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Moving Bodies and Identities Across the Atlantic: The Subversive Narrative of the Slave Trade in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*

Abstract I: La qualità sovversiva della scrittura creativa di Bernardine Evaristo, tra le voci più interessanti del panorama letterario britannico contemporaneo, trova espressione dirompente nel suo quarto romanzo, *Blonde Roots*, pubblicato nel 2008 a valle delle celebrazioni per il bicentenario dell'abolizione del commercio degli schiavi. La spiazzante narrazione dello *slave trade*, che si caratterizza per un'inversione di ruoli lì dove sono gli Africani a ridurre in schiavitù gli Europei, è intesa a gettare una nuova luce su un capitolo infame della storia 'gloriosa' dell'Impero per sollecitare una consapevolezza e una conoscenza non solo degli orrori commessi nel passato, ma, altrettanto, delle loro drammatiche conseguenze nel presente, un'ingombrante eredità che segna pesantemente la società britannica contemporanea.

Abstract II: The subversive quality of Bernardine Evaristo's creative writing finds a most challenging expression in her fourth novel, *Blonde Roots*, published in 2008 after the celebrations which took place in Britain for the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The disrupting narrative, in which she operates a risky inversion of the history of the Black Atlantic in a race-reversal novel where "Aphrikans" enslave "Europanes", is meant to shed new light on a notorious chapter of the 'glorious' history of the British Empire in order to provoke an awareness and knowledge not only of the horrors of the past, but also of their traumatic consequences and legacy in the present, revealing the centrality of that page both for Black and British history at large as well as for the shaping of contemporary identities.

Keywords: Evaristo, *Blonde Roots*, slave trade, neo-slave narratives, *herstory*.

The subversive quality of Bernardine Evaristo's creative writing finds one of its most challenging and 'disorienting' expressions in her fourth and first full-length novel in prose, *Blonde Roots*, published in 2008 soon after the celebrations in Britain marking the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade[1]. The disrupting narrative, in which she undertakes

[1] The novel was completed in 2007, the year of the Bicentenary, in the middle of very harsh debates about the legacy of the system of slavery and the profits derived from it not only in the past but also in the present.

a risky inversion of the history of the Black Atlantic in a race-reversal novel where Africans enslave Europeans, is meant to shed new light on a notorious chapter of the 'glorious' history of the British Empire to provoke a critical awareness not only of the horrors of the past, but also of their traumatic consequences and legacy in the present, revealing the centrality of that page both for Black and British history at large as well as for the shaping of contemporary identities.

In order to compensate for the lost opportunity represented by the pompous celebrations which emphasised the abolitionist stance of the British nation overshadowing its direct, guilty and most lucrative involvement in the trade, Evaristo counteracts official accounts by presenting a *herstory* in the shape of an innovative neo-slave narrative, destabilising both the traditional genre and its new creative expressions. If contemporary slavery fiction[2] adopts the form and the conventions of the classical antebellum slave narratives creatively re-imagining the subjectivity of the enslaved to reclaim their full humanity and agency (Lima 2012), Evaristo apparently aligns herself with the new cast of the traditional form, but actually introduces an ironic twist which redirects it, humorously inverting racial paradigms to depict a "parallel universe" that "hopefully gives readers a modern and historical context" through which to "a) view that history and b) understand notions of civilization and savagery" (Evaristo in Ashfeldt 2009). Evaristo's project is explicitly synthesised in her own comments on the novel:

> The book is provocative and aims to stir things up a bit and it uses a lot of satire and humor generally. […] My project as a writer is to always push the boundaries, to venture into new, sometimes precarious territory. It's risky but I can't help myself (Evaristo in Collins 2008).

The writer's words reveal once again the militant stance of her unswerving literary engagement. As a "freedom lover and disobeyer of rules" she intellectually and artistically defies all conventions to shake the reader out of their complacent certainties and comforting views of the world, granting herself, "the most rebellious of writers", the "complete artistic license to write from multiple perspectives and to inhabit different cultures across the perceived barriers of race, culture, gender, age and sexuality" (Evaristo 2021: 201).

Born in London to an English mother and a Nigerian father, with a grandfather who had returned to his home country from Brazil in 1888 after the abolition of slavery, Evaristo personally embodies the experience of a family directly involved in the fluxes of the triangular trade whose shadows still inform of themselves a society profoundly marked by a rhetoric of colors. The multiple roots of her Afro-Brazilian, British, African familial history

[2] Neo-slave narratives, which draw upon and reshape the antebellum and post-emancipation autobiographies written or dictated by liberated slaves, in their re-imagining of the experiences of Atlantic slavery, cast a special focus on the subjectivity of the once enslaved Africans who are no longer represented simply in relation to their status of subjugation, but as individuals calling into question master narratives and the official historiography through their own personal voice and testimonies and their extraordinary resilience. The stereotypical image of blacks as victims only is reversed. For an exploration of the genre see, among the others, Asraf (1999).

interweave, reconnecting the many routes of the Black Atlantic which she is determined to re-trace in order to achieve full awareness of the past and thus be able to understand the present and, possibly, contribute to changing the future. As she herself explains, "I'm interested in exploring the roots of British history and looking at the black presence in Britain, and that comes from my particular ancestry and history" (Evaristo in Muñoz Valdivieso 2004: 13), a project driven by the awareness, as one of her fictional characters claims in *Girl, Woman, Other*, that "We are all part of a continuum […] the future is in the past and the past is in the present" (Evaristo 2019: 221).

Moving from her painful experience of discrimination and exclusion as a black woman living on the margins of a white world, in which "colourism or shadism is historical and omnipresent, from the hierarchy of the slave plantations to the internalised racism of today's black populations" (Evaristo 2021: 26), Evaristo transforms her original creative vein into an instrument of resistance and affirmation. She gives voice through her literary writing to all those confined to the status of second-class citizens, marginalised and silenced by oppressive and discriminatory systems and by biased master narratives that reinforce dichotomous oppositions and hierarchical classifications.

If the dialogue with the past is the *fil rouge* which runs through all her literary production, it is specifically the re-thinking and re-writing of the history of the Black Atlantic which, questioning how slavery can be remembered and narrated, interrogates not only the tragic reality of the phenomenon through the lived experiences of its protagonists, but also its reverberations in the present that affect the subjective and collective identities of the descendants of the Black diaspora, in order to "make sense of what it means to be black in this country" (Evaristo 2005). Restoring dignity and visibility not only to the Black presence, but also to the Black History erased from official narratives is essential to discard the racialist ideology which still constitutes a hindrance to the creation of a peaceful and inclusive society. Such a history is obscured primarily by the British educational system, as the writer underlines in several of her interviews, even though it is inextricably intertwined with that of the nation whose affirmation and very identity are indisputably indebted to it, insofar as it is constructed on the myth of the superiority of its civilisation and culture.

In *Blonde Roots* the challenge to binary systems of thought and representation at the very foundations of the national historiography and of its master narratives, systems based on essentialist and exclusivist discourses marked by the rhetoric of purity as well as by ethnocentric and racialised normative models, is carried out through an avant-garde displacing writing that breaks the categorisations of the canon, crossing genres, literary forms and expressive modes. Reconfirming the constant trace distinguishing Evaristo's oeuvre, the novel is characterised by a daring experimentation that results in innovative narrative solutions, under the banner of cross-fertilisations and of the dismantling of oppositional logics, in artistic expression as well as in content. The dialogic quality of her writing makes use of a fruitful interweaving of voices and stories that echo and refer back to each other in a continuum between past and present, restoring the complex and varied portrait of the world of the black diaspora, placed in a historical perspective that allows the reader to trace its development over the centuries and to detect its many forms in the contemporary world.

In the book the first-person gendered narrative of the experience of slavery is deployed through the voice of Doris Scagglethorpe, the "whyte" English woman who reconstructs and denounces the cruel system of capture, transportation and exploitation by which the "Aphrikans" enslaved "Europanes", a system of which she is herself the victim in her new life as Omorenomwara, a name that deprives the slave of her former identity and marks her subservient condition. The story opens on the young woman's attempt to escape from her master Kaga Konata Katamba I into whose property she was sold after being kidnapped. In the Bwana's household in Londolo, at the very heart of Aphrika, she works as a home slave and personal secretary. While she plans her escape, her mind fills with the memories of her past life woven through her deep and moving longing for her family and lost home country, a kaleidoscope of images and sensations which synthesise her tragic experience of life, epitomised by the forced separation from her children who were sold into slavery:

> We slaves don't end relationships. Other people do it for us. Often we don't start them either, other people do it for us. We're encouraged to breed merely to increase the workforce.
> My three were sold on.
> Each time they promised I could keep the child. A bold-faced lie, because some expectant mothers would rather kill themselves if they knew their child was going to be taken away at birth (Evaristo 2009: 22)[3].

The narration is structured around constant flashbacks which allow the reader to reconstruct Doris's life and experience in an atemporal yet, at the same time, very concrete dimension. The sort of medieval peasant world of poverty and serfdom on the Cabbage Coast of Europa where she lived in the days "BS (Before Slavery)" (Evaristo 2009: 11), where the feudal landlords sold their subjects to the slave traders, is represented with stark realism in its social inequalities. The girl's adolescence is brutally interrupted by the appalling moment in which her life as a slave began, depriving her of every form of dignity and control over herself: "My kidnapper tugged me towards the traders. I had lost control of my body. It was no longer I who decided whether I walked to my right, to my left, backwards and forwards, or at what speed" (Evaristo 2009: 63).

In the First Book, altering the natural progression of events, the narrative interweaves and overlaps different temporal layers moving back and forth in an oscillatory motion from the girl's present condition of fugitive to her childhood, from her first transportation in chains to the new world where she served the young Miracoletta as personal slave and companion to her shipment to the Kingdom of Ambossa after the death of her first owner, until her second crossing of the ocean to work on the plantations where she is confined as a punishment for her attempted escape. The following passage encompasses in a few lines these three crucial and traumatic moments in her life:

[3] Evaristo (2009). All further references to this novel are from this edition.

> My feet could not, would not climb aboard the ship.
> Not another floating torture chamber.
> Not another floating coffin.
> Not after all this time.
> I dug my heels into the sludge of the docks and felt myself sinking.
> Back through the years to when I was a captured child (Evaristo 2009: 75).

These words introduce the most touching and dismaying pages in the novel. The chapter entitled "The Middle Passage" plunges the reader into the abyss of the abominations of the slave trade, reconstructing Doris's first harrowing voyage across the Atlantic: "I was being pulled in two: my body forced away from the shore, while my heart dragged me back to the landmass to which my whole life was attached" (Evaristo 2009: 76). Her shattering experience of physical and psychological fragmentation is reinforced by the newly acquired awareness of the insurmountable and irreconcilable gap between 'races', a divide generated by the hierarchical rhetoric of color and its constructed stereotypes:

> If I had to pinpoint a moment when the human race divided into the severe distinctions of blak and whyte, that was it: people belonged to one of the two colors and in the society I was about to join my color, not my personality or ability would determine my fate (Evaristo 2009: 76).

The horrors of the Middle Passage and the cruelty of the treatment of the slaves are reproduced in shocking detail through appalling and unforgettable scenes built from an accumulation of harsh disorienting particulars. The ironic touches which characterise the novel's overall style are suspended leaving readers breathless in front of the unacceptable abominations perpetrated by human beings against other human beings.

The reconstruction of her alienating and disrupted life as a slave is temporarily broken off by the anti-abolitionist pamphlet written by her chief enslaver which occupies Book Two of the novel. Evocatively entitled *The Flame*, in direct reference to the white supremacist National Front journal published in the 1970s as a testament to the long, uninterrupted line of intolerance and racism, it represents an abrupt change of perspective and narrating voice which shocks the reader out of their complacency introducing the key ideological foundations of discriminatory thinking, the ideological system which justified the exploitation of the subjugated. By celebrating the civilising mission of the superior race Chief Bwana exposes his "Candid & Free" ideas on "TRUE NATURE OF THE SLAVE TRADE", offering a "Modest & Truthful" (Evaristo 2009: 113) account of his growth as a slave trader thanks to "self-sacrifice and an upwardly mobile mind" (Evaristo 2009: 117). In an ironic reversal of their cruel treatment, he asserts that the slaves "have been saved from the most horrendous deaths, punishments, and morally reprehensible indulgences and serfdom, while being given the opportunity to adopt the manners and customs of civilized men" (Evaristo 2009: 127). The eighteenth-century language full of anachronisms interpolated and mixed up with contemporary colloquialisms testifies to a continuum of discrimination which lays its roots in Enlightenment thinking and resonates still in the present of a society

which, though professing itself post-ethnic, has not yet overcome prejudicial attitudes and racist ideologies.

It is significantly to Doris's voice that the writer consigns the third and last Book of the novel in which she reconstructs her life from the moment in which she was recaptured by her enslaver and transported once again across the Ocean to work on the sugar plantations in the West Japanese Islands run by the cruel and lazy Bwana's son, a place ironically named "Paradise Island", until her final liberation when she breaks the chains of her servitude and gets free joining a group of maroons living on the mountains. As Newman remarks, the plot apparently reproduces the typical mode of the slave narrative genre charting the process of emancipation of a young woman after her tragic experience of enslavement:

> the novel incorporates almost all the familiar elements of the slave narrative genre: capture, failed escape, Middle Passage with slave insurrections, multiple deaths, rape, torture and mutilations, branding […], slave auctions […], family separation […], renaming, whippings, the acquisition of literacy […], and a final escape to freedom to a long-established community of maroons (Newman 2012: 286).

However, it is from the very opening that the displacing quality of this innovative text manifests itself assuming its first plastic shape in the image of the map that introduces the reader to the subverted spatial representation of the Atlantic world, an alternative cartography which requires an adjustment of perspective, revealing the arbitrary nature of any fixed point of view whose relativity is denounced through Nietzsche's words chosen as the epigraph to the novel: "All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth" (Evaristo 2009).

The paratextual element of the map, the first of several in the novel, echoes the long-established tradition of the slave narratives which opened the autobiographical testimonies with the portrait of the protagonist as a guarantee of the verisimilitude of the narrated story. It is that very pretense of objective testimony that the writer aims at discarding disclosing the fictionality of every representation and, thus, of its associated ideology, such as the prejudiced and constructed assumption of the superiority of the 'North' and the subalternity of the 'South', visually marked by their physical placing in a hierarchal, pyramidal depiction of the globe. The map reconstructs the factual history of the transatlantic slavery reproducing the axes of the triangular trade, but it alters its location and vectors in a provocative reversal which unsettles traditional paradigms and, together with them, the familiar history of the Black Atlantic and of the slave trade conveyed by its master narratives. In Doris's world Aphrika, sitting on the Equator, is located in the north of the hemisphere in the place of Europe, highlighting the centrality of the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, whose capital is Londolo, positioned off the western coast of the continent. The slave trading Empire provocatively takes the shape of Great Britain:

> Great Ambossa - Doris reveals - is actually a very small island with a growing population to feed, and so it stretches its greedy little fingers all over the globe, stealing countries and stealing people.
> Me included. I'm one of the Stolen Ones (Evaristo 2009: 6).

The play on the acronym U.K. serves to unsettle the readers who are obliged to constantly consult the alternative map to reorient themselves. Europa is geographically 'degraded' occupying the place conventionally assigned to Africa in the Eurocentric representation of the globe. England, with its Cabbage Coast which clearly evokes the African Gold Coast, is the point of departure of the slave ships directed along the infamous middle passage to the American colonies. Amarika is not geographically re-set but re-named, and the Caribbeans are indicated as the West Japanese Islands. Spatial assumptions are dislocated in the radical inversion of the familiar identification of northern and southern countries, a distinction which is imbued with hierarchical connotations and deeply rooted in preconceptions about the superiority and inferiority of civilisations and 'races'. The turning of the world upside down upends the reader's expectations and questions their conventional assumptions drawing the attention anew both on the phenomenon of the slave trade as well as on the legacies of its founding ideology which bears heavy traces in the present. Evaristo's intention is very clear in this respect:

> Everything is shaken up, not only racially, with the power imbalance of the transatlantic slave trade inverted, but also geographically, with Europe (or Europa) located where Africa is and vice versa. I wanted to write about the transatlantic slave trade so that people imagined it afresh, to avoid a straightforward telling of a familiar history. I began asking myself the question WHAT IF-what if I turned this world upside-down. I discovered that the racist ideology that justified the slave trade, the legacy of which we live with today, is exposed and ridiculed by means of this inversion (Evaristo in Gustar 2015).

In the writer's dystopian version of the Black Atlantic world (Newman 2012) not only spatial expectations, but also temporal ones are discarded in a daring and astonishingly creative intermingling of medieval scenes of witch burnings, Enlightenment coffee-houses and customs, Victorian crinolines and corsets, contemporary locations and cultural products, as well as images of an unspecified future, symbolically represented by the disused Underground Railroad, once the crowded Londolo tube, through which tunnels Doris tries to escape, its stations' names recalling those of the contemporary metropolis. The most disparate settings and temporal markers take the reader backward and forward while their co-presence and overlapping cross conventional barriers of time establishing a constant interweaving of past and present. Such a commingling is powerfully conveyed by a bold, inventive mixture of archaic languages and XXI century jargon, an intriguing "mongrel voice" (Evaristo in Muñoz-Valdivieso 2004: 17) with a defamiliarising and destabilising effect which fearlessly and daringly overcomes borders and unsettles all expectations reproducing the "chaos world" of Glissantian memory (Glissant 1997). The multilayered time-shifting representation prevents the pinpointing of a definite historical moment in which to locate the narrative, making the text a complex arena of interlaced interdependent stories and experiences which commingle and echo one another, encompassing within the complex picture of an enlarged Atlantic world a long and unending history of oppression, from the serfdom of the Middle Ages to contemporary forms of human trafficking and exploitation of the

poorest and most vulnerable. The conventional periodisation of the phenomenon of slavery is thus revised emphasising its protean nature and the multifarious forms it has taken throughout the centuries, never erasing or blurring the reality of the slave trade and the horrors of the system which are reproduced in their most brutal details. Evaristo unequivocally attests her intent to write about the transatlantic slave trade "in a way that enabled people to see it afresh. It's a subject that elicits strong responses, including anger, defensiveness, resentment, self-righteousness, guilt, sadness" (Evaristo in Collins 2008: 1201). However, she seems to suggest, this jumble of reactions is not a sufficient and satisfying answer as the conventionality of its representations produces a sort of habit-forming familiarity, whereas it would be necessary a radical re-vison of that recognisable history as well as of the narratives which have represented it. The shocking reversal of skin colors and social roles thus deprives the readers of the comfortable position of passive receivers of a much-told history obliging them to take an active critical stance to react to the legacy of that past in our contemporary world.

As the writer claims, her work is a "what if? book but it's also a 'This is what was' book" (Evaristo in Collins 2008: 1201), a book which uncompromisingly depicts and condemns the system of slavery together with its racist ideological underpinnings which reverberate in the present. The self-reflexive nature of this neo-slave novel, with Doris's first-person narration revealing its biased nature, though contradicting "any sense of a fixed historical vision of Atlantic slavery" (Burkitt 2011: 406) and exposing the relativity of its narratives, neither deprives the phenomenon of its substantiality, nor does it divert the attention from its dramatic and suffered reality. On the contrary, it reveals the concreteness of a personal, and thus inevitably 'compromised', lived and narrated experience, a story which coalesces with a multitude of other stories weaving and re-composing the complex and multilayered world of the Atlantic slavery. The fictionality of Doris's slave narrative is foregrounded through the many references to her role of storyteller who reconstructs the events from her subjective angle of observation drawing on oral sources and anecdotes which are constantly re-shaped in the act of their re-telling, revealing in such a mutability their unreliability. The novel's postmodern stance, which manifests its self-conscious metafictional nature interrogating any fixed and objective form of narration, neither questions the reality of facts, nor does it diminish its gravity. On the contrary, it guarantees, through its overtly biased reconstruction, that what happened does not remain relegated to the fixity and the conclusive dimension of a past chapter, thus opening it up to the present (Hutcheon 1988: 110).

It is for the same reason that the enlarged perspective on other highly disquieting forms of servitude and exploitation, which are not necessarily racially determined and confined just to one specific historical moment, does not compromise the clear focus on the Atlantic slave trade, but reinforces its dramatic history placing it within a continuum of oppression and discrimination across the centuries that emphasises its most devastating and dehumanising dimension. Evaristo, thus, reconstructs a "historiography of slavery which complicates it as a purely black experience" (Burkitt, 2011: 407). From the first chapter such a never-ending history of slavery explored in its many different forms finds an explicit manifestation in Doris's narrative when she introduces herself and her family.

> I am proud to declare that I come from a long line of cabbage farmers.
> My people were honest peasants who worked the land and never turned to theft even when it snowed in summer or rained in winter so that the crops miscarried their pods and turned to mulch.
> We weren't landowners, oh no, we are serfs, the bottom link in the agricultural food chain, although no actual chains clinked on the ground when we walked around. Nor were we property, exactly, but our roots went deep into the soil because when the land changed hands through death, marriage, and even war, so did we, and so tied we remained, for generation upon generation (Evaristo 2009: 8).

The parallel with her following condition of white slave at the service of cruel black masters strikes the difference between the medieval serfdom, a condition of subalternity which does not eradicate her sense of identity and belonging both to the family and to her much beloved land, and the totally displacing alienation and disruption of her inner self determined by her new status of bondage. In line with the same strategy, the allusion in the opening chapter to the enslavement of approximately one million Europanes by North Africans on the Barbary Coast between the 16th and the 19th century, does not divert the attention from the history of the Atlantic slave trade, but, conversely, contextualises and re-situates it underlining the devastating dimension of the phenomenon and its racist legacy in the present (Evaristo in Collins 2008). As a matter of fact, "*Blonde Roots* does not eradicate the real history of the Black Atlantic slave trade, but it allows for that 'pre-history' to be considered as part of a wider context" (Burkitt 2011: 408).

As well as different experiences of servitude and oppression are recalled and intertwined to enshrine the multilayered complexity and dramatic concreteness of the phenomenon of the Atlantic slavery, various modes of discourse which give voice to those experiences are echoed, reproduced and reshaped in the novel's network, alerting the attention on their nature of fictional constructions. It is only by re-composing all those narratives and reconnecting their manifold voices that we can achieve the awareness of what happened in the past and of what continues to happen in the present. The shrewd recast of different literary genres calls into question the simplistic binary true/untrue revealing the relativity of such a dichotomy. Slave narratives are not necessarily true in their quality of autobiographical accounts because the texts depend on specific formal conventions linked to their political purposes as part of the abolitionist campaigns and are thus inevitably influenced by the readers' expectations (Gould 2007: 19)[4], as well as neo-slave narratives, as creative fictional accounts of the tragedy of slavery, are not necessarily untrue (Iromuanya 2017: 181). The objectivity of pseudo-scientific journals is likewise masterfully exposed through the biased testimony of Chief Kaga in Book Two in which he adopts the typical stance of the Eighteenth century anti-abolitionist slavers with the pretentious style of their reports, exposing his racialised and racist rationale that justifies the subjection of 'lesser' human beings, disguising his role of enslaver as that of the 'savior' of the most unfortunate and debased 'races'. The

[4] In addition, we should not forget that autobiographical accounts were shaped and deeply altered by their white editors and amanuenses.

weaving together of all these different narratives makes the disquieting painting of the slave trade emerge in its monstrosity denouncing its consequences and enduring effects.

The broadened perspective embracing the whole Black Atlantic world, from the past to the present, is reproduced as well through the intertextual references to literary works which enter into a fruitful and dynamic space of dialogic interaction, crisscrossing the ocean and connecting one with the other despite the different contexts in which they were produced. The history of colonial slavery and of its legacy is thus recast in literary terms by the allusions to renowned masterpieces which symbolically stand for the vertices of the infamous 'triangle'. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the novel at the center of the late Victorian canon, is explicitly recalled in Chief Kaga's cry "the horror, the horror" in reference to the 'barbarity' of the 'Europanes' life, as well as reproduced in the description of the place as "the Heart of Grayness", the capitalisation directly alluding to the title of the XIX century text. Traces of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the Nigerian novelist's writing back to Conrad's masterpiece, can be detected in *The Flame*. The biased master narrative echoes the voice of the District Commissioner who silences the tragedy of the colonised in his enthusiastic narrative entitled *The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Literary allusions to the novels of the black descendants of the Atlantic slavery represent the third apex of the triangle set in the New World. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is often evoked in the text starting from the reverberation of the title in the protagonist's anaphoric cry of longing for her lost sisters, "Beloved Beloved, Beloved" (Evaristo 2009: 10), whereas the most renowned slave narrative by the American writer Alex Haley, *Roots* (1976), finds reflection in the novel which bears in its title a direct reference to it.

If it is true that these texts testify the transcultural dimension of a transnational space of circulation of voices and ideas (Gilroy 1993), it is likewise evident that in depicting the Black Atlantic Evaristo avoids a universalising approach which would run the risk of uprooting it from its specific historical and social context. At the same time, if on the one hand she exposes the capitalist nature of the colonial adventure at large guaranteed by its highly profitable system of slavery (Newman 2012), Evaristo never sidelines the question of 'race' in favor of a socio-economic reading of the phenomenon. On the contrary, she explores the harsh reality of the slave trade foregrounding the mechanisms of racialisation which justified and guaranteed its survival for over three centuries and whose legacy is deeply entrenched in our present. *Blonde Roots* thus reconstructs a contextualised and much detailed setting of that infamous history which does not allow a "colorblind reading" of the story (Iromuanya 2017: 176) representing it as a vague condition of oppression and subalternity which has assumed different shapes throughout the centuries. To make an example, the mercantile adventure of Chief Kaga which, thanks to a strict class-defined hierarchical system ruling first on the slave ship and then on the plantations, allows him to accumulate wealth and capital through the sale of slaves and the exploitation of their workforce, is never disjunct from his prejudiced racialised view of the 'Europanes'. When he lands on the shores of Europa he meets the 'savagery' of the 'inferior race' encompassed in a myriad images depicting the presumed barbarity of their costumes and habits, since their very first appearance in front of the dismayed eyes of the coloniser shocked by their irredeemable alterity:

> As they crept in a cowardly way towards us, I heard them whispering rapidly in their nonsensical "language". […] A language without the c!icks, c!ucks, c!acks and !tsks of normal speech sounded dreary beyond belief, more akin to the low monotonous moan of cattle than the exuberant sounds of human communication (Evaristo 2009: 130).

Represented as beasts, more than human beings, the autochthonous population is associated with the filthiness of the muddy earth:

> Naturally the savages were overdressed, as I had been told they would be. They wore grimy layers of cloths and matted wools which were coloured in browns and greens so dingy they could blend into the filth of the earth without need of camouflage (Evaristo 2009: 131).

Questions of 'race' and class are skillfully woven by a gendered perspective which shapes the text as a very distinctive *herstory*, though the privileged feminine dimension, which definitely marks the novel giving it a specific characterisation, does not limit itself to shedding light on the experience of oppression lived by women, but, in a wider perspective, embraces the predicament of the whole enslaved community, independently from gender identity. Thus, female sensibility serves as a powerful lens through which to view and 'enter' that world, but such an angle of observation is never exclusive and excluding, respecting the writer's aim to overcome both racial and gender dichotomies. In a radical shift away from the tradition of the slave narratives mainly narrated by men in whose accounts women were represented exclusively as passive victims of abuses and violence, *Blonde Roots* places at the forefront a courageous young woman who tells her story in her own voice raising her head to reaffirm her right to a dignified life. Despite the selling into slavery of her three children and the forced separation from her partner, despite the dehumanising treatment of the slaves with the horrors of whippings and cutting of limbs, despite the abuse and humiliation of female bodies, despite all the abominations of the system of slavery, Doris retrieves her agency finding a source of comfort and power in the solidarity of the slave circle and in that very peculiar form of sisterhood of a female world carefully and lovingly portrayed in the novel. The education of children, cooking, music and religious rituals are preserved and cultivated by women offering the community a sense of normalcy and dignity which saves its members from the abyss of desolation and despair. Seated in a circle on the Sunday evenings, Doris narrates, "We let our laughter stream up into the sky and ricochet between the mountains. It was almost as if our lives were normal" (Evaristo 2009: 215).

That 'unspeakable' reality, whose immeasurable brutality seems impossible to be represented, is transmitted by her empathetic voice characterised by an ironic stance which produces the double effect of both involving and distancing the reader placing them in an uncomfortable position (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2022: 224, 231). Deployed in its different forms, from hyperbole to reversal, from incongruity to harsh humor, irony represents a powerful strategy to convey an otherwise unrepresentable story, as the following passage significantly demonstrates:

> When Bwana bought me he had me tattooed with his initials too – KKK.
> Can you imagine having a red-hot poker searing into your skin? Twice? The delayed shock reaction as it sizzles and smokes, then the warm bloody tears streaming down your arms and spine? (Evaristo 2009: 18)

The cruelty of the branded initials of Chief Kaga on her body, "K.K.K.", three capital letters which call to mind the contemporary extremist white supremacist hate group, could not have been rendered in a more vivid and incisive way than through the apparently light humorous touches of the woman's narrative which creates a highly distinctive and original form of "empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra 2001), reaching beyond a sense of guilt and hatred. The irony of Doris's daily mantra aimed at reconstructing her shattered identity and regaining the pride of her belonging through the acceptance of her body provokes the reader into questioning prejudiced assumptions and rooted stereotypes concerning the ideals of feminine beauty:

> "I may be *fair* and *flaxen*, I may have *slim* nostrils and *slender* lips. I may have *oil-rich* hair and a *non-rotund* bottom. I may blush easy, go *rubicund* in the sun and have *covert yet mentally alert* blue eyes. Yes, I may be whyte. But I am whyte and I am beautiful".
> Our guys would call women who looked like me Barbee, named after the popular rag doll of the Motherland […] (Evaristo 2009: 32, emphasis in original).

The canons of beauty are exposed as a prison which entraps women revealing their nature of fictional constructions as a result of racialised operations of power. Hair in particular, as Kobena Mercer convincingly asserts, "is merely a raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meanings and value" (Mercer 2000: 118).

> The hairdressers used kinky Aphrikan hair on the Burbite women, who had their own hair chopped off and these bushy pieces sown onto them so that the effect was (un)naturally Aphrican. It took up to ten hours and when the blonde, red, brown or straight roots came through, it looked just plain tacky, apparently (Evaristo 2009: 30).

If the blonde, tacky roots of Doris's hair are the sign which condemns her to slavery, they are, at the same time, the expression of her potential liberation when she comes to accept herself and her body, as in the aforementioned passage in which she retrieves her rights and proudly reasserts her identity, through words which recall the rallying cry of the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement.

Instances of 'race' and gender constantly intertwine in the novel crossing spatial and temporal boundaries to demonstrate the persisting legacy of an unending past whose shadows loom large in the present. Doris's final words in the postscript are revealing in such a respect:

> In the twenty-first century, Bwana' s descendants still own the sugar estate and are among the grandest and wealthiest families in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, where they all reside. The cane workers, many of whom are descended from the original slaves, are paid (Evaristo 2009: 269).

The novel denounces the persistence of forms of slavery referring directly to the prosperity of the U.K., the United Kindom of Great Ambossa, which is still nowadays constructed on the exploitation of the work force and resources of the neo-colonial world. The Bwana's descendants run "the Business", as the Chief did in the past, and their dependents, though paid, are nonetheless kept in a subservient condition. The novel, as the inscription recites, is thus a tribute to both "THE TEN TO TWELVE MILLION AFRICANS TAKEN TO EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS AS SLAVES ... AND THEIR DESCENDANTS" (Evaristo 2009): the writer's interest in the past is indisputably motivated by its enduring relevance to our society in our present world.

The strategy of 'race' reversal, "translating black experience into a white one" (Rosenberg 2014: 390), encourages a sense of proximity for the western reader to the slaves' predicament and an instinctive identification with the young woman's tragedy because, as Evaristo repeatedly emphasises in many of her interviews, the magic of fiction consists in facilitating the "understanding of stories that are not your own stories" (Evaristo in Hughes 2020). Taking her readers on an "unpredictable moral journey" (Evaristo in Collins 2020), the writer calls us all to our own responsibilities: as inheritors of that tragic history we are all implicated in its enduring legacy. The creative word contributes to foster such critical knowledge and empathic sharing because, borrowing Evaristo's words, it "is perhaps the deepest way in which we can experience other people's lives and broaden our understanding of who we all are as people" (Evaristo 2025).

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