



ARTIGOS



“YOU MUST GO BACK AND FIGHT THE BATTLES THAT ARE YOUR BRITISH BIRTHRIGHT, CAROLE, AS A TRUE NIGERIAN”: DIASPORIC GENERATIONAL DIVIDES IN BERNARDINE EVARISTO’S *GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER*

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Abstract

This paper looks at Bernardine Evaristo’s treatment of themes relevant to Diaspora Studies, such as generational divides between first- and second-generation immigrants, belonging, and national identity, in her 2019 novel *Girl, Woman, Other*. For this analysis, I have focused on the relationship between Bummi, a Nigerian mathematician, and her daughter Carole, an investment banker born

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in England. I propose that Evaristo’s narrative technique favours a reading of the complex dynamics that runs through such relationships by making each character a protagonist of their narrative, thus shedding light on and producing complex subjectivities.

Keywords

Diaspora. Bernardine Evaristo. Identity.

In *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), Bernardine Evaristo develops a polyphonic narrative that presents the reader with the experiences of twelve characters, most of whom are black women either born or living in Britain. The way such a plural range of subjectivities appears on the page communicates the non-circumscribable variety of meanings attached to the construction of Britishness. That remains, of course, a word tightly associated with the remains of the empire. Evaristo underlines this in a scene where an American character called Nzinga criticises other black women, Londoners, for sounding too English, implying that their speech patterns or accent are signs of their subordination to colonial power. Besides, the fact that one of the characters immediately reacts against Nzinga’s suggestion, reclaiming her own take on Britishness – “that’s because we are, Amma replied, British, *all* of us are, right?” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 82) –, another one reminds us further along the novel that “it’s easy to forget that England is made up of many Englands” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 450). *Girl, Woman, Other* is told from the perspectives of characters who, while connected in some way, are all considerably different amongst each other. It does not commit to a single point of view nor favours one. It reintroduces and ressignifies Britishness to a broader, international reading audience by offering it snapshots of some of its many manifestations. The work thus eludes the risk of falling into the problem of representation, something Gayatri Spivak (1990) warned against in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, as the novel persists homogenisation. In this paper, I will look at how Bernardine Evaristo – a descendant of the Nigerian diaspora herself – takes part in a wider movement that interrogates global geopolitical designs (RANASINHA, 2016) through the narrative structure of her novel, which refrains from relegating its characters to mere objects that figure in or propel the others’ arcs. The novel does not produce a main plot. It offers the reader snapshots of each of its characters’

narratives, with some events overlapping, being told from various perspectives. Unique vocabulary, stylistic, and linguistic choices also mark their age, background, and experience differences. To look at how Evaristo disarticulates traditional narrative modes, and, with that, what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) has called the “abyssal lines” that divide the metropole and the colony, I will focus on a specific arc involving a Nigerian woman called Bummi and her daughter Carole, who was born in England. The conflict between the two relates to a generational divide often observed in diasporic communities, especially between first and second-generation immigrants, as Susan Friedman (2018) has suggested in “Cosmopolitanism, Religion, Diaspora: Kwame Anthony Appiah and Contemporary Muslim Women’s Writing”. It is a struggle, moreover, that is particularly well explored by the narrative strategy Evaristo adopted for this novel, as the reader experiences it from both women’s perspectives. “You are a Nigerian, first, foremost and last-most” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 155), Bummi insists as she realises there is a cultural shift taking place in and around her daughter after she leaves home to attend Oxford. This conflict, narrated from Carole’s and then Bummi’s point of view, will allow us to consider some of the effects produced by the novel’s narrative structure and produce a discussion of Evaristo’s treatment of generational divides in diasporic communities in this family dynamics.

In “Introduction: De Margin and De Centre”, Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer (2015, p. 5) argue against the regime of representation, in which “individual subjectivity is denied because the black subject is positioned as a mouth-piece, a ventriloquist for an entire social category which is seen to be ‘typified’ by its representative”. Their point is aligned with the one Gayatri Spivak (1990, p. 108) makes in her “Questions of Multi-culturalism” interview, where she addresses the problem of representation as one that must be punctuated by a resistance towards homogenisation, “constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on”. Readers of *Girl, Woman, Other* will soon realise that Evaristo’s project does not leave room for that construction of otherness as multiple subjectivities are recognised and constructed as such. The book is divided into four large chapters, a final and shorter one, composed of a single event where most characters come together – even if some of them do not meet –, as well as an epilogue. The first four chapters are subdivided into smaller sections titled with the names of

the characters through whose point of view the reader is going to follow the narrative. For the purposes of this paper, I am focusing on Chapter Two. Though this section of the novel is structured around three characters, Carole, Bummi, and Latisha, I will look specifically at the relationship between Bummi, a Nigerian mathematician who lives in London, and her daughter Carole, the vice president of an investment bank who was born in the United Kingdom.

The reader hears from Carole first, following her life as she frustrates the expectations of clients of the investment bank she works for as a vice president. Some of them do not expect to find someone who looks like her in such a prestigious position. We learn how she acquired and perfected the performance of business-like femininity and upper-class, bourgeois Englishness as she welcomes her clients at work. Carole describes how the scene usually goes, celebrating her upper hand but punctuating that she remembers

[...] all the little hurts, the business associates who compliment her on being so articulate, unable to hide the surprise in their voices, so that she has to pretend not to be offended and to smile graciously, as if the compliment is indeed just that (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 117).

Carole’s description of a meeting with a client underlines the discomfort that runs through the interaction:

[...] she will stride up to the client, shake his hand firmly (yet femininely), while looking him warmly (yet confidently) in the eye and smiling innocently, and delivering her name unto him with perfectly clipped Received Pronunciation, showing off her pretty (thank-god-they’re-not-too-thick) lips coated in a discreet shade of pink, baring her perfect teeth as he adjusts to the collision between reality and expectation, and tries not to show it while she assumes control of the situation and the conversation (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 117).

Carole’s professional stance represents the materialisation of the success of a project her parents delineated for her even before she was born. Bummi, a graduate of the Department of Mathematics, at the University of Ibadan, in Nigeria, had moved to England with her husband, Augustine, searching for better professional opportunities. When she left her home country, she could not have known, however, “that her first class degree from a Third World country would mean nothing in her new country especially with her name and nationality attached to it and that job rejections would arrive in the post with

such regularity” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 167). Augustine, whose “family was not connected enough to get him a job in government or business as befitting his PhD in Economics”, believed that “if he left for England, he was sure to find a job that would take him around the world as a globetrotting businessman or consultant” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 166). That plan, however, did not work as intended, and Augustine soon found himself working as a taxi driver while Bummi got turned away from jobs due to her non-English name and Nigerian accent. She later found work as a cleaner. Therefore, to protect her from prejudice, “when their daughter was born, they named her Carole without a Nigerian middle name” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 168). The English tension towards any sign of otherness comes full circle when Carole works hard, succeeds, but still has to deal with the surprise of colleagues and clients, or to celebrate the fact her lips are “not too thick”, that they do not stray too much from European beauty standards nor drift towards features that would link her complexion too closely with her West African heritage.

In “Para além do pensamento abissal: das linhas globais a uma ecologia de saberes”, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007, p. 71) proposes the concept “abyssal thinking”, a system of “visible and invisible distinctions in which the latter fundament the former”². These invisible distinctions, he argues, are established by “radical lines that divide the social reality into two distinct universes”, which Santos (2007, p. 71) presents as “this side of the line” and “the other side of the line”, images for the metropole and for the colony. The latter appears as “the place where the rule of law can be easily withdrawn as the humanity of those who live there is relativised”. This denial of the humanity of the colonised, he explains, is “sacrificial” as it imposes itself as a condition for “the other part of humankind to affirm itself as universal” (SANTOS, 2007, p. 71, P. 76). In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo deflates and blurs abyssal lines through her narrative technique not only by positing the subjectivities of those who leave their homes – in the former colonies – towards the metropole as complex and non-circumscribable, but also by exposing the absurdities and violence of colonial discourse and practices. Bummi suffers several forms of violence markedly shaped by lines such as the ones proposed by Santos. Her father, Moses, died in an explosion while illegally refining diesel: “where millions of barrels of oil are suctioned up by the gargantuan drills of the oil companies

² All citations from Santos’s text were translated from Portuguese by me.

from thousands of metres down into the earth to provide precious energy for the rest of the planet while the land that produces it is left to rot” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 159). After that, Bummi and her mother had to move away from their home as Moses’s relatives seized their land, and then again, as Bummi’s grandfather wanted to have her married as soon as she hit puberty. Her mother insisted on working hard at a factory to afford her education, “until the unthinkable happened when the girl was fifteen” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 162), and she was left an orphan. Bummi moved in with an aunt but was mistreated and exploited as a servant there. Finally, she was able to study Mathematics at the University of Ibadan, where she met Augustine, whom she married. The backstory provided for Bummi illustrates Santos’s point that “beyond the line there is only inexistence, invisibility and non-dialectical absence” (SANTOS, 2007, p. 71), as it offers the reader a haunting image of the unavailability of living conditions brewed by the subjugation of the colony by the metropole in the world stage. One could argue those are outdated terms in a world where colonies are no longer a geopolitical reality. International divisions of labour, and international complacency towards violations of human rights, however, are only some of the elements that mark the invisibility discussed by Santos and built by Evaristo in her novel. Then, the question both ask concerns what options are left for those who inhabit the margins. This is elicited both in the image of the state of vulnerability and destitution Bummi and her mother faced upon Moses’s death, but also in the fact that even after Bummi surpasses that state of precarity and earns her degree, the metropole calls out to her and Augustine as a land of opportunities, but ultimately fails them.

In that movement, we see what Santos identifies as a reaction against abyssal thinking, the return of the colonial. This, he explains, is “a metaphor for those who understand that their life experiences occur on the other side of the line and rebel against it” (SANTOS, 2007, p. 78). Thus, the return of the colonial is “the abyssal response to what is perceived as a threatening intrusion by the colonial in metropolitan societies”, which “takes three main forms: that of the terrorist, that of the undocumented immigrant, and that of the refugee” (SANTOS, 2007, p. 78). Though Augustine and Bummi do not fall into any of those categories, they do become immigrants in the United Kingdom in search of better opportunities and are not well-received there. They are surprised by how expensive London is and by an economic crisis in Nigeria that makes it necessary for Augustine to send cash transfers back home:

Bummi and Augustine agreed they were wrong to believe that in England, at least, working hard and dreaming big was one step away from achieving it. Augustine joked he was acquiring a second doctorate in shortcuts, bottlenecks, one-way streets and dead ends while transporting passengers who thought themselves far too superior to talk to him as an equal. Bummi complained that people viewed her through what she did (a cleaner) and not what she was (an educated woman) (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 167).

Although Augustine ends up being consumed by the long hours and low pay of his job, dying of “a heart attack while driving over Westminster Bridge transporting drunken partygoers in the early hours of New Year’s Day after too many unbroken nights with junk food on the go”, he does not lose hope that his expectations will be paid off by Carole’s success at some point, as Bummi relates: “she felt sad when he said to her one day, if we cannot make it here, perhaps our child will” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 169). One should observe here that both parents were victims of abyssal thinking – dehumanised, immediately classed by potential employers as pertaining to the other side of the line and, therefore, sacrificed as less than human. The best they can do, then, is to draw a project of assimilation that will make it possible for their English-born daughter to succeed. Thus, they do not give her a Nigerian middle name.

That was the first in a series of choices that did not, however, entail an effacement of Carole’s Nigerian heritage on her parents’ part. The negotiation between performing assimilation in a way that would ensure the professional success Bummi wished for her and a retainment of the Nigerian values her mother also aimed to protect was a negotiation Carole became increasingly unwilling or unable to make as she drew further away from home and from a cultural background she could only get in contact with through Bummi after her father’s death. Generational divides are consistently observed in diasporic communities. As Steven Vertovec (2001) suggests in “Transnationalism and Identity”, the contrast between Augustine’s close contact with his family in Nigeria, which included sending money transfers, versus Carole’s cultural dissociation could even elicit a discussion of transnationalism itself: how much do the practices that define it extend to second-generation immigrants? In *Girl, Woman, Other*, while Bummi is able, as a migrant, to adapt to England and refashion herself as a businesswoman after her husband’s death, Carole – which, again, is a character that does appear as a mouthpiece for all second-generation Nigerians – follows a path that fully embraces not only England,

but an upper-middle-class experience of it, undercut but her early traumatic experiences and her education at Oxford. After her first term, Carole feels marginalised at Oxford and wants to leave. Bummi then instructs her to use her English birthright – her privilege – to fight “as a true Nigerian” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 134) to stay. This is a negotiation Bummi frequently undertakes in her business – even without the upper hand of being English herself – that of the “the ‘portability of national identity’ (Sassen 1998) among migrants [that] has combined with a tendency towards claiming membership in more than one place” (VERTOVEC, 2001, p. 575). Carole heeds her mother’s advice, but only partially so. After the following term, she no longer wanted to leave Oxford, but had absorbed so fully the mannerisms and values of those around her, that she shocked Bummi, who “did not subsequently expect Carole to return home after her second term speaking out of her nose like there was a sneeze trapped up it instead of using the powerful vibrations of her Nigerian vocal power” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 150).

In the section told from her point of view, we learn that Carole grew up in a London housing state, and up until a traumatic event at a party where several young men violated her, she “was labelled the Super Geek of Year 9” and “preferred the mind-bending pleasures of mathematical problem-solving, inspired by her mother, Bummi, who was raising her alone after her father died” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 120). It is this moment of crisis that shifts Carole’s worldview. After facing a period of depression that her mother, unaware of what had happened, could not understand, Carole is filled with a deep sense of dread towards the life she felt awaited her. And while up to this point, she had affectionately referred to Bummi as Mama, in tune with the Nigerian culture of their household, when she summarises all the elements she rejected about that way of life, they not only pointed towards Bummi, but the mother is also referred to in a fully anglophone term – “Mum”:

[...] she saw their futures and hers, as baby-mothers pushing prams, pushing fatherless timebombs forever scrambling down the side of sofas for change to feed the meter, like Mum shopping in Poundland, like Mum scrambling around markets at closing time for scrag-ends, like Mum not me, not me, not me, she told herself, I shall fly above and beyond
be gone from tower blocks with lifts stinking of piss
be gone from rotten low-paid jobs or the dead-end dole queue
be gone from raising my children alone
be gone from never being able to afford my own home, like Mum

or take my children on holiday or to the zoo, like Mum or to the movies or the funfair or anywhere except church (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 128-129).

Dealing with trauma at such an early age and unable to elaborate upon it, Carole conflates images of pregnant girls at her secondary school with that of her own mother, who widowed too soon. Already at this point, Evaristo delineates cracks in the relationship between a child who was a victim of abuse and a mother who was overworked and alone. Carole decides to pursue a different path for herself, asks a teacher for help and dedicates herself to school, eventually earning a full scholarship to study Mathematics at Oxford. Upon her arrival at university, Carole's self-consciousness towards her heritage is signalled by the relief that her mother could not accompany her as she would

[...] wear her most outlandish Nigerian outfit consisting of thousands of yards of bright material, and a headscarf ten storeys high, and she'd start bawling when she had to leave her only child for the first time Carole would forever be known as the student with the mad African mother (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 131).

It is not until she returns home and is coaxed by Bummi to fight back against a place she felt she could not fit in – as her birthright – that Carole detaches herself from her Nigerian roots to do precisely what is being asked of her. Bummi cites the names of black women who rose above hardship to reach excellence – Oprah Winfrey, Diane Abbott, Valerie Amos – and ultimately asks her daughter if she and Augustine moved to England “for a better life only to see our daughter giving up on her opportunities and end up distributing paper hand towels for tips in nightclub toilets or concert venues, as is the fate of too many of our countrywomen” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 133), thus echoing Carole's own fears when she first set out to excel in her studies. However, there is something Carole Williams leaves behind in her crusade toward assimilation at Oxford. As she returns to university “resolved to conquer the place where she would spend the next two and a half years of her life” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 134), she permanently sheds many of the characteristics Bummi would have her only tuck away when convenient.

The reader reaches Bummi's narrative at the height of her frustration towards Carole. A contrast is established between her daughter's return after the first and the final term. Whereas Carole had returned to Peckham at the end of the first term, saying “I'm done, Mama, I'm done” (EVARISTO, 2019,

p. 133), Bummi relates that in the second year Carole hardly returned home and by the 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” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 151). The shift from “mama” to “mum”, back to “mama” and then to “mother,” one that lasts through most of Bummi’s narrative until she confronts Carole about it near its ending, marks the generational divide between these diasporic characters who are both put under pressure to assimilate in different ways. Bummi resents the way Carole turns away from Nigerian culture; from its cuisine to the fact that she is not interested in the men from church her mother wants to introduce her to. They have a serious fight when Carole announces she is engaged to a white English man called Fred. Bummi perceives Englishness as performance, a façade – Carole Williams is an English-sounding name, so her parents did not give her a Nigerian middle name, hoping she would succeed. Bummi was as delighted about Oxford as she was when Carole got a job in an investment bank in the City. However, she did not predict that her daughter would embrace that as her life and that she would forge her own alliances, friendships, and romantic relationships with people outside the Nigerian community. Throughout her narrative, Bummi laments that Oxford drew Carole away from her “real culture” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 151) and that it led her to reject her “true culture” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 155). She could not fathom that Carole was English as well, after all, she was born and raised in London. She tries to reason that Carole must marry a Nigerian man for her father’s sake and that “you are not English / or did you give birth to yourself?”, asserting that “you are a Nigerian, first, foremost and last-most” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 155), and for the reader it is perfectly understandable that Bummi’s loyalties lie where they do. As a cosmopolitan woman who made a life for herself in a foreign country that did not want her, she expects her daughter to identify in the same way. This becomes even more poignant when, after a long period not speaking to Carole, Bummi decides to forgive her for marrying Fred and tells her daughter the way English people usually look at her:

[...] you see here, Bummi said, gesturing at the sack of rice, English people like to waste their money in expensive supermarkets on overpriced goods in fancy packaging, and then dare to complain in the bus queue about the economy going down the drain while giving *me* filthy looks, when it is them, yes, *them* who are going down the drain with their susceptibility to fancy advertising that

causes a slump in their personal finances as a consequence you English people, I want to tell those dirty-lookers, should ask *me* how to shop in this country because we immigrants are much cleverer at it than you, we refuse to pay ridiculous amounts for spices simply because they are in pretty little glass jars with 'a scattering of cardamom pods' or 'fine strands of saffron' on the label (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 157).

Bummi furthers her point by insisting that Carole is, in fact, Nigerian and that “if you address me as Mother ever again I will beat you until/you are dripping wet with blood and then I will hang you upside down over/the balcony with the washing to dry/I be your mama/now and forever/never forget that, abi?” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 158). A lack of negotiation on Bummi’s side regarding her daughter’s Englishness is balanced out by her son-in-law’s enthusiasm for Nigerian culture. In this outsider, an English white man “whose lineage [...] could be traced back to William the Conqueror” (EVARISTO, 2019, p. 149), a compromise is found, and Carole is able to relax into her Nigerian self again, as Bummi also becomes more accepting of her daughter’s “multiple affiliations and positionings” (ÇAĞLAR, 2001, p. 610), as opposed to her insistence that she was Nigerian only.

While throughout the novel, the reader learns of many other aspects of Bummi’s and Carole’s lives, the tensions brewed and developed in their relationship elicit some of the main questions Bernardine Evaristo deals with so successfully in *Girl, Woman, Other*. In this paper, I have focused on two elements of Evaristo’s writing. Firstly, the fact she alternates between her characters’ narratives and points of view allows the author to impress upon the reader an understanding of multiple perspectives and subjectivities, rather than relegating characters to a secondary position in the narrative of another. In that sense, by stressing a multiplicity of different experiences, Evaristo also distances her novel from a problematic regime of representation, indicating to the reader that though some circumstances and phenomena and recurring and widespread, the way individuals act and react are personal and varied. Secondly, the author’s writing mode in this novel destabilises the language of abysal thinking, as posited by Boaventura de Sousa Santos. She achieves that by enacting a return of the colonial through Bummi and Augustine in a movement that exposes the incongruities of colonial thinking and practices. Finally, the relationship between Bummi and Carole develops some generational divides which, though common among diasporic communities, are developed in the

same complex and highly subjective mode of the novel, untangling and unpacking experiences and personal trauma throughout their stories but still leaving open questions towards the meanings and forms identity and belonging take up for first and second-generation immigrants in Britain today.

“Você deve voltar e enfrentar as batalhas que são seu direito de nascença britânica, Carole, como uma verdadeira nigeriana”: divisões geracionais diaspóricas em *Girl, Woman, Other* de Bernardine Evaristo

Resumo

Este artigo analisa o tratamento que Bernardine Evaristo, em seu romance *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), dispensa a temas relevantes para os Estudos da Diáspora, como divisões geracionais entre imigrantes de primeira e segunda geração, pertencimento e identidade nacional. A análise aqui desenvolvida foca o relacionamento entre Bummi, uma matemática nigeriana, e sua filha Carole, uma banqueira de investimentos nascida na Inglaterra, propondo que a técnica narrativa de Evaristo favorece a leitura da dinâmica complexa que permeia essas relações, trazendo cada personagem como protagonista da própria narrativa, iluminando e produzindo subjetividades complexas.

Palavras-chave

Diáspora. Bernardine Evaristo. Identidade.

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