occasionally placed to further separate those sections. Adinkra symbols are placed on the title page and at the start of each named subchapter: ideographically representing concepts and values of the Akan peoples of West Africa, these symbols function as a complementary mode of naming sections of the text and, to those who can interpret them, offer further (sometimes ironic) comment on each character's story. At a structural level, this seems, then, to be a book divided, subdivided, and designated in multiple ways, interested in interpersonal boundaries, typographical territories, and the construction of (textual) identities.

Yet the characters gleefully breach these organizing structures. Despite the twelve key figures each having their own named textual spaces, they freely traverse the subchapters, appearing in each other's stories and interacting with, remembering, or gossiping about others in their own. This counters the separatist logic of the named sections, holding in tension the concepts of individuality and connectedness. The relational links between figures are most pronounced in the

tripartite chapter groupings: in chapter one, Amma is mother to Yazz and best friend to Dominique; in chapter two, Carole is the daughter of Bummi and former schoolmate of LaTisha; in chapter three, Shirley is the daughter of Winsome and colleague of Penelope; in chapter four, Megan/Morgan is the grandchild of Hattie, and Hattie is the daughter of Grace. Connections also emerge between the chapters, thickening the relational web: Bummi (chapter two) works as a cleaner for Penelope (chapter three); Carole and LaTisha (both chapter two) were taught by Shirley (chapter three); Shirley and Amma (chapter one) are old schoolfriends; Yazz (chapter one) attends a university talk given by Morgan (chapter four). The novel therefore disrupts a logic of classification as separation, showing instead how relationships span categories, and identities emerge through those relationships.

This is, then, a layered and richly textured novel. Merve Sarıkaya-Şen has described it as a "network" (305), while Carolina Sánchez-Palencia calls it "figuratively... diasporic" (4), in that characters travel beyond the textual sections named for them. Strikingly, these terms echo those used to describe the dynamism of the Black British women's movement in the 1980s: Carol Leeming remembers "links" and "connections" (SuAndi, Smartt, and Leeming 144, 146), SuAndi describes "a circuit" (144), and Dorothea Smartt recalls "networks" (144). As a novel that is diverse, decentered, and connected, *Girl, Woman, Other* reflects in its very structure the Black feminist principle of nonhierarchical collectivity. There is no one protagonist, nor a single narrator, and though there is a framing event—the premiere of Amma's play *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* at the National Theatre, with which the book opens and to which chapter five returns—this is not allowed to function as a conclusion, as the novel embarks again on tracing its characters' lives with an epilogue that hints at a new relational (and racial) beginning. Just as the Black women's movement in Britain sought strategically to build connection—amidst difference, and albeit subject to tensions (Samantrai)—so does the novel formally enact community. Evaristo's characters and their stories are interconnected and mutually constitutive, and the borders between them prove porous.

As well as breaching its own structural divides, the novel also defies chronological linearity, moving unannounced between present and past as it traces its characters' biographies. This layering of past and present is reminiscent of the treatment of time in the 1985 Black feminist publication *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, which speaks with ease of precolonial Africa, the nineteenth-century plantation economy of the Caribbean, and postwar Britain to construct a composite story of Black women's history. The technique also recalls the compression of time in Evaristo's 1983 play for Theatre of Black Women, *Silhouette*, in which a character from contemporary London, Anna, connects with the spirit of Zenobia, a woman who died in slavery in Barbados two hundred years prior. Similarly, in *Girl, Woman, Other* Evaristo makes each character something of a time-traveler, moving fluidly through their own life story and constructed as the sum of all moments past and present.

In syntax, too, Evaristo crafts an idiosyncratic form for *Girl, Woman, Other.* This is not a "novel-in-verse," like her earlier works *Lara* (first published in 1997, with a revised and expanded version issued in 2009) and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), both of which are presented predominantly in couplets. Instead, it adopts a flexible prose that enacts the associative wandering of thought and the unpredictable unfolding of life events. An abundance of commas and the resulting run-on sentences give the prose a casual quality suggestive of conversation, crafting an intimate connection to the characters:

> Shirley never had a negative word to say about her [Amma's] sexuality, covered for her when she bunked off school and listened avidly to her tales from the youth theatre—the smoking, snogging, drinking, acting—in that order, even when their paths forked after school, Shirley into teaching, Amma into theatre, they maintained their friendship. (27)

There are no full stops within sections, and correspondingly few capitals. This resistance to typographical hierarchies is perhaps comparable to the choices made by bell hooks, the Black British playwright debbie tucker green, and the Black British writer and activist Helen (charles) to render (elements of) their names without the dominating effect of capitalization. Instead of capitalized beginnings and punctuation-marked endings, Evaristo's novel distinguishes sentences, determines flow, makes meaning, and creates space through lineation. She has statements and ideas appear one after the other—indeed, one under the other—imaging a quality of spaciousness and fluidity rather than fixity and closure.

The significance of space is characteristic of Evaristo's writing. Reflecting on the 2009 revision of *Lara*, Evaristo explained her division of the text into couplets as giving "the dense, textured poetry... more space to breathe" ("In Conversation"). Though *Girl, Woman, Other* does not find expression in the same form, Evaristo borrows from poetic practices again for this novel by making meaning through the spatial relations between words. Spacing is used for emphasis and interrogation, and abrupt line breaks signal passages of particular—often traumatic—significance. For instance, as Penelope faces the revelation that she was adopted as an infant, the repeated prefix "un-" emphasizes her loss:

> the feeling of being
>
> un
>
> moored
>
> un
>
> wanted
>
> un
>
> loved
>
> un

done. (Evaristo, *Girl* 283)

Presenting the word stem separately from the negating prefix stresses what is missing, the life of attachment and security Penelope might have lived: moored, wanted, loved. Evaristo's lineation creates a stark expanse of space on the page here, visually illustrating how Penelope's sense of herself is "exploded into scattered fragments" (284). The single-word lines are suggestive of her isolation, both within her family—since it has proven to be deceptive and emotionally disconnected—and from the protective collective of Black feminism, since she has understood herself to be white, and is rather racist with it (250). The epilogue sees Penelope discover her mixed ancestry and meet her birth mother, Hattie, in a storyline that at once presents "race" as biologically knowable and exposes the idea of (white) racial purity as an illusion.[7] This epilogue recalls the lively debates over essentialist versus political definitions of Blackness in the 1980s, showing—via the modern technology of DNA profiling—that an appeal to biology does not offer the singularity or certainty its proponents might suppose. It is fitting that Evaristo writes Penelope's—and the nation's—story of mixedness without adherence to generic conventions, by adopting poetic techniques to enrich the prose.

7 In a 2022 conference paper, Amber Lascelles observed how the epilogue of *Girl, Woman, Other* is preoccupied with bloodlines and biological kinship, counter to the critique of racial essentialism elsewhere in the novel.

Idiosyncratic lineation enacts something of the experience of Carole, too, as a traumatic experience kept secret since her teenage years dominates her inner life. Early in her subchapter, we read her silent meditation on railway suicides:

> Carole knows what drives people to such despair, knows what it's like to appear normal but to feel herself swaying
>
> just one leap away
>
> from
>
> the amassed crowds on the platforms who carry enough hope in their hearts to stay alive
>
> swaying
>
> just one leap away from
>
> eternal
>
> peace. (114)

The single-word lines elongate the passage vertically, giving the text a sense of precariousness that reflects Carole's own. The shorter phrases and individual words appear vulnerably exposed against the extended line depicting "the amassed crowds" in which the words cluster together, illustrating the comfort and security of the collective described. Juxtaposing the shorter statements with the sudden flurry of the longer lines creates a pendulous movement that enacts Carole's physical and psychological "swaying." Again, then, Evaristo's lineation promotes a tangible understanding of a character's experience. These poetic techniques

move the act of reading away from passive reception of information toward fellow feeling, promoting solidarity with the characters that populate the pages.

The novel as a form is social by definition—"helplessly" so, in the words of Ali Smith (30). Evaristo affirms and amplifies this in *Girl, Woman, Other* both by writing multiple interlinked stories and by creating a form that itself emphasizes connectivity, relationship, and active readerly engagement. Describing the novel's dynamic structure, idiosyncratic punctuation and lineation, compressed temporality, and complex narrative mode, Evaristo has named this fluid form "fusion fiction" ("I Want"). These formal innovations serve effectively to convey the complexity of Black British community.

Speaking Out: Free Indirect Style and Focalization

Narrative mode is a key aspect of the "fusion fiction" form Evaristo constructed for *Girl, Woman, Other.* The novel is not written in the first person, conforming to expectations of autobiography, authenticity, and the confessional that have long dogged "minority" writing (D'Aguiar). But neither does it use the third-person omniscient, the anthropological—even colonial—mode in which the subject is divorced from object and the knower stands apart from what is known. It offers neither the distance of external observation nor the sustained intimacy of a single viewpoint. Instead, it makes use of free indirect discourse, a hybrid, inside-out mode that allows fleeting contact with a character's specificity without promising unlimited identification. Through focalization Evaristo gives access to individuals' memories, unspoken views, subjective experiences, and interior lives, including inner monologue—which sometimes presents as a dialogue between several selves in tension, as in an internal exchange between Amma as nervous artist and assertive personal historian (Evaristo, *Girl* 5). Further, Evaristo serializes this free indirect style, giving a platform to many focalizing figures and facilitating free flow between their different consciousnesses. This fluid narrative mode sidesteps—or, at least, complicates—the problematic connotations of both first-person and third-person narration. Here, I analyze Evaristo's writing of speech—and, by extension, the construction of character—in *Girl, Woman, Other* for its connections to the writerly practices and political principles of 1980s Black feminism, as well as tracing continuations from Evaristo's own earlier writings.

Lexicon and tone quickly establish the particular personality within a focalized section. For instance, the subchapter named for the teenage Yazz is characterized by run-on sentences, emphasis in italics and capitals ("the older generation has RUINED EVERYTHING and her generation is doooooomed" [42]), hyperbole ("the theatre is predominated by the usual greyheads (average age one hundred)" [42]) and youthful phrasing ("way too old for it" [45]; "isn't that, like, a bit of a tall order?" [46]). We come to know Yazz for her precocious confidence and exuberant expression. At the other end of the age spectrum,

ninety-three-year-old Hattie's subchapter is characterized by wearied critique of her ungrateful offspring and refusal of the ways of contemporary society. Her narration positions her geoculturally through the use of Northern English and Scots idiom, such as "bairn" for child (350), and sociopolitically through her references: her main source of information is *Farmers Weekly* (346), and she maintains a determined ignorance about concepts like "gender binary" and "non-binary," for which the focalized narration reads instead "gender granary non-binding" (352). By contrast, the subchapter named for Megan/Morgan ventures into the distinctively modern discursive realm of the online world, featuring emoticons, initialisms, hashtags, and social media handles ("*like like like like like* ☺" [320]; "LOL!!" [323]). Subtle details add to the sense of a character: in Penelope's subchapter, the character Bummi is named incorrectly within the focalized narration, without mention, as "Boomi" (296), to quietly signal Penelope's disregard for the Nigerian and her culture. Bummi's own subchapter features a few characteristic exclamations ("eh! eh!" [151]) to ground the focalized prose in her linguistic particularity, and its metaphor is similarly personal, as in the culinary image "his brains were fried with garlic" (172–73) to describe her late husband's uncritical devotion to their church pastor—though the majority of the section is given in Standard English rather than adopting the Nigerian Pidgin with which she speaks.

Although the book is frequently described as telling twelve stories, its free indirect style gives access to many more perspectives and voices than those for whom subchapters are named. For instance, the subchapter focalized through Grace also gives substantial space to Daisy, Grace's white mother (and Morgan's great-great-great-grandmother), following her from an impoverished Victorian childhood living in an unfurnished tenement, through falling pregnant to an Abyssinian seaman named Wolde in 1895, to her untimely death from tuberculosis when her daughter was just eight years old. The focalized narration shows Daisy to be tenacious, resourceful, and optimistic, and the section is punctuated with tender words spoken to her young mixed-race daughter. Chapter five is likewise focalized through several characters, including an extended insight into Yazz's father Roland—the only male focalizing figure in the novel's ensemble. This section is self-importantly seasoned with French ("*grande entreé*" [405], "*au coeur*" [405], "*Les Negresses*" [406]), continuing the stylized traits of Roland's spoken language—for which his daughter mocks him (51).

However distinctive a character's expression, it is not necessarily fixed nor stable; the focalization shows how one's voice shifts over the course of a lifetime. For instance, Carole's careful Received Pronunciation, learned at university, disappears as we journey back to her teenage years to find her at a party thinking in drunken abbreviations: "lol, marriage? whoa, where did that come from? OMG, hubz, was this her future hubz?" (124). This narrative slippage shows how the past(s) are connected with and active in the present, decrying tidy temporal divisions like then/now and pre-/post- as a biographical fiction.

The particularity of individual characters' focalizing voices is not to say that the third-person narrator is entirely displaced. It is possible to trace a consistent expressive style throughout the book—though its initial appearance and concentration in the first subchapter, Amma's, gives her a special connection to this persistent voice. It is marked by alliteration ("strolled along the Serpentine in the sunshine" [70], "going bonkers with boredom and banality" [289], "parroting the patriarchy" [319]); pronounced rhythm ("rain abating, skies clearing, rainbow appearing" [59], "her skin glowed, her robes flowed" [75]); and internal rhyme ("a renegade lobbing hand grenades" [2], "making fascism fashionable again" [42], "picking on his pickney" [265], "flock down to the docks" [373], "musicians or pediatricians" [437]). The last of these phrases is spoken by Amma towards the end of the novel, in a conversation about contemporary feminism and the media, and is queried by Dominique; Amma justifies the eccentric expression with an appeal to the pleasure of rhyme. Her enjoyment of the lyrical in everyday language aligns her values with the playful, poetic practices of the narrator throughout the book. Indeed, this statement of style—at once logophilic and irreverent—fits Evaristo's aesthetic across her oeuvre. Yet this persistent voice in *Girl, Woman, Other* does not dominate; it joins the chorus of many.

Evaristo's writing of voice in *Girl, Woman, Other* also extends beyond the focalized narration, as direct speech gives even more characters space to speak for themselves. Within Hattie's chapter, for example, we hear from Polina, who offers weekly care visits ("your feet they will crack and the germs they will have the field day" [343]), as well as the remembered Southern drawl of Hattie's late husband, Slim ("y'all ain't living in the segregated society I come from where you ain't got no rights" [355]) and Hattie's father's Geordie slang ("hyem" for home [367]). Elsewhere we hear fragments from the artistic director of the National Theatre (2); Dwight, the father of LaTisha's son Jason (204); and Penelope's second husband, the psychologist Phillip (292–93), among others. The incursion of these voices into the "now" of the novel is rather like the holograms in Amma's play: just as the projected images bring historical figures into the audience's present, so these fragments of remembered voice are brief auditory enactments of presence, reanimating the biographical past. Reading these various voices becomes a kind of empathic training, carrying the reader from a position centered solely on the figure for whom the subchapter is named to receiving instead other people speaking on their own terms.

Indeed, the reader must work actively to identify those voices as Evaristo leaves direct speech unmarked, without attribution or conventional punctuation. Commas and dashes often serve as the only distinction between voices, as in this excerpt from the subchapter named for LaTisha. Nestled alongside the narration are the voices of LaTisha's older sister Jayla and mother Pauline: "one morning when they were all having breakfast together, Jayla said she wanted to meet her dad, the man you've kept from me my entire life, Mummy—who rooted out the address of his parents, you shouldn't go, Jayla, he's bad news" (199). The

shift from reported speech ("Jayla said she wanted to meet her dad") to direct speech ("the man you've kept from me my entire life, Mummy") entails swapping the distanced third person ("they," "she," "her") for the dialogic first ("me") and second ("you"), while the source of this utterance is implied with the relational identifier "Mummy." Naming an addressee often serves as the only signal of direct speech, especially when voices irrupt into the third-person narration within a single line. The further shift from one speaker to another is then signaled with the change in address: "you shouldn't go, Jayla." These fluid transitions—unmarked, unannounced—might be thought of as a grammatical queering of narrative convention, fitting for a text writing to (and, via the character of Morgan, about) contemporary cultural conversations around identity, gender, and pronouns. In the absence of denotative punctuation or a narrator's mediation, the reader is tasked to make their own sense of the prose, recognizing who is speaking when. Rather than passively receiving a report of a past event, the reader is welcomed into an act of listening, not overly identified with any one speaker but positioned alongside each in turn.

The multiplicity of voices in *Girl, Woman, Other* has repeatedly been highlighted in scholarship and reviews: Darja Zorc-Maver calls it a "panoramic, polyphonic novel" (120), Sánchez-Palencia affirms it as a "polyphonic text" (2), Ron Charles calls it a "breathtaking symphony of... voices," and Josie Mitchell extends the musical metaphor: "Polyphony requires balance: lines of melody that interweave, supporting each other one moment, competing for dominance the next… Bernardine Evaristo employs these qualities to wonderful effect, composing a compelling work of individual voices in counterpoint." *Girl, Woman, Other* platforms diverse—even antagonistic—perspectives and gives space to different kinds of prose (direct and indirect speech; focalization and third-person narration), affirming different ways of voicing and being.

Evaristo's early playwriting also explored the shifting multiplicity of voices. For the final assessment on her degree course, she wrote and performed *Come to Mama* (1982), in which a single performer stages a daughter's monologue and her mother's response, with no distinction between voices marked in the playscript. Later that same year she had the coming-of-age piece *Moving Through* (1982) staged at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs by the Activists (the Court's Young People's Theatre Scheme), portraying the protagonist's inner discourse as polyvocal in nature. Shortly after Evaristo took a play called *Tiger Teeth Clenched Not to Bite* (1982) to the Melkweg in Amsterdam. This stylized performance in which an unnamed woman negotiates her place in society borrows both themes and sections of text from *Come to Mama* and *Moving Through*, but by reallocating speech to different characters played by distinct performers, *Tiger Teeth Clenched Not to Bite* externalizes what was presented in the earlier plays as the various voices of the protagonist's fractured psyche. This experimental approach to voice continues in *Girl, Woman, Other* with the unmarked speech and fluid shifts in perspective.

Toward the end of *Girl, Woman, Other*, a long conversation between Dominique and Amma is so closely depicted that for several pages there is very little organizing information other than the characters' occasional address to each other by name (or affectionate abbreviation):

> I love Britain, too, Ams, although less so every time I return, it's become a living memory for me, Britain feels in the past, even when I'm in its present.
>
> sounds like you've been talking to your therapist about this
>
> I pay her to sit and listen to me splurge without interruption for an hour every week, I've been seeing the same woman since I left Nzinga, it's wonderful, you should try it
>
> except unlike you I don't have any disturbing psychological problems. Dom (436)

Without narratorial intervention in the form of quotation marks, attribution, or interpretation, these pages give the impression of unmediated real-time access to the conversation and characters—as if we hear what is said as it is said. This is energetic prose, and demanding of its reader: making sense of an exchange such as this requires tracing the opinions, experiences, and idiom specific to each character. Presenting this extended challenge toward the end of the novel tests the reader's developing sense of each character's particularity. With this technique *Girl, Woman, Other* imagines and indeed produces a reader who is actively engaged, who enters into the discursive moment and participates in the making of meaning. This receptivity—the need for an audience to *hear*—is crucial to realizing the Black feminist political agenda of "speaking out."

Writing "We": Polyphony as Political Praxis

With its narrative strategy of multiple stories, shifting focalization, and unmarked speech, *Girl, Woman, Other* explores what it means to say "we." This subject is raised within the novel with a quotation from Grace Nichols' poem "We the Women" (254). Nichols' title invokes the nation-state-making statement "We the People" from the Preamble to the US Constitution, a "we" which has been radically redefined in the centuries since its initial inscription, not least through the campaign for women's suffrage and the Civil Rights movement. The possibilities and limitations of a claim to collectivity are no less lively in the history of Black feminism in Britain.

The Black women's "we" speaks in sharp resistance to the ignorance of white feminism. Hazel Carby challenged the presumptuous claim to universal feminist collectivity in her vital 1982 essay "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," asking white feminists "what exactly do you mean when you say 'WE'??" and writing instead a first-person plural specific to Black

women: "we have... been outraged by the ways in which [history] has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us" (52, 45). The newsletter/magazine title *We Are Here!* speaks a similar declaration, asserting Black women as a self-defining "we" distinct from the state-sponsored "myth of communal identity" (Samantrai 24). The exclamatory title of this periodical should not be mistaken for an innocent belief in collectivity as easy, natural, or guaranteed though; the range of pieces and perspectives it printed, including some fiery letter exchanges, vividly demonstrate internal discontinuity and trouble the certainty of the titular "we."

The landmark publication *The Heart of the Race*—published in 1985, though commissioned in 1980 (Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, "Writing" 123)—makes the Black women's "we" an aesthetic strategy. It draws on interviews with nearly a hundred women and spans centuries and continents to "tell [a history] as *we* know it" (Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, *Heart* 2), constructing "a composite *we*... that refers not only to the three anthologists but to all black women" (Samantrai 115). Coauthors Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe describe this practice as "collective autobiography" and recall of their writing process: "The 'we' became stronger, paramount—conscious and unequivocal. It was the guiding force in a seamless stream of shared experiences from grandmothers, mothers, aunts and sisters" ("Writing" 126, 129). Their writing of "Black Women's Lives in Britain"—the subtitle to *The Heart of the Race*—differentiates quotations from the main body of prose typographically but does not attribute these to individuals. This practice developed in parallel with that of the newsletter *Speak Out*, to which Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe all contributed as members of Brixton Black Women's Group. *Speak Out* was presented with a similar "we," coproducing a "collective grammar" that emerged from a complicated mix of "kinship, relation and struggle" (Bentil 11), and most features were printed without identification of their writers (Bryan, Dadzie, Fajemisin, Bridglal, Lawal, Lewis, Mama, Morris, Scafe, and Wolfe 357). Similarly, the authors of *The Heart of the Race* originally planned not to be named on the book's cover, considering themselves "merely representing a body of Black women" (Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, "Writing" 124).

This writing of an undifferentiated Black women's "we" was not without critique. One review of *The Heart of the Race* was concerned that the practice undermined the book's attempt to correct misrepresentation and absences: "Too much of our history is consigned to anonymity, which makes it all the more desirable that we humanize our past, wherever possible, by bringing alive the names and faces of those who went before us" (Sisters in Study 95). In the preface to the anthology in which this review was published, *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, the editors ask provocatively "For where are we at present?" (Grewal, Kay, Landor, Lewis, and Parmar, Preface 3). Here the first-person plural not only appears in a question but is itself questioned, such that the concept of a collective identity is shown to be provisional and always in process, under negotiation, rather than fixed and certain.

As the internal diversity of the Black British women's movement became increasingly prominent within its own discourse, this multiplicity was mobilized as a political strategy. Heidi Safia Mirza has written how polyphony is a political act with specific meaning for Black women: "Strategic multiplicity and contingency is a hallmark of Black British feminism... you can have difference (polyvocality) within a conscious construction of sameness" ("Introduction" 21). Emphasizing the multiplicity of Black women's experiences and modes of expression, a special issue of *Feminist Review* published in 1984 was titled *Many Voices, One Chant*. The issue includes pieces by writers of different ethnicities and sexualities as well as contributions in alternative media: poetry and photography alongside the nonfiction prose—making it more formally diverse and visually orientated than most issues of the publication today (Lascelles and Swaby 99).

The shifting focalization and unmarked speech in *Girl, Woman, Other* connect to this history of negotiating a position of collective enunciation, a "we" for Black women. Indeed, the blurb on the back cover of the paperback describes the book as "a novel about who we are now." Like *The Heart of the Race*, *Girl, Woman, Other* presents a "stream of... experiences from grandmothers, mothers, aunts and sisters," and though these experiences are not necessarily "shared" in the novel, as Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe reflect of their own writing practices, the unpunctuated dialogue and free flow between focalizing characters does produce a "seamless" quality ("Writing" 129). In *Girl, Woman, Other* Evaristo writes some of the "many voices" of the Black British population and stretches the "construction of sameness" (Mirza, "Introduction" 21) by representing those who identify neither as Black (Penelope), nor straightforwardly British (the story of Bummi is rooted in her childhood in Nigeria; Dominique considers America her home), nor as a woman (Morgan). Evaristo's characters are not diminished for the sake of a singular (Black, female) identity. This is a community tensioned by difference: characters are striated by social class and entrenched inequalities, subjected to each others' misunderstandings and judgment, and alienated by various forms of intergroup prejudice. The positive connections between them are not predetermined by "race," gender, or bloodlines but emerge through interaction and are actively evolved into loving, respectful relationships. The composite "we" of *Girl, Woman, Other* is as heterogeneous and uneasy as that of the 1970s and 1980s Black feminist periodicals and anthologies—and just as dynamic and politically resonant. In this way, Evaristo crafts a fitting form for what Ranu Samantrai calls—describing Black British feminism—"a nonconsensual community" (20).

"London Choral Celestial Jazz" ends with another expression of the first person plural, in the exuberant proclamation "We were there. We are your ever here. We are your celestial companions in the air." Another echo of Sivanandan's aphorism, Evaristo's speaker expresses determination and hope against anti-immigrationism, racism, and sexism into a shared tomorrow. *Girl, Woman, Other* expands the range of the "we," and explores its implications, but is no less determined in its affirmation of the Black population in Britain: "We are your ever here."

Conclusion

Evaristo's 1982 playscript *Moving Through* draws to a close with the lines "Living in a city that must learn to sit up and listen / To the emergent voice of black woman" (3). More than thirty-five years later, *Girl, Woman, Other* extends (beyond the "city" to the nation), pluralizes, and diversifies this commitment to representation. The novel is a chorus of multiple voices, "speaking out" to show the diversity within the category "Black woman" as well as making space for adjacent stories. Crucially, through its complex form, the novel also activates the learning yearned for in Evaristo's early unpublished playscript. *Girl, Woman, Other* is a lesson in how to listen.

At the end of the novel, in the relational climax that sees the adopted Penelope reunited with her birth mother, Hattie, Evaristo writes a proclamation that would seem to capture the spirit of the text as a whole:

> this is not about feeling something or about speaking words
>
> this is about being
>
> together. (452)

Being, *together*, speaks to a politics and praxis of interdependence, forged in the Black British women's movement and enacted in the form of Evaristo's vibrant, polyvocal novel. This is a togetherness that does not flatten or erase difference, but instead depends on it. Through its fluid structure, unmarked speech, and shifting focalization, *Girl, Woman, Other* compels its readers to participate with active, empathic attention, to hear as its multiple voices speak out, to recognize and validate the collective, "we." *Girl, Woman, Other* is to be celebrated for its writing of difference, then, but its form is neither spontaneous nor unique—it continues and repurposes practices established in Black feminist periodicals and anthologies of 1970s and 1980s Britain. Its polyphony has a history and significance as a political aesthetic—and is all the more meaningful for it.

University of Reading, UK
n.l.abram@reading.ac.uk

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