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Feminist/queer/diasporic temporality in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019)

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Abstract

Claiming that individuals and communities get their choices, rhythms and practices biopolitically choreographed by temporal mechanisms that dictate which human experiences are included or excluded, Elizabeth Freeman states that those 'whose activities do not show up on the official time line, whose own time lines do not synchronize with it, are variously and often simultaneously black, female, queer' (2005). The narrative subject of Bernardine Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other (2019) is black, female and (mostly) queer in her design of a polyphonic text featuring twelve black women moving through the world in different decades and occupying a temporal dimension that deviates from the linear and teleological modes. I draw on Edelman (2004); Freeman (2010) and Ahmed (2010, 2017) to analyse Evaristo's novel as a text informed by feminist queer temporality and thus explore these characters' resistance to chrononormative assumptions like 'the straight time of domesticated gender, capital accumulation, and national coherence' (Ramberg, 2016). In this light, I address her cast of 'time abjects' –lesbians, transgender women, feminist killjoys and menopausal females—as characterized 'chronotopically' as their racialized and gendered subjectivities coalesce temporally and spatially seeing their pasts and futures interact in a typically transpositional, queer and diasporic continuum. By invoking Freeman's notion of 'erotohistoriography' (2010) as a distinctive mode of queer time that not only recognizes non-linear chronopolitics, but decidedly prioritizes bodies and pleasures in self-representation, I contend that Evaristo depicts bodies as likewise performing this encounter between past and present in hybrid, carnal and trans-temporal terms. I conclude that in her joining temporality and corporeality, memory and desire, she suggests alternative ways of representing contemporary black British womanhood

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In the thought-provoking introduction to their 2011 volume, Ellen McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen state that '[i]f queer theorists have agreed on anything, it is that, for queer thought to have any specificity at all, it must be characterized by becoming, the constant breaking of habits' (10). They conceive *becoming* not only as opposed to *being* and 'as a narrative of self-development, a *Bildungsroman*, but as a question of the lack of fit, of the difficulties of interpretation, the moments of textual resistance and unintelligibility' (McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011: 10). And it is precisely in this realm of the improper, the unfitting, the unsuitable, that they invite us to rethink queer time –'at best contrapuntal, syncopated, and at worst, erratic, arrested' (McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011: 1)—almost as a form of *unbecoming*, and consider the tensions among history, life and chronology in new and different ways.

For more than a decade now, queer theorists have been exploring the regulatory and disciplinary temporal norms that impose life scripts dominated by economic development, individual or national progress and heterosexual reproduction. These scripts that are formulated in different ways – 'chrononormativity' (2010) by Elizabeth Freeman, 'reproductive futurism' (2004) by Lee Edelman, 'straight time' (2007) by Tom Boellstorff, and 'heterofuturity' (2011) by Jack Halberstam—are firmly installed in our social imaginary and shape our biographies according to linear, teleological, reproductive and future-oriented modes. By way of contrast, they argue, Queer Temporalities offer different ways of resistance to the limitations of such normative understanding of time by prioritizing those manifestations of temporal dissidence that we might relate to certain forms of social and sexual dissidence (i.e., queer experiences). The strength of such an approach is that queer temporality, in its different formulations and contexts, is perceived as powerfully deconstructing the dichotomies of past and future, progress and decline, success and failure, youth and age.

One of these scholars of queer time, Elizabeth Freeman (2005, 2010), claims that individuals and communities get their choices, rhythms and practices biopolitically choreographed by temporal mechanisms in a complex matrix that dictates which human experiences are included or excluded, which ones officially count as a life and are historically significant, and which ones don't. And she thus concludes that those 'whose activities do not show up on the official timeline, whose own timelines do not synchronize with it, are variously and often simultaneously black, female, queer' (Freeman, 2011).

The narrative subject of Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (winner of the 2019 Booker Prize) is black, female and (mostly) queer in her design of a polyphonic text featuring twelve black British women of different backgrounds and experiences moving through the world over a hundred years period, although the story time is condensed on the few hours before, during and after the premiere of the play of one of the main protagonists – Amma - at the National Theatre at London.[1] These shared moments and experiences create a kind of transhistorical and transpatial community and the playhouse where the protagonists converge on the same night develop into a queer chronotope where, following Mikhail Bakhtin (2002)[2], time and place coalesce, 'thicken', for their racialized and gendered interconnected subjectivities.[3] Through this system of open-ended

connections where spaces, events and beings coexist simultaneously, Evaristo seems to be invoking another important concept in Bakhtin's universe: dialogism. In fact, as Leila Kamali (2016) argues, the dialogic in Evaristo's fiction enables 'diverse historical subjectivities as well as temporalities [to] flow together in a dialogue with the aspects of *otherness* within the self' (216) and validates '[the] specific integration of Blackness into the centre of Britishness past and present' (214), by 'draw[ing] routes of communication even between subjects who attempt to distance themselves from the past altogether' (220).

As their black womanhood is addressed not only dialogically but also intersectionally in their various ages, classes, faiths, occupations, education and sexual orientation, they become and unbecome while journeying along a temporal dimension that deviates from the linear, and chrononormative modes. Following up on Warhol and Lanser's (2015) invitation to unbind narrative theory so as to include feminist and queer approaches, I have analysed Evaristo's novel as a text informed by queer temporality. Considering that these twelve life accounts constitute a chronicle of temporal heterodoxy associated to other practices of socio-sexual dissidence that have typified as queer, I contend that queer biographies (as presented by Evaristo) stand as an overlapping of diverse chronologies: the individual, the collective, the national and the historical.

After Evaristo's dedication sets the novel in motion and bids her 'hideous progeny go forth', so to speak –'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'– what follows is a criss-cross of narratives conceived as the intertwined stories of these twelve women[4] whose voices interact dialogically and whose experiences move from past to present and project into the future, between England, Scotland, Ethiopia, Nigeria and the Caribbean, thus contesting the linear narratives of patriarchal and imperial discourse. Homi Bhabha (2004) argues that, by confronting the voices of the past and the present, of home and abroad, postcolonial authors create something new and disturbing; a rich space that can very accurately define Evaristo's novels[5]:

> The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with newness that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent in-between space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. (10)

Committed to issues of migration, heritage and (un)belonging, Evaristo dramatizes the literal diaspora of the black Britons, necessarily inhabiting—drawing on Bhabha—a 'revisionary time' (2004: 10). Heidi S. Mirza introduces her 1997 Reader by referring to black British feminism as a 'self-consciously constructed *space*' (3), a 'common structural *location*' (3), a 'political *terrain*' (4) and ultimately, 'a *place* called home' (4). Within the last two decades, such critical investment on space has been superseded by a temporal turn in Race Studies and Postcolonial Studies where the geopolitical has been decidedly complicated by the chronopolitical. Seen in this light, some Black feminist scholars seem to have adopted a temporal approach when they conceive their work as deviating from the linear generational model of different 'waves' of feminism

and from the 'allure of teleogenic plotline' so as to address instead 'lifelines' that reorganize the past and make sense of the present (Mirza and Gunaratnam, 2014: 128). Based on this, life histories of black diasporic women in Britain should be perceived as fractured, discontinuous and flexible (Rasool, 1997; Young, 2000) thus embracing a politics of recognition that speaks a collective but not a uniform voice.

The narrative design of Evaristo's novel is also figuratively decentred and diasporic, as the different characters appear, disappear and reappear in someone else's story and their gendered and racialized perspectives overlap and switch back and forth between temporal and spatial dimensions as if navigating the oceans of history and memory. Through an intense use of narrative flashbacks and detours, Evaristo creates discontinuities and gaps in the characters' life accounts that could exemplify what Freeman (2010) calls 'temporal drag', with 'all the associations that the word *drag* has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present' (62). Temporal drag ends up illuminating that which is often excluded from the forward-looking, future-oriented time and its related *mantras*: progress, advance, development, evolution, growth.

Queer subjects/Time abjects

It is outside this normative paradigm where Freeman locates the materiality of bodies and decidedly prioritizes its connections and pleasures against the emphasis on trauma, pain and loss that has characterized many queer metanarratives. This is what she has termed *erotohistoriography*, a non-linear approach to history that makes past and present interact and registers this interaction through erotic and embodied sensations.[6]

Evaristo's characterization of Amma's lesbian temporality might be read as an invocation of Freeman's erotohistoriography inasmuch as the account of her different sexual experiences serves to break apart time into lesbian moments. Amma has had sexual relations with many different partners in varied contexts, some of whom help her repair and alleviate previously inflicted bodily damage, while some others help her learn more about herself, very much in line with Audre Lorde's (1984) assumptions about '[o]ur erotic knowledge empower[ing] us, becom[ing] a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives' (57).[7]

By not trying to fit into hegemonic or even homonormative standards like gay marriage, Amma takes control of her own narrative, her own chronology. She does not see relationships as having to climactically culminate in a committed long-term relationship. Rather, she values the present moment in terms of itself, viewing her relationships through a lesbian temporality where, outside the temporal logic of the family, her (queer female) body functions as a site of 'bad timing' in resisting the 'enforced synchronicity' (Freeman, 2010: 39) of patriarchal, hetero- and chrononormative structures. Such resistance, in turn, manifests itself as what Freeman terms bodily 'microtemporalities'. Her life-long lesbianism is one of these struggles through which she contests popular discourses about girl queerness being 'a passing phase' that has to be overcome through the heteronormative models of human development or *coming of age* (Monaghan, 2016). Amma recalls her mom's temporalizing her daughter's queer sexuality as a manifestation of juvenile desire she would eventually grow out: 'She said she suspected when pencil

skirts and curly perms were all the rage and I started wearing men's Levis. She's sure it's a phase, which I'll throw back at her when I am forty' (Evaristo, 2019: 12).

In a similar fashion, trans and non-binary characters like Megan/Morgan and Bibi transition various gendered positions and corporealities thus experiencing, like coloured Orlandos, what it means to inhabit the world in the opposite sex. Bibi, who has transitioned from male to female, confesses having learnt first-hand how women are discriminated against: 'I miss sitting alone in bars nursing a quiet pint, without feeling self-conscious or being hit on […] I am wary of walking home late at night on my own, I miss being respectfully called sir when I am in a shop or restaurant' (Evaristo, 2019: 322–323). Both in their becoming what they already truly were, and in their ghostly still inhabiting their previous cis-normative selves, transgender characters become powerful disrupters of lifetime. In fact, the very notion of *transition* proves to be problematic because of its association with essentialist ideas of *before* and *after* that imply binary approximations to time and gender that are not easily accommodated by trans-subjects. Alternatively, these subjects occupy the realm of trans temporality that Jacob Roberts Lau (2016) describes as a series of affective events of somatic dislocation in which current and past displacements can be rewritten. If Butler (1993) conceived the abject in spatial terms by ascribing its subjectivity to those unlivable and uninhabitable zones of social life, Lau adds a chronological dimension 'by exposing the anxiety of those subjects at the uninhabitable and perhaps dangerously unregulated temporality that marks the abject' (2016: 16). The experience of temporal abjection that affects trans narratives, bodies, desires and lives is epitomized by Megan/Morgan's perception of her own contradictory subjectivity as a 'woman who wondered if she should have been born a man, who was attracted to a woman who'd once been a man, who was now saying gender was full of misguided expectations anyway, even though she had herself transitioned from male to female' (Evaristo, 2019: 321). Identifying the multiple intersections between blackness and transness, Evaristo seems to denounce, in line with Riley Snorton (2017), that the erasure of black people from trans history reveals the crucial role race has played in the shaping and representation of transgender subjects. Black trans temporality is thus constructed as the overlapping of discontinuous and multidirectional timelines that negotiate 'change, passage, permanence, and closure, as well as both the stability and the development of embodied identity' (Pellegrini, 2019: 46).

Within the novel's polymorphous black female cast, another instance of women characterized as 'time abjects' are the feminist killjoys that Sara Ahmed (2017) situates in a queer temporality[8]:

> The idea that you mature out of being a feminist killjoy, that in growing up you *unbecome* her, also implies a linear development and progression: as if being unaffected or less bothered is the point you should reach; what you should aim to reach. It associates maturity with giving up, not necessarily conviction as such, but the willingness to speak from that conviction. A feminist life is not so linear. Some of us become angrier and more volatile in time. We don't always become feminist killjoys early on; she can catch up with you anytime. (163)

Being the daughter of a polyamorous lesbian (Amma) and a gay narcissist (Roland), 19 years old Yazz might typify as one of these feminist killjoys in her feeling completely

alienated from what she calls the 'Swipe-Like-Chat-Invite-Fuck Generation where men expect you to give it up on the first (and only) date, have no pubic hair at all, and do the disgusting things they've seen women do in porn movies on the internet' (Evaristo, 2019: 52–53). As a distant observer of 'the other freshers running around with their foam parties, disco paintballing, treasure hunts and group pub crawls' (Evaristo, 2019: 56), Yazz both disrupts her own ability to simply enjoy the things that are meant to make her happy and questions other people's ease to be affected by the objects and practices that align them to different forms of socially constructed happiness. One of such forms is body image, which, in the case of black women, can only be truly understood within an intersectional framework of oppressive *isms* like racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. Yazz's deliberate transgression[9] of these normative body images and beauty standards means for her to be aware of the 'situations of conflict, violence, and power that are read as *about* the unhappiness of feminists,' Sara Ahmed (2010) argues, 'rather than being what the feminists are unhappy about' (67). But Yazz's feminism is just one side of her radical politics, as she is also committed to fight systemic racism in higher education (by, for instance, writing a column titled *Why is my professor not black?* in her university newspaper) as if verbalizing the claims that feminist scholars like Ahmed herself, but also Spivak (1993); hooks (1994), Collins (1990) or Mirza (2006) have made for decades about how black women in academia–either as staff, students or researchers—have been appropriated and instrumentalized by the fetish of diversity, while most effective work on diversity remains undone and their invisibility and negative stereotyping are still unaddressed.

Bernardine Evaristo had already explored the realm of queer temporality in her 2013 novel *Mr Loverman*, the story of a septuagenarian, Antigua-born and secretly gay lovers with his childhood friend. His being black, old and gay positions the protagonist outside the chrononormative life course and thus turns him into a certainly apt case to address the critical intersections of queer and postcolonial temporalities. After dealing with childhood in some of her previous novels –*Lara* (1997), *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), *Hello Mum* (2010)— Bernardine Evaristo ventures into the uncharted territory of queer postcolonial aging with a story about the conflicts and dilemmas of homosexuality within London's West Indian diaspora. Barry Jedidiah Walker is a husband in his mid-70s and father of two daughters, who contemplates divorcing his Pentecostalist wife to finally live in the open with his secret partner, Morris. Barry's environment is an example of what Edelman (2004) called 'reproductive futurism' which has heterosexual family as its prime political unit and, in his case, his two daughters and one grandson as the centre for a future project. He positively believes in his having carved a better future for his descendants[10] after having made good money out of Hackney gentrified property. Considering these achievements, Barry's successful life course seems to fit within the heteronormative imaginary of productivity (both in the biological and capitalist senses of the word). But despite these attachments to his patrilineal legacy, Barry does not seem to feel fully comfortable within this future-oriented paradigm when, in this late-life crisis, he laments that '75 percent of your life is in the past. Each step forward triggers a step backward' (Evaristo, 2014: 130). Likewise, his lover Morris's senile memory loss and their nostalgic return (through narrative flashbacks) to the primary scene of their first, illicit and lifelong love generate discontinuities, deferrals and reverse chronologies that evidence how elderly people are often expelled from the linear and teleological paradigms of success and progress.[11]

Seen in this light, Barry's reluctance to leave the closet and set his new life in motion is another challenge to compulsory linearity. By continuously procrastinating, postponing, delaying the moment of his self-disclosure, he seems to be suspended in the stagnant temporality that prolongs actions, choices and resolutions into a realm of 'slow time' that has also been theorized by some queer scholars. In *Cruel Optimism* (2011) Laurent Berlant highlights the importance of slowness and negativity and explores 'stuckness' as a structural feature of the present: 'the impasse is a cul-de-sac, [where] one keeps moving, albeit paradoxically, in the same space […] Its unbound temporality marks a delay that demands activity. This activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading' (199–200). *Mr Loverman* is full of these unexpected happenings that take place while Barry makes a decision; it is a story about waiting, loitering, belatedness and what takes place in the meanwhile. In many humorous occasions, Barry is represented and perceived as flamboyantly old-fashioned: his gentlemanly manners, tastes and Shakespeare-inflected language are decidedly atavistic and thus incongruous with modern times. But his anachronism, his not living up to the modern gay standards, seems to be decidedly strategic and instrumental to his present need of survival, normalcy and assimilation. If coming out and same-sex marriage can be considered as the highest forms of progress in the gay metanarratives of success, the fact that Barry *disidentifies* from these formulas alienates him from the most visible and accepted mainstream gay culture, whose clichés and assumptions he satirizes in his monologues.

Against the masculinist bias in queer theories of time, I would like to address, even if only tangentially, the figure of the postmenopausal woman as another example of conflicting temporality. Hattie in *Girl, Woman, Other* and Carmel (the object of her husband Barry's invectives) in *Mr Loverman* are not lesbians but they live in all-female mutually supportive environments where men are excluded. The end of their reproductive femininity and futurity marks these elderly women out of the designated biopolitical schedule and positions them in a realm of queer temporality. As Kelsey E. Henry (2015) argues, '[m]enopause is an embodied temporality that somatises queer time's design. It is an *unbecoming* process that exposes reproductive futurity on its own fragile constitution' (109). Contesting the normative scripts of inevitability, abjection and failure associated to menopause, 93 years-old Hattie, who still runs her northern farm by herself, rewrites her own chronology in more positive and emancipatory terms and exerts her matrilineal prerogative to pass her landed property on to her non-binary great-granddaughter. If, as a woman born in the 1920s, Hattie has seen her life-cycles and life-rhythms dictated by men (father, husband, sons) and subjugated by a patriarchal model of temporality, her *rebecoming* deviates from narratives of normative aging by challenging not only lifetime but patterns of inheritance when she comes up with 'the radical idea of reinventing the farm for people who have reinvented themselves' (Evaristo, 2019: 332).

Embodied (un)belongings/Textual diasporicity

Susan S. Lanser (2015) argues that the field of gender and narrative stakes its different approaches from the shared belief that sex, gender and sexuality are significant to textual poetics and thus to the shapes, structures and representational practices of texts. In this light, I contend that Evaristo turns fragmentariness into a queer statement

seemingly invoking Sara Ahmed (2017) when she recalls Audre Lorde's account of her cancer treatment and her wilful determination not to wear a prosthesis so as to resist normalization and vindicate her new fragmented/mutilated body. Ahmed relates this experience with that of queer subjects who resist being swallowed by narratives of (hetero) normalization that she identifies with supplements or prostheses to compensate the wrong/missing/unfitting parts of their lives:

> Smoothing things over often means eliminating the signs of injury to create a fantasy of a whole. Smoothing things over often means eliminating those who are reminders of an injury […] A queer crip politics might allow the body deemed not whole to be revealed, a revelation that might be registered as a wilful obtrusion into social consciousness. A queer crip politics might involve a refusal to cover over what is missing, a refusal to aspire to be whole. (2017: 175)

The novel's multilayered narrative style is also fragmentary and dispersed in a hybrid composite of poetry-prose[12] with very little punctuation, no capitalization and the lines breaking and pacing to match the characters' emotional goings on. When, in the last life account of the novel, Penelope recalls being told on her sixteenth birthday that she's 'a foundling', the line breaks to show her tearing apart and the pain of disconnectedness — 'the feeling of being / un / moored / un / wanted / un / loved / un / done / a / no / one' (Evaristo, 2019: 283). Such a revelation disrupts her sense of time and history and forces her to reconsider her life narrative outside the normative patterns of futurity and linearity: 'she was an orphan/a bastard/unwanted/rejected/now the disparity between them made sense/her parents were not her parents/her birth date was not her birthday/ she was not of their blood or history […] there was no paper trail/she was a foundling/ anonymous/unidentified/mysterious' (Evaristo, 2019: 282).

Evaristo also refuses to such aspiration of wholeness by dismantling unifying and monolithic arrangements of plot, character or time in her novels. But we cannot obviate the fact that her display of textual dispersal and diasporicity should be interpreted as an elaboration of her own understanding of diaspora as the *unfinished* condition of displacement of those individuals from multiple backgrounds and lineages who get their biographies excluded from the official history. In his analysis of Evaristo's early fiction, MacLeod (2011) anticipates distinctive features of *Girl, Woman, Other* as he highlights the complex ways in which the novelist acknowledges the polycultural foundations of black Britons' marginalized identities. He contends that, in her narrative, 'diachronic routes of historical and geographical passage give way to key instances of synchronic spatial richness where a number of diverse places seem gathered together and transposed upon the local geography of London' (MacLeod, 2011: 171). This reformulation of the English-African diaspora –to which Bernardine Evaristo herself belongs—, not only as a condition or a space, but as a *process*, invites an analysis of its temporal intricacies.

The critique of chrononormativity has been an important part of the agenda of postcolonial theory whose temporal turn seems to indicate a move from geopolitics to chronopolitics. Achille Mbembe (2001) declares that 'the postcolony encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias' (14) that contest the linear and progressive accounts of colonial history and allow for the existence of simultaneous times. In the same vein, Johannes Fabian (2014) argues that colonial societies have 'otherized'

subaltern groups positioning them 'behind the times' –that is, as primitive, backward, or retarded—through recourse to a modern dominant time-line built upon such concepts as civilization, progress, acculturation or development.[13] In Evaristo's novel, the eldest black Britons are depicted as living anachronistically, whereas their descendants seem to have 'caught up' as a result of an imperial project that has assimilated them to modern European time.

The generational conflicts between Bummi, a Nigerian immigrant who fled her village near Lagos carrying her 'possessions in two baskets upon [her] head' (Evaristo, 2019: 160) and her English-born daughter –who, every morning in front of the bathroom mirror, pronounces her self-inspirational *mantra* '*I am highly presentable, likable, clubbable, relatable, promotable and successful*' (Evaristo, 2019: 140) before she heads to her London City office at an investment bank—are decidedly complicated by the dominant belief that 'backward or retarded' cultures have been left lagging behind European modernity. But if, as Mbembe (2001) suggests, postcolonial experiences are presided by discontinuity, non-linearity and fragmentariness, Carole's temporality has to be interpreted within this heterochronic matrix. As a brilliant businesswoman with hard-won professionalism, Carole, who might fit within what Ifekwunigwe (1997) calls a 'Diaspora's daughter/Africa's orphan' identity, accommodates herself within a narrative of progress and success modelled on the 'motivational books ordered from America telling her to *visualize the future you want to create, believe you can and you're halfway there, and if you project a powerful person, you will attract respect'* (Evaristo, 2019: 118). By radically extricating herself from her African background, she tries to 'synchronize' her lifetime with that 'of the privileged of this world who take it for granted that it's their right to surf the globe unhindered, unsuspected, respected' and is determined to 'release the past, and look to the future with positivity and the lightness of a child unencumbered by emotional baggage' (Evaristo, 2019: 118–19). But Carole's utopian cosmopolitanism is a homogenizing attempt in the synchronic global that fails to address the individual conflicts experienced locally and diachronically. She recalls being subjected to border violence by virtue of her colour and thus backlashed to a primitive condition:

> But there was that one time, at the start of her career, in a country known for its terrible record on human rights, even though she'd told them she was there to meet a team from their national bank, and presented the documentation to show them, which they refused to look at
>
> even her body was
>
> invaded
>
> as if she were an impoverished mule with half a kilo of white powder stuffed up her fanny, or waiting to be evacuated out of her bowels in the little plastic bags she *obviously* must have had for breakfast that morning
>
> the invasion of alien hands in a window-less, dungeon-like room cut off from the flow of the airport, while another grubby immigration official in a sweat-stained blue uniform
>
> looked on (Evaristo, 2019: 119)

If we agree with Salman Rushdie (2003) that borders operate palimpsestuously[14], signifying different things to different peoples at different times, then we would have to deconstruct the very notion of the border as a fixed and well-settled entity and address instead its performative quality. It is in this light that Carole's backlash from citizen to pre-citizen has to be understood, as victimized by a violence that has arguably less to do with where she is geographically at the time of her *legal* border crossing (deliberately omitted by Evaristo) and more to do with her uncertain status of a black, female, diasporic subject.[15] Ahmed argues that, though feminism is necessarily future-oriented, 'it is through attending to the multiplicity of the pasts that are never simply *behind* us, through the traces they leave in the encounters we have in the present, that we can open up the promise of the "not yet"' (2002, 559). Similarly enough, some postcolonial critics warn us against the insistence on a shared present for both settlers and colonized peoples that would obviate the force of dominant (settlers') articulations of time.[16] If read in this feminist and postcolonial light, the episode reveals Carole's painful awareness that her past is not over and that, despite her modern privileges, as a black woman moving globally, she is still positioned as "untimely". Through what seems to be a persistent projection of a hierarchy of time in which certain pasts and certain presents are better than other, Evaristo seems to conceive personal and national history as a mosaic of contradictory existences and absences 'so as to emphasize a living and potentially limitless fluidity between diverse cultural positions, which might be seen to constitute not only Black British identity, but Britishness itself' (Kamali, 2016: 215).

Just as their womanhood is questioned in a multiplicity of gender positions and sexual orientations, neither their blackness nor their Britishness can be taken as simplistic or reductive and has to be conceived as, drawing on Stuart Hall (2003), 'floating signifiers' and unmistakably relational experiences. The novel's characters ascribe themselves to these genealogies of dispersion crafted from the remains of slavery and imperialism and conditioning their interracial and multicultural present: 'Megan was part Ethiopian, part African-American, part Malawian, and part English / which felt weird when you broke it down like that because essentially, she was just a complete human being' (Evaristo, 2019: 311).

Since the publication of her first novel, *Lara* (1997), 'Evaristo challenges a hegemonic politics, in which Britishness is equated only with whiteness, and in which British history is regarded as "closed", "finished"' (Kamali, 2016: 213). Through Amma, she makes a powerful statement about black Britons being subjected to racial and cultural prejudices and to paradigms of identification that end up alienating them. When Afro-American Nzinga scorns those 'black women sounding so Britissshhh',

> Amma thought she was accusing them of being too white or at best, in-authentically black, she'd come across it before, foreigners equating an English accent with whiteness, she always felt the need to speak up when it was implied that black Brits were inferior to African-Americans or Africans or West Indians (Evaristo, 2019: 82)

In lieu of a conclusion

If, admittedly, queerness is characterized by inconclusiveness, instability and indeterminacy in its attempt to embrace 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances

and resonances' (Sedgwick, 1993: 8), and if, in this vein, Evaristo has chosen to blur the story's boundaries so as to make its different subjectivities inflect and transform each other[17], then no conventional closure would be deemed advisable here. Therefore, in lieu of a conclusion, it is my aim to finish this article by picking up from my initial statement about Bernardine Evaristo's adoption of a feminist queer temporality that accommodates a multicultural cast of female black Britons within non-linear and non-normative life scripts. An analysis of the diasporic rhetorics of *Girl, Woman, Other* has evidenced that Evaristo's overlapping of chronologies and subjectivities, together with her queer erasure of identity boundaries across cultural, territorial and sexual lines cohere with an understanding of migration in non-binary ways. These new ways referred to as 'postmigration' (Moslund, 2019) or 'conviviality' (Gilroy, 2004) suggest that the ethnic and cultural hybridity informing contemporary Britain (as well as Evaristo's fiction) is no longer exceptional or exclusive of racialized subjects or 'othered' migrant minorities, but rather, Moslund argues, 'ubiquitous and commonplace' to all members of a global society (2019: 129). From this angle, it is not surprising that in the novel's epilogue, the one main character who thinks of herself as white, Penelope, discovers, after an ancestry DNA testing, that 'only 17% of her was British' (Evaristo, 2019: 448), thus inviting a critical revision of the very limits and meanings of national identity.

If one of the features of these new millennium's postmigrant literatures is their move 'from the periphery to the centre of what is commonly understood as British literature' (Moslund, 2019: 106), the fact that Bernardine Evaristo split the 2019 Booker Prize with bestselling Canadian author Margaret Atwood might be an indication of how black or Asian British literature is being 'demarginalized' to simply reflect the generalized awareness about the multicultural and hybrid condition of present-day Britain. Stepping beyond the ghetto politics that, according to Young (2000), has characterized an important part of black feminism for decades, Evaristo's novel constitutes an attempt to acknowledge the contribution of black women, 'as initiators and not marginal, nameless bystanders in the transformations of British society and culture' (55).

From the above discussion of the novel's fragmented and decentred narrative, it is clear that the black British womanhood of its twelve characters is represented intersectionally within a complex matrix of categories of identity –age, class, occupation, sexuality, upbringing—that evidences the relational modes in which belonging and unbelonging are produced in terms other than just race and gender. In a typically diasporic (queer) fashion, *Girl, Woman, Other* is designed as a fluid continuum rather than as a series of clear-cut subject positionings. Therefore, that queerness disrupts identities rather than defining them, would justify Evaristo's choice to address diverse racialized and gendered ways of being British in this plural and multifaceted mode. Feminist queer temporality is, consequently, for Evaristo, a vehicle to express the processes of becoming and unbecoming of those individuals that do not fit within chrononormative paradigms and that I have referred to as *time abjects*. Her cast of black lesbians, trans/non-binary women, feminist killjoys or menopausal females does not align with linear progress as they, instead, choose to live contemporaneously with one another seeing their pasts and futures interacting, overlapping and ultimately vindicating the possibility to create alliances among non-normative groups, all of them marked by a particular form of *untimeliness*.

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Notes

1. This aspect of the novel is unmistakably autobiographical considering that in 1982 Evaristo co-founded the Theatre of Black Women, Britain's first such company.
2. Bakhtin defined the chronotope as the interaction of space and time that is intrinsic to narrative. He approximates to a definition of a rather ambivalent and slippery concept in the following terms:

   > In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (2002: 15)

3. John MacLeod (2011) has described Evaristo's earlier novels as '*chronotopias*, in that their exciting transpositional fusion of diachronic histories within synchronic spaces attend, on the one hand, to the difficult passages of transcultural passage and, on the other, look forward to the often unrealised polycultural possibilities of dwelling companionably side by side' (172).
4. Each section within the four chapters is titled after one of the twelve protagonists –Amma, Yazz, Dominique, Carole, Bummi, LaTisha, Shirley, Winsome, Penelope, Megan/Morgan, Hattie and Grace—as if to challenge the general belief that '[t]o be black and British is to be unnamed in official discourse' (Mirza, 1997:3).
5. Nevertheless, Evaristo has been very reluctant to align herself to Bhabha's grandiloquent theoretical discourse and refers to it in very irreverent terms: 'hybriditycosmopolitanismcultural transformationdiscursiveconstructednessauthenticatingidentitybestowingfunctions—will not be at the back of my mind when writing a poem' (1999: 49).
6. 'Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations' (Freeman, 2010: 95-96).
7. Designed as a collective account of what it means to be 'black lesbians in Britain', 'Becoming Visible: Black Lesbian Discussions' (Carmen, Gail, Shaila and Pratibha, 1984)

addresses the radical potential of such experience in ways that seem to be echoed by Evaristo's character, Amma Bonsu:

> all those forces have fashioned us: being women/Black/working class/lesbians/anti-imperialist/coming from Third World countries, so your consciousness has been made up of surviving so many oppressions, that when you start rebelling your consciousness is necessarily going to expand to take in all these factors (69).

8. Along with the unhappy queer, the angry black woman, and the melancholic migrant, Sara Ahmed analyses the figure of the feminist killjoy to illustrate how the Western imperative for happiness outcasts those whose life experiences fail to adjust to the dominant narratives of success. Within this framework, the feminist killjoy is a figure of unhappiness in her disrupting the social scripts imposed upon women:

> Feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. The word feminism is thus saturated with unhappiness. Feminists by declaring themselves as feminists are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy 'spoils' the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, to meet over happiness. (Ahmed, 2010: 65)

9. 'With her own unique style (part 90s Goth, part post-hip hop, part slutty ho, part alien), she [Yazz]'s having to compete with images of girls on fucksites with collagen pouts and their bloated silicone tits out' (Evaristo, 2019: 53).
10. According to Halberstam (2015), an important element of heteronormative temporality is, the time of inheritance [which] refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability. (5)
11. Sandberg and Marshall (2017) argue that Feminist, Queer and Crip Studies are useful for deconstructing the heteronormative and ablest paradigms of successful aging inspired by narrow definitions of hetero-happiness and compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness that exclude a whole spectrum of 'unsuccessful others—those who are too queer, too disabled, too demented or too poor.'
12. MacLeod (2011) interprets Evaristo's adoption of this genre as indicative of her 'transpositional sensibility' (172). Additionally, the Anglo-Nigerian novelist herself has acknowledged her debt to Ntozake Shange, whose *For coloured girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) inspired generations of female playwrights that came behind her. Evaristo (2018) admits her fascination about this series of feminist monologues for seven black female characters named after the colours of the rainbow which 'opened up the experimental possibilities of poetry by and about black women to [her] and created a new performance form around female lives, which she called choreopoetry.'
13. Fabian refers to this political and ideological use of Time as a metaphor for cultural difference as 'the denial of coevalness' (2014: 31).
14. Rushdie (2003) typifies the border, in any of its manifestations—checkpoints, airports, immigration offices, detention camps—as one of such spaces of the globalized world where citizenship is compromised and tested:

> At the frontier we can't avoid the truth; the comforting layers of the quotidian, which insulate us against the world's harsher realities, are stripped away and wide-eyed in the harsh fluorescent light of the frontier's windowless halls, we see things as they are [...] At the frontier our liberty is stripped away —we hope temporarily—and we enter

> the universe of control. Even the freest of free societies is unfree at the edge, where things and people go out and other people and things come in. Here, at the edge we submit to scrutiny, to inspection, or judgement. These people guarding these lines must tell us who we are. We must be passive, docile. To be otherwise is suspect, and at the frontier to come under suspicion is the worst of all possible crimes. (412-13)

15. Carole's racist incident at the airport could be read through the lens of what Sara Ahmed (from her own experience of inhabiting the white world in a non-white body) termed phenomenology *of whiteness*, 'which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they "take up" space, and what they "can do"' (2007: 149).
16. Mark Rifkin (2017) has suggested that 'an emphasis on coevalness tends to bracket the ways that the idea of a shared present is not a neutral designation but is, instead, defined by settler institutions, interests, and imperatives' (viii).
17. Penelope's final encounter with her biological mother is presided over by their readjustment to a discontinuous, porous and queer temporality: 'both of them are welling up and it's like the years are swiftly regressing until the lifetimes between them no longer exist' (Evaristo, 2019: 452).

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