REPRESENTATIONS OF DEVIANT BLACK BRITISH WOMXNHOOD IN BERNARDINE EVARISTO'S *GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER* (2019):

Exploring Aesthetic and Narrative Deviance in Portraits of Black Diasporic Womanhood Through Experimental Fiction

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed and has been cited and referenced.

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Date: 9 February 2024

Abstract

Bernardine Evaristo's 2019 novel, *Girl, Woman, Other* renders the portraits of twelve Black British womxn whose converging narratives span a distance of almost one hundred years. In this plurivocal experimental novel, the author's distinctive narrative style of fusion fiction, characterised by a free-flowing, punctuationless, prose poetic structure reconstructs and reimagines these twelve diasporic narratives through the form of the text. While the content of the overlapping and intersecting narratives offers deviant portraits of Black Womxn who live in opposition to traditional images of Black diasporic womxnhood from gendered, racialised and sexualised perspectives, this thesis aims to argue for the form of the novel and its narrative strategies as not just necessary but inevitable for the kind of deviance it renders. Through close critical analysis of the form and content of *Girl, Woman, Other* as well as comparative exercises with relevant diasporic literature, the development toward this experimental sub-genre of fusion fiction is traced alongside the development of Evaristo's corpus populated by a world of deviant womxn. Finally, by way of the complexity of the twelve Black British characters and the dimension created by the fusion fiction, *Girl, Woman, Other* is presented as not simply a re-construction and re-imagination of Black British womaxnhood through experimental fiction but as an aesthetic practice of liberation for Black diasporic women. This thesis contributes to the recognition of experimental Black woman authors who utilize their work to redefine and recover their narratives from within the rich margins of diaspora.

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Chapter One: Introduction

> "Girl, Woman, Other is a polyphonic paean to black British womanhood and non-binary people, in all our flawed complexity".
>
> (Bernardine Evaristo interviewed by Emily Bernard, 2021)

In Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) the tendrils of diasporic relation and identity reach across generations of twelve Black British womxn[1]. The novel follows the navigations of temporal and spatial dimensions wherein the twelve character's racial, socio-spatial, gendered and sexual identities are confronted. The author's coined sub-genre of fusion fiction is characterised by a prose poetic, free-flowing narrative style. This fusion fiction also features the oscillation between internal monologues, dialogue between characters, confessions and memories, providing the reader with varied levels of intimate access to these moments of confrontation. The experimental novel renders twelve intimate portraits of each of the characters and their varied relations and relationships through a polyphonic layering of the individual narratives that intersect and interrupt one another throughout the novel. Although this latest novel by Evaristo has risen to mainstream success, Bernardine Evaristo's corpus is punctuated by decades of literary and theatrical productions that engage with Black British identity and experience from gendered, racialised and spatialised frames as part of her ongoing project of diasporic representation.

Throughout her work, Evaristo's preoccupation with representing Black British womxnhood in all its complexity has produced dimensional portraits of these characters who have so often been marginalised within an exclusive, normative, heteropatriarchal British literary canon. In this process of re-representing these marginalised subjectivities, the author turns to nonnormative or deviant renderings of the twelve queer, Black British womxn. In the character portraits drawn by the author, the characters are complicated by their opposition to trite stereotypes that have traditionally flattened literary representations of Black girlhood, womanhood and (m)otherhood.

From the late twentieth century, scholars within previously siloed disciplines of queer, Black political, and diasporic studies have turned toward transcendent frameworks and orientations to transcend the prescriptive narratives of identity formation and expression. Evaristo's text and its engagements with race, gender, sexuality and diasporic identity are in line with Transmodernity as a philosophy that beckons us to reach into the contours of intersecting disciplinary siloes and subjective experiences to

[1] In the direct discussion of Evaristo's work, I use "womxn" as the author intends. As Evaristo has discussed in a 2019 interview with her editor, the spelling of "womxn" is to reference the inclusion of non-binary/gender-conforming identities to a gendered experience and of Black British identity. The original title of the novel, *Girl, Womxn, Other* was edited as to speak to a wider readership.

centre silenced voices on their own terms. This conceptualisation of diaspora in Black British women's writing has garnered much attention and critical acclaim due to the changing nature of diaspora and its meaning in contemporary literature and subsequent discourse.

To discuss diaspora without privileging "experiences of displacement" as solely constitutive diasporic identity, I employ the term rather as a frame of analysis in the discussion of racialised, gendered and spatialised experiences of the "other" in both the lived and the literary (Clifford 302). This thesis utilises a hybridised conception of Black/queer/diaspora to explore and discuss the interrelatedness of racialised, gendered and geographic identity markers that affect the lived experiences of those who carry them and how these subjectivities are represented through the literary. I employ these terms in conjunction with the concept of relationality as it similarly functions as a theoretical frame of analysis that privileges social connectivity as constitutive of diasporic formations (Banjeree, McGuinness & McKay 3). In the context of Evaristo's text, both diaspora and relationality serve as the theoretical underpinnings to the thematic, narrative and aesthetic work that *Girl, Woman, Other* achieves through the twelve Black British womxn's subjective voices.

The historical marginalization of these voices and their narratives has led to a relative canonisation of Black British authorship and its critical reception as a project of redefinition and recovery by these peripheralized voices. In these margins, gender, class, history, location, migration, identity, temporality and spatiality are all rendered through the lens of relation as a force that is productive of diaspora and its subjectivities. In this thesis's engagement with *Girl, Woman, Other*, the aesthetic and narrative strategies employed by Evaristo, will be discussed as a nonnormative engagement with the complexities of diaspora at its intersections of race, gender and sexuality. The following chapter will also gesture towards theoretical frameworks of black geographies, relationality, Transmodernity and deviance as constitutive of a more expansive conception of diaspora and its representation through the literary.

Bernardine Evaristo's Corpus

In an article written by the author for The Guardian, Evaristo describes the tendency to reflect on her childhood as a mixed-race Black British child in South London during the 1960s to 1980s (Evaristo 2021). As the child of a first-generation Nigerian immigrant father who formed part of the Windrush generation, welcomed as the "sons of the empire", their family's experience quickly turned to brutal racism in and beyond London. As a result, Evaristo quickly learned the implications of "Empire" on Black populations of African descent in post-war England (Evaristo 2021; Matera 101).

The distinction between a prior generation of African descendants in England and the forthcoming Windrush generation lies in that the populations of Black "sojourners and migrants" in the decades after

WWI utilised the "British Empire [as a] locus of resistance to empire (Matera 2). Contrastingly, the Windrush era's assumption of Black presence within Britain depended on their loyalty and investment in British identity to the benefit of Great Britain (Matera 2; Fryar, Jackson & Perry 2018). Evaristo herself describes how her father, during this influx of this Windrush era "belonged to a brown middle-class" whose "social positioning was determined by his race and outsider status, which was deemed lower than the white working class" (The Guardian 2021).

In *Black London* (2015) by Marc Matera, the author presents South London during the interwar period as "Spaces of Black London" where Black people of African descent "[organised] across colonial boundaries against racism and empire" to unify socially, culturally and intellectually within "three-dimensional spaces" (Matera 1). Within this space that produced their racialisation, Matera describes the interactions between White Britts, Black political intellectuals and activists, African university students, feminist intellectuals and the men and women who formed the social background against which this Black London developed (Matera 101).

These social background in the 1920s to 1940s was largely created and embodied by Black women who opened restaurants and places of gathering to facilitate "the story of meetings of men and men's minds" (105). These women of African descent, the spaces they created and their intellectual contributions to pan-Africanist, feminist movements during this time became the "living bridge between the struggles for Black liberation" by addressing the "contradictions and blind spots" within the matrix of race, gender and class (108). During the interwar period and into the 1950s to 1980s, feminist perceptions energised a spirit of "feminist internationalism" within the empire and its former territories outside of official British borders, indicating a shift toward "cross-border and multi-axial alliances" (Matera 109).

Against this backdrop of decades of Black political intellectuals, activists, artists and community within South London, Bernardine Evaristo's own relational, social and political upbringing was filled with encounters with race-based discrimination (The Guardian 2021; Evaristo 14). By the time she reached her twenties in the 1980s into the 1990s, her work in theatre and poetry surfaced themes of rebellion against a White, heteropatriarchal British society.

From as young as twelve years old, the theatre has remained integral to Evaristo's artistic expression which led her to establish the Theatre of Black Women- a company that from 1982 to 1984 experimented with form and performance to discuss race, gender, national identity, womanhood, trauma and more (Akbar 2020; Evaristo 100). In an interview, Evaristo claims her work across different genres and forms as her creative activism by "telling stories that haven't been told" (Evaristo in an interview with Arifa Akbar 2021). In her *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (2021), Evaristo describes her spirit as an actor and playwright during the 1980s as a time of "self- and group interrogation" through immersion in Afro-Caribbean, Jamaican and Black cultural influences via colleagues and friends (Evaristo 101). It was at this time that Evaristo discovered the concept of "communicating solidarity" through both

embodied and aesthetic artistic practices that allowed the theatre as a collective to "[explore] the plurality of Black female stories" (102). This exploration is evident across Evaristo's corpus spanning decades of stories about Black girlhood, womanhood, queer and national identity through experimental and subversive narrative forms.

Girl, Woman, Other (2019) is the seventh novel published by Bernardine Evaristo that punctuates decades of her literary commitment to articulate and explore the contours of Black diasporic identity. Beyond her multi-axial approach to genre, reaching across performance, poetic and narrative fictional modalities, Evaristo writes from oscillating perspectives that allow her to render Black diasporic experiences from women's, men's and gender-queer perspectives. Thus, her corpus of aesthetic practices can be thought to emerge from within the intersections of Black/queer/diasporic markers of identity.

Evaristo's corpus illustrates a careful meditation of the material, temporal and spatial experiences of Black, gendered bodies in the diasporic space. The author's innovative manipulation of form facilitates a unique, subjective reading of these identities as the characters navigate these overlapping dimensions. In *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) the tendrils of relation and identity between the twelve central characters reach across generations of Black British womxnhood and their navigation of material, temporal and spatial dimensions wherein the character's racial, gendered and sexual identities are confronted. The close third narration and the oscillation between internal monologues, dialogue between characters, confessions and memories are all literary devices that grant the reader varied levels of access to these moments of confrontation. The character's navigation of these confrontations is further complicated by the layered relations and relationships amongst them that Evaristo carefully develops the narrative through. I argue that this approach to rendering Black diasporic womxnhood offers fertile grounds for exploring Black British womxnhood through a framework of relational consciousness.

Although Evaristo's texts are largely occupied by womxn, their mothers and their daughters, the role of fatherhood is a theme that reoccurs across her texts, particularly in the scenario of paternal emigration to the United Kingdom. In Evaristo's first novel, *Lara* (1997*)*, the protagonist's father Taiwo opens the text with his enthusiasm to leave Nigeria and move to England for a better life. Similarly, in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2021*)*, Amma's father was forced to leave Ghana due to political threats and a will for a better, more progressive life for his children. There is also evidence of the author's transposition of her identity onto that of Amma and her mother who are similarly bi-racial women with desirability complexes that determined their relationships with men in the 1960s (Evaristo 9-10). These blurred boundaries between narrating and fictionalising the self are what Borbèly describes as "highly experimental contemporary feminist life-writing" – a position from which Evaristo produces some of her work. This practice facilitates the expression of "a network of subjectivities" that is informed by

her race, gender, history and location as a Black British individual, doing the work of representing diasporic subjectivities in a unique and subversive modality (282).

Evaristo similarly complicates a reading of diasporic manhood and fatherhood in *Mr Loverman* (2013) which we can situate at this intersection of Black/queer/diasporic as proposed by J. S. Allen. This novel is written from the oscillating perspectives of an elderly Barry, his lifelong secret male lover Morris and his (Barry's) wife Carmel who navigate the trials of marriage, parenthood, desire, sexuality and diasporic identity. Evaristo renders the lifelong infidelity between Barry and Morris as a means of inevitable necessity due to their ability to *see* one another while not villainizing the characters. In the story, Evaristo presents both men's failed marriages and their subsequent homosexual affair as one of convenience and survival for the Black man in Britain. *Mr Loverman* offers an opportunity to explore the concept of intentional deviance of queer Black communities who "reclaim [the] limited agency" that they possess, complicating the portraits of the characters relative to their social, special and temporal domains (Cohen 27).

Evaristo's sub-genre of literature, coined as fusion fiction, is an apt description of the narrative structure and thematic explorations across many of her texts. Borbély points to *Lara's* (1997) subtitle, "the family is like water" as an indication of the fluidity, interconnectedness and relationality that the novel presents. As Evaristo's debut semi-autobiographical fictional verse novel, *Lara* fictionalizes the author's family over eight generations reaching back into her Yoruba, Brazilian and Irish origins. The novel is constructed by layered narrative verses that carry Evaristo's distinctive free flowing, nearly punctuationless style. As a whole, the story simultaneously re-tells and re-imagines the past and the transposition of narratives of colonialism, war, labour, slavery, marriage and parenthood across successive temporalities (Gendusa 103).

Lara's free flowing borderlessness in both the structure of the text and its narratives is made possible by the mapped-out family tree that the author includes as a kind of genealogical key to the diverging and converging narratives that follow. This biological and generational mapping across geography and history is one of the thematic foundations that stretches across Evaristo's work and suggests an active and restorative re-location of these narratives into literary history.

As a kind of hybridized genre that exists somewhere in between prose and fiction, Evaristo's paratactic structure in *Lara* subverts "ontological [and] canonical models to which literary texts are often taxonomized" through its form and content (Adeniyi 157). A paratactic structure is characterised by successive sentences and elements with questionable relations to one another. This is notably paradoxical to the content of this paratactic verse novel, *Lara*, whose narrative hinges on both close and distant relations between the narrators within the Da Costa lineage. Although interpretations and categorisations of the genre vary, Evaristo's situation within this terrain of post- and transmodern

literature is irrefutable in its deliberately transgeneric endeavour to redefine and reposition the form. Through the experimentation with form and genre, Evaristo necessitates hybridity and disarticulation as a strategy of recovery and reimagination of marginalised or effaced histories.

Evaristo's later novels, *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) *and Blonde Roots* (2008) are narrated by flawed and complex women characters, Doris and Zuleika who inhabit what Judie Newman considers dystopian novels. These kinds of texts subvert historical renderings of the diasporic space by twisting and transposing race, power, slavery and geography onto themselves as commentary on the imaginative possibilities within transmodern, Black, feminist literature. In both novels, Evaristo engages in this process of transmutation of history by warping history into reimagined versions wherein great Black nations conquer and enslave white populations. Thus, placing the agency in telling complex stories of diaspora and displacement back into the hands of these fictional subjects. This strategy effectively allows the author to wield racial, political and economic power that determines these imagined ancient and modern histories (Newman 283-285).

In *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), the novel-in-verse follows the life of Zuleika, an adolescent teenage girl "born to Sudanese parents in Roman London 1800 years ago" (Sarikaya-sen 304). Unlike *Lara*, in *The Emperor's Babe,* there is one central and linear narrative from which Zuleika speaks in the first person. The narrative is made up of ten parts, a prologue and an epilogue which are written in couplets and short, punctuated stanzas. The reader meets Zuleika as a young girl (eleven years old) in Roman Londinium and follows her as she navigates marriage as an adolescent, loneliness, desire, and friendship that all lead her to a tragic death. In T*he Emperor's Babe*, Evaristo subverts the utopian rhetoric of bustling Black kingdoms as proposed by Gilroy's conception of the Black Atlantic by revealing the darker underbelly of slavery, gender inequality and capitalism in Londinium. This subversion becomes even more apparent in *Blonde Roots* which Newman discusses as "a classic reversal novel" where Evaristo narrativizes "what if" and "this is what it was" in the depiction of the historical, cultural and economic significance of transatlantic slavery (Newman 285).

Within Evaristo's corpus of fictional work, *The Emperor's Babe* and *Blonde Roots* are evidence of how Black artistic productions within diasporic literature are generative grounds for the provocation of Black utopias in ways that address "issues of black humanity as well as gender, sexuality, class, transnational origin, acculturation, and cultural trauma" (Birdsong & Nwanko 143). In her discussion of liminal and transmodern literary female voices, Pellicer-Ortín describes transmodernism and its literary productions as "a planetary vision" that evokes the same re-descriptive ambitions of Gilroy's utopia (213). Dissimilar to Gilroy, these visions more effectively describe transmodern *utopia* as "a new relational consciousness that can lead to "the willingness to accept contradicting realities and multicultural perspectives" (213). In both novels, Evaristo's experimentation with form and language becomes the vehicle for the historical and discursive subversions through the literary.

Both the rendering and reading of these diasporic subjectivities are integral to the significance of this study. Similarly central to the significance of this thesis is the real-world implications of what Evaristo's work achieves. Much like Gopinath's assertion of the material implications of diasporic aesthetic practices, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) has complicated the ways Black diasporic womxnhood is both constructed and identified within popular British contemporary literature. Ultimately, the complexity of her experimentation with narrative form and content within the novel can be explored as a strategy to humanise and legitimize these historically marginalised voices in a world and in a canon committed to peripheralizing them. By populating her world-of-womxn with dense portraits of Black British womxn who live in opposition to the prevailing dominant narratives that have previously flattened such characters, Evaristo reimagines and recovers these twelve interconnected stories.

Theoretical Framework: Framing Black/queer/diaspora

In the current transnational contemporary moment, ambitions to unify or condense diaspora and diasporic discourse into a singular school of thought or academic domain limit the frame of analysis that the field requires. Attempts to neatly define diaspora threaten to reduce the nuances involved in a contemporary invocation of the word. James Clifford's article "Diasporas" addresses these nuances in the question of diaspora and its development beyond "experiences of displacement" in the consideration of the roots and routes that capture "global histories", "political ambivalences" and "utopic/dystopic tensions" (Clifford 302). Tina Campt reiterates that fundamentally, scholars "have made clear, the forced dispersal or displacement of a people functions as the foundational notion of diaspora" (2).

What is more useful to this thesis is relationality as integral to diaspora and how more generally, diaspora serves as a frame of analysis into the intersecting "fields of social relations, subjectivity and identity" (Brah 180). This has allowed scholars and authors to privilege social connectivity within diasporic formations in place of universal stories of origin and displacement. In the context of my thesis, I utilise this hybridised term of Black/queer/diaspora to invoke the racialised, gendered and geographic identity markers that affect the lived experiences of those who carry them. Similarly, I refer to the concept of relationality as the connectivity and mobility that is pertinent to social formations within diaspora (Banjeree, McGuinness & McKay 3).

Divisions between academic and non-academic conceptualisations of diaspora along with distinctive silos of Black political, queer and Black Atlantic fields of study have created a generative space wherein the gaps between these silos hold opportunities for more malleable modalities of thought and practice. Within this space, the framing of diaspora across these overlapping plains has allowed scholars, writers and artists to examine and present concepts and experiences of diaspora in imaginative and interdisciplinary ways.

In his paper, "Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture", J.S Allen facilitates "a dynamic conversation" between academic and non-academic intellectual traditions (214). Currently, discourse within diasporic scholarship is occupied with finding "alternative visions" of diaspora and diasporic bodies in terms of "performance and performativity" (Allen 212). How, why and by whom these alternative visions are staged is presented as the focus of Allen's inquiry as the intersection of scholarship, activism and artistry has effectively blurred the lines between Black, queer and diasporic work and the practices thereof (213). In the context of my thesis, I utilise this hybridised term of Black/queer/diaspora to invoke the racialised, gendered and geographic identity markers that affect the lived experiences of those who carry them. This nexus that is Black/queer/diasporic presents a suitable point of entry into this thesis as the orientations of all three of these theoretical domains in the contemporary space present an opportunity to assess how diaspora is conceived and consequently portrayed.

Allen describes these overlapping relationships within queer and diasporic disciplines as a way to ensure these scholarships remain "grounded in" and accountable to lived experience and "non-academic intellectual tradition" (213). Ultimately, what Allen posits is the situation of Black/queer/diasporic discourse at the intersection of the maturation of these siloed studies. This is toward the acknowledgement of the presence of the transnational in an uneven process of global exchange in the conception of these siloed schools of thought (214). Within this landscape reside diasporic subjects, their lived experiences, practices and productions which are increasingly shared and consumed rapidly through "popular form" (214). This territory has traditionally and contemporarily been marked by contradiction and disarticulation that ultimately achieve the re-envisioning of the images of diaspora and the imagined, "liberatory models" of both the past and the future (214). With this, an understanding of the interrelationship between Black political studies, queer theory and diasporic discourse can be used as a holistic frame or matrix of analysis to discuss the formation, performance and practice of Black/queer/diaspora and its representation.

The intersections of queer and diasporic theories reveal the possibilities and complications of how diasporic subjects, and their histories are read across non-normative histories, lineages and geographies. Gayatri Gopinath's conception of a "queer diaspora" in *Unruly Visions* (2018) produces "a new mapping of space and sexuality [as] alternative cartography [which] rejects dominant cartographies that either privilege the nation-state or cast into shadow all those spaces, and gender and sexual formations, deemed without value within the map of global capital" (Gopinath 5). She engages with familiar concepts of diaspora by acknowledging its historical connotation with dispersal and the creation of nation-state affiliations across geopolitical lines (Gopinath 13). In that, the author gestures toward how reframing the diasporic subject and movement within these sites of dislocation and dispersal are ways to explore non-normative visions of diaspora. This effectively *queers* or deviates any linear, privileged conception of diaspora in favour of diaspora "through spaces that deviate from the straight lines of

hetero- and homonormative scripts" (6). Thus, if one considers Gopinath's reconfigured diaspora as a space and practice of embodied opposition or deviance, these dominant scripts can be effectively addressed. This reframing of where and how we position diaspora and its lived experience ultimately complicates diasporic subjectivities within temporal, spatial, racial, gendered and sexual dimensions of identity and embodiment.

Gopinath introduces an alternative mapping of queer, diasporic and regional imaginaries according to the "digressions offered by mining both the personal and the regional histories, identifications, and affiliations" to inform diasporic aesthetic practices (26). The author describes these digressions as *aesthetic practices* and not as productions as they "[enact], [produce], and [perform]" the forms which they take on as well as the affinities, affiliations and relations they envision (Gopinath 16). In this context, to practice is not to simply render but to affect the world around the aesthetic form (the photograph, the novel, the play) that facilitates a reading of erased subjectivities within a dominant narrative (16). The effect on the world these practices enact is disrupting and subverting heteronormative spatial and temporal landscapes by suspending the linearities that inform such landscapes and the aesthetic productions that reinforce such visions (Gopinath 65). These diasporic aesthetic practices create alternative and imaginative visions of diaspora and its subjects that are considered queer due to their deviation from normative models of being and representation thereof.

In Tamar Shirinian's "Diaspora's Queer Archive: Honing the Mundane, the Personal, and the Sensorial Toward Unruly Methodological Visions*"*, the author describes Gopinath's treatment of queer diaspora and archiving as a way of "seeing and not seeing" (89). This dyadic process is facilitated by aesthetic practices that function to "provide [new ways] of reading and seeing regions in relation to national and transnational cartographic imaginaries" (89). In other words, while Gopinath's proposition of "the queer optic" as a suitable entry into the queering diasporic archive, this idea of queer diasporic aesthetic practices functions to render and legitimize nonnormative visions of diasporic imaginaries. This orientation towards how we construct, represent and perceive diaspora holds space for unconventional, intimate and relational layers of diasporic subjectivities across time and borders.

Much like Gopinath's consideration of the visual medium as a methodology to render diaspora at the intersection between artistic production and historical archive, *Image Matters* (2012) by Tina Campt captures a similarly intimate rendering of Black diasporic experiences. Both scholars discuss the visual medium as a medium for the portraiture of Black geographies through the intimate familial gaze. In Campt's work, this gaze articulates Afro-European identity, relation and alternative constructions of what and where it means to be Black in Germany (21). What Campt's ethnographic work offers is a different modality of theorizing the formulation of Black diaspora by making it visceral, tangible and intimate. Not from the spectacular but from the banal moments that reveal degrees of intimacy and

complexity within familial structures that colour Black people and their experiences as an integral part of German history.

Like Gopinath, Campt captures and discusses lived experiences of diaspora through spatial and temporal dimensions through this aesthetic practice that is the visual medium. She challenges what we read, see and understand as "diasporic relationality" by archiving stories and photographs that are complicated by "racial and gender formations" which function to enunciate what it is to be visible (Campt 24). In this way, both scholars challenge what constitutes an archive and insist on both historical and imaginative renderings of diaspora to produce a more relational, intimate conception of diaspora by way of aesthetic practices. The careful consideration of mediums (in their case, photographs) is evidence of how strategic scholars, artists and authors must remain in their production, reimagination and recovery of diaspora.

The notion that the particular mediums scholars and artists utilize to close the gap between reimaging the past and representation of subjective present diasporic conditions is crucial to the argument of my thesis. Evaristo's aesthetic construction and execution of fusion fiction achieve similar imaginative and subversive outcomes by bridging the gap between fiction and diasporic representation. While the author can intimately render themes of racialised, sexualised and gendered marginality that the Black British womxn experience, the individual narratives aren't presented as collectively prophetic or prescriptive of a universal diasporic experience. This similarly representational yet subjective aesthetic practice (*Girl, Woman, Other*) is achieved through the form of fusion fiction that blurs the boundaries between the character's memories, observations, conflicts, desires and embodiments that are entirely subjective within the relational network they exist in.

In a comparative exercise between Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and DeSouza's 2004 photographic series, "The Lost Pictures", Gopinath discusses these artists' diasporic aesthetic practices as responses to closing the "gap between memory and representation" (Gopinath 134). This dissonance and the work of diasporic intellectuals and artists who reside within it function as a response to the occlusion, misrepresentations and erasures of archival history that necessitate an oftentimes imaginative re-representation of diasporic history (135). It is from within this gap that aesthetic practices such as Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) emerge as part of the recovery of lost memories and the reimagination required for subjective representation.

I find it productive to situate Evaristo's work within Hall, Brown and du Gay's conception of Black diasporic identity as unstable and unsettled. These author's conceptualisation holds space for the deviations and differences that make the subjectivities of diasporic narratives more useful in a transmodern contemporary analysis. Although contested, describing diasporic identity and experience from within a gap, a liminal space or even as suspended creates a sense of urgency to claim and determine this space from within. The imagination that this gap requires also points to the experimental

approach to fiction that contemporary Black British authors employ in shaping and rendering silenced or occluded narratives. Much like Hartman, Evaristo's aesthetic practices, which have taken on various forms, have all been produced from the entanglement between the personal and the historical. Gopinath describes the tendency to experiment with form and medium (of aesthetic practices) as a means of responding to and mending this gap between the "internal visions" and experiences of racialised diasporic subjectivity and the "fixed" images" of diasporic history and belonging (135).

Although extensive, works by the authors aforementioned do present asymmetries prevalent in literary renderings of diasporic experience and Black womanhood dominant to the paradigm. Jacqueline Nassy Brown describes diaspora as "racialised geographies of the imagination" (73). Within these geographies where descendants of Africans are racialised as "other" due to their location, social spaces are produced "in tandem with the process of racial formation" (Brown 74). It is from within these social spaces where knowledge and experiences are produced that this asymmetrical cultural exchange occurs (Brown, 74). In *Diaspora and Desire*, Brown points to how Black American hegemony has dominated conceptions of Black diasporic formation by way of an imbalanced global, transnational exchange of cultural, social, relational and political markers of diaspora.

The imbalance discussed in texts by Brown and Campt as those existing on "the margins of diaspora" describes "histories and genealogies" of diasporic Black communities who "do not necessarily or comfortably conform to dominant models" of diasporic and identity formation (Campt 3). These dominant models are those that privilege diasporic narratives that focalize on diaspora as a "consequence [of] migration, displacement and relation to originary [African] homelands" (Campt 3). It is from this model that collective identities such as African American and Black British identities converge and are qualified as diaspora, definitively. It is because of these "settled" Black diasporic communities and their forged identities that Black diasporic discourse is dominated by narratives from these geographic locations. Thus, the hegemonic asymmetry necessitated a broader conception of diaspora in relation to the physical and relational divergences of diaspora and diasporic identity. This presents the more generative and expansive opportunities of Black Geographies as a concept as it reaches beyond ideals of direct lineages to and from Africa as the motherland or reverence of painful displacement as the consecration of a claim to Black diasporic identity.

As is with any relation or formation of groups, asymmetries are involved in the processes of borrowing and appropriation. Building on Gilroy's conceptions of how "settled" black communities in the diaspora, like the Black British, borrow culturally, politically or socially from one another is discussed as the means by which intercultural and transnational address occurs "for specific purposes toward particular ends" (Brown, 32). Raw materials that take the form of diasporic resources such as cultural practices, music, iconography, art etc function to construct a "Black world" for communities such as the Black British and it is within these constructions that power asymmetries and consequences emerge

(Brown 97). For example, Brown's research into the tandem construction of race and diaspora in Black communities living in Liverpool and how these communities read their Blackness (identities) about Black American hegemonic constructions of Blackness (Brown 29). Brown's emphasis on diaspora as "racialised geographies of the imagination" that are constituted by specialisations rather than physical locations lends to the pliability of identities within the diaspora.

Gilroy's Black Atlantic "formulation" is built upon an already existing "paradigm" that focused on "cultural, political and economic relations of Africa, Europe and the New World" (Chrisman 89). This theoretical framework argued against a nationalistic perspective on relational and cultural formation toward a more hybridised and rhizomatic conception of black politics, culture and identity (90). Beyond these conceptions of politics and transcultural identity, this vein of Black Atlantic thought serves as a counter-paradigm to modernity as it insists on the "mutual implication of slavery in modernity" and how both of these processes forged "distinctive historical experiences of African diasporic populations" and it is these converging and diverging histories that necessitate "a unique body of reflections" (Gilroy 4).

This body of reflections offers more nuanced and textured descriptions of Black narratives across temporal, spatial, and social dimensions. These dimensions are not solely bound by the monolithic narratives of the movement and settlement of Black people across the ocean as a result of the commodification and militarization of the Black body. Rather, as complimentary frameworks of Black Atlanticism, Black Geographies offer a provocation of how we understand Black experiences in relation to the interconnected domains of space and place and further how race and identity are analytically inseparable from the negotiations that happen within these spaces and places (Hawthorne, 2019). In this provocation, thinking through this mapping of Black Geographies as portraiture with distinct and connected backgrounds, middle grounds and foregrounds will help to illustrate the dimensionality of diaspora, its experience and its consciousness.

My conception of diaspora in relation to Black geographies is informed by this insistence to acknowledge asymmetries, divergences and tensions inherent to diasporic identity formation and expression. What Black geographies as a framework facilitates is a more dimensional, context-driven conception of diasporic identity that holds space for the historical, geographic, and symbolic imbalances and incoherencies of racialised experiences. Fundamentally, Black Geographies as a framework allows us to map and represent the development and complexities of Black diasporic identities across various physical spaces and generations.

This characterization of diaspora as a consciousness and not exclusively as a field or framework allows for flexibility, expansion and negotiation of the parameters of diaspora and diasporic identity. In Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay's Introduction: *Who Needs 'Identity'?"* in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, the authors reject the notion of identities constituting unequivocal "sameness", seamlessness and unity.

Rather they posit that identities are "subject to radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (Hall 4). This is in agreement with Campt's inquiry into how Black, diasporic identities are not seamlessly unified and centralised according to notions of displacement, but rather that the very nature of diaspora in a contemporary invocation is subject to radical historicizations that subvert this idea of (un)belonging for established black communities in Europe (Hall 4; Campt 17). Similar to traditional diasporic discourse, the logic of identity discourse "assumes a stable subject" i.e. a central undertow to what constitutes "our" identity (Hall 9). What these thinkers articulate is the subversion of naturalised conceptions of Black, diasporic identity as stagnant or stable subjects, but rather as dynamically different. This allows us to recognise the asymmetries and divergences at work within the Black diasporic identity.

Thinking through the project of Black Geographies as thick portraiture, made up of a of background, middle-ground and foreground allows us complicate, contextualize and facilitate a nuanced understanding of diasporic experiences. Similarly, this process surfaces the interrelations between place, space, history and identity. Campt captures this by criticising how flatly theorizing on the discourse of Black communities and diasporic relation through privileging similarity handicaps the "relations of the African diaspora" (Campt 169). Instead, seminal authors such as Hall, Clifford, Gilroy, hooks and Brown are insistent that acknowledgement of the decalage, *the gap,* the dissonance and the difference as the foreground articulates diaspora.

As theoretic discourse moves away from traditional idealised notions of what constitutes diaspora, narratives rooted in displacement and the idea of an "originary homeland", have increasingly become inept. More complex approaches to African diasporic relation posit conceptions of relationality across "fields of social relations, subjectivity and identity" (Campt 170-171; Brah 24). Alongside relationality as a framework, this thesis will also utilize an intersectional framework as posited by Patricia Hill Collins. The interdependence between these interlocking fields and experiences of social relations, subjectivity and identity reflect the interrelatedness between the themes that Evaristo surfaces in *Girl, Woman, Other*.

Intersectionality as a framework originated in the 1980s as a "heuristic term" to focus attention on "dynamics of difference" and solidarities of sameness about "antidiscrimination and social movement politics" (Collins 786). Interlocking experiences of oppression and identity are central to Kimberlè Williams' Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins' contribution of intersectionality. Simply, intersectional thinking functioned as a prompt for scholars to think laterally across social planes wherein individuals experience oppression at the intersections of their identities, socio-economic backgrounds, genders, races etc. to move toward social justice for oppressed groups. This is relevant to the argument of this thesis as it underscores Evaristo's unique practice of representation in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and how the Black political, queer and diasporic discourse overlap and borrow from one another in the

analysis of the twelve character portraits. Thus, intersectionality as a framework mobilises this line of inquiry by acknowledging the layers of identity and experience that the twelve characters are forged against. Much like Allen's insistence on the multi-axial analysis of a diasporic consciousness, intersectionality echoes the necessity to ground scholarship in lived experiences and investigate the development of overlapping fields of study and aesthetic practices from within.

Research Questions: De-constructing the Black Female Figure through Intentional and Perceived Deviance

Cohen situates deviance studies at the intersection of Black political and queer theory whose shortcomings may be strategically addressed by the concept of deviance. For Cohen, deviance serves as a means through which marginalised subjects reclaim their limited agency in both private and political domains. Cohen presents *Deviance As Resistance* (2004) as a "possibility of constructing a field of investigation" based on African American studies, Black feminist analysis and Black Political theory (27). Together, these frameworks borrow from and turn toward queer theory to highlight "the malleability of categories" and the "processes of normalization" (Cohen, 27). This allows us to understand how these individuals function within the matrix of "race, gender and class" and "the everyday politics of those at the bottom in Black communities" (Cohen, 27). Throughout the course of this thesis, I position deviance, how it is constructed, represented and formally rendered at the centre of my analysis of *Girl, Woman, Other* and its non-normative portraits of Black British womxn. With deviance as a critical lens Evaristo's field of representation will be discussed according to its ability to facilitate more dense and dimensional engagement with the complex characters, the relationships between them through the multivalent narrative form.

The concept of deviance lies at the centre of this strategy whereby Cohen describes intentional action/behaviour as a legitimate means to reclaim limited agency by smaller and often shamed subsets of Black and/or queer communities (27). Deviance as resistance emerged from Cohen's observation of a distance between Black political academia and the lived experiences of those who necessitate this inquiry into what is termed Black queer studies (Cohen 28). The author utilizes deviance as a frame analysis which observes the judgement of behaviour from racialised, gendered and sexualised positions to understand how chosen action from the outside of a state-sanctioned, normalized, White, middle- and upper-class, male [heterosexual] standard narrative is an act of resistance. Although based within African American scholarship, Cohen's discussion of deviance is relevant to Black British populations who as minorities, encounter similar challenges in navigating societies as *othered* identities.

Concerning Black womanhood and the perceived deviance thereof within white, heteronormative standard models of femininity, Black queer politics is presented as a counter to the pathologized renderings of Black women and their perceived (deficient) womanhood. Destiny O Birdsong and

Trudier Harris discuss this pathologized nature in which Black woman characters within the English literary canon have been constructed. Early male-authored literature fictionalizing Black women as strong, domineering, aggressive, promiscuous, maternal etc, neglected the complexity and emotion necessary for dimensional characterisation (Birdsong 3). Harris notes authors like "James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright" who defined critical interpretations of Black women's literary archetypes according to *diseased* portrayals of Black female minds, bodies and overall personhood (Birdsong 4). In her seminal text, "*This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character*" (1995), Harris details the close ties between African American history and literature and how it is at the co-production of these narratives that Black women were constructed in their communities against "assaults from outside as well as from within the community" (109). The literature reveals the intertextual reliance on the strength of Black women, ultimately limiting the possibility of "revision or rejection" of their construction while serving heteropatriarchal, monolithic narratives (Harris 124). It is these narratives that have historically positioned Black women in communities and families facing the atrocities of slavery, abuse, economic depravity, spiritual warfare and any other humane violations that require suprahuman traits (Harris 124).

The illness in this ascription of inherent strength is present in how it "perpetuates dysfunction" and promotes this idea that Black women as mothers, healers and shields are somehow capable of bearing the burdens of various communities (Harris 110). With this, it becomes evident that reclaiming any kind of humanity for Black women characters within literary, academic and embodied domains, must involve deviation from these predominant ascriptions to their prescribed character. What Evaristo achieves with *Girl, Woman, Other* is deviance not only from these stereotypical ascriptions but similarly from the traditional narrative structure of the novel that liberates her characters from further narrative limitations. By embodying and rendering the necessary complexity to render twelve Black British narratives of girlhood, womxnhood, (m)otherhood, the author explores what personal agency looks like for each of the characters with the appropriate complexity.

From the work of Harris, Birdsong, Cohen and similar scholars and authors within this domain, this concept of deviance (perceived or actual) is presented as a more generative line of inquiry that accommodates how and why authors like Evaristo respond to the challenge of representing Black diasporic womxnhood in experimental ways. Thus, deviance becomes the necessary means for agency or liberation from predominant narratives of Black diasporic womanhood. How this agency is acquired in the literary can be explored by paying attention to the narrative strategies utilized by writers such as Evaristo whose diasporic aesthetic practices wield this deviance in their reimagining of Black/queer/diasporic womxnhood. In this thesis, the prose-poetic structure, cadence, patterning and topography of the narratives will be discussed as part of these aesthetic strategies utilised by the author.

In *Girl, Woman, Other* intersecting portraits of Black British womxnhood are rendered through the author's prose-poetic, fusion fiction narrative style. As discussed by Harris, this trend, by authors in the same class, toward distortion of Black womanhood in its construction of femininity, sexuality and overall humanity is what Evaristo exercises in her form, subverting girlhood, and womxnhood through narrative strategy and a fusion form. This distortion thus becomes liberatory as it reimagines the bonds between the twelve characters' subjectivities through time and relation without ascribing them to traditionally stable narratives of Black British womxnhood. This destabilisation away from normative renderings of Black womxnhood, or *deviant* renderings, lies central to how themes of racialisation, sexuality and diasporic identity formation will be explored in relation to the novel's situation at the intersection of Black/queer/diasporic.

A further gap presented by Cohen, Harris, Birdsong and other scholars/writers is the necessity to bend both time and relation between diasporic subjects in order to facilitate this liberation and reimagination of character. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the construction of narratives within and between sets of chapters reveals how Evaristo relies more deeply on the relationships between the womxn in place of linear, contingent narratives bound by the forward movement of time and events within the novel. As discussed by Cohen, malleability is integral to deviance to liberate categories of marginalised groups from normative models of being.

To ground this thesis's line of inquiry within the concept of intentional and perceived deviance is to acknowledge Evaristo's novel as a response to the need to recover and re-imagine Blac diasporic womxn's narratives. This concept of deviance allows us to investigate the efficacy of experimental, fusion fiction as a suitable carrier for this process of recovery and re-imagination. Similarly, deviance forces us to engage with the practice of representing marginalised identities from the assumption of coherence and stability to determine what strategies are necessary to limit further violence and stabilisation of these subjects. Finally, exploring motherhood through the lens of intentional and perceived deviance in Evaristo's intergenerational world-of-womxn facilitates a more intimate, relational tracing of the trajectory from girl to woman, to (m)other.

Literature Review: Experimental Diasporic Women's Fiction in the Black British Canon

> "For how much longer will we Black women writers have to protest against oppression—voice bitterness and resentment, prove that we possess the human characteristics of intelligence, vent anger through artistic creative expression?"
> (Adukwei Bulley interviewed by Bekers, Burnett and Cousins, 334)

Authors like Evaristo and Bulley reject the idea that narratives by Black British women offer a sociological or psychological simulation of a racial and gendered experience. Evaristo's novel doesn't serve as a glimpse into these margins but rather is the active centralisation of Black British womxn's narratives as original (rather than derivative), complex and complete (Bekers, Burnett and Cousins 212; Scafe 246). Victoria Adukwei Bulley terms this centralisation as Black women "daring to position [themselves] as a site of knowledge" (Bulley in an interview with Bekers, Burnett and Cousins 327).

The reception of Evaristo's text was integral to the text's rise to mainstream popularity for broader readerships. In an interview with Bekers, Burnett and Cousins, Evaristo shares that her latest novel, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) is her way of "exploring the multiplicity, the diversity of how we exist in this world, which has to be brought alive through the people that I create" (341). The author asserts how "aesthetic pleasure is key to that", referring to the exploration of her characters and their depth (Evaristo 341). In this interview, Evaristo shares that in as much as her work addresses "identity and race and gender and sexuality", its layering and plurivocality present readers with the challenge of assessing "what *else* can be found in the work" (341). This question echoes Bulley's implied resentment of the tradition of Black women's writing to be read as definitive representations of oppression by readers both inside and outside of the field of representation. Perhaps this resentment of what is expected of this class of contemporary authors reveals why experimental modalities in poetry, verse novels, prose novels and fusion fiction is necessary.

This literary form, coined by Evaristo as "fusion fiction", is defined by its "prose-poetic patterning on the page and non-orthodox punctuation, while fusing the women's lives together" (Borbély 284). This form converges and diverges the twelve characters' narratives or portraits through the layered text (Borbély 284). In her latest published text, *Manifesto* (2021), Evaristo describes the function of this form as facilitating a flow "from interiority to exteriority, from the past to the present, from one character's narrative to the next" (Evaristo 80). Ultimately, this form renders the plurality of Black British Womxnhood in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and how the novel's network of subjectivities presents a "distinctive genealogy of Black British [womxn] and their maternal empowerment" in complex ways (Borbély 285).

This experimental wave of authors holds the ambition of having their work not weighed down by the critical gaze of readers seeking transparency and understanding into the experience of Black British diasporic stories but rather to garner attention and acclaim due to the craftsmanship and uniqueness of how these stories are told and by whom they are told.

Within this generation of authors, there is evidence of dissensus about how the craftsmanship in their storytelling is achieved. Lamarque describes this trend as a "bifurcation of interest" (Lamarque 30). This bifurcation refers to how experimental authors tend to straddle the two sides of content and form

in the distillation of their diasporic narratives (Lamarque 30). On one hand, the author's interests rely on "structures, devices, narrative styles and modes, narrators and implied authors" while on the other, their content relies on the ", interest in the human dramas depicted, the people, the conflicts, the politics, the emotions, the sociological and psychological implications" (30). As a result of this bifurcation, they can tell a compelling story through characterization and literary devices that capture the attention of audiences and function as compelling literature. At the same time, this class of experimental authors is also actively addressing the lived experiences of a marginalized group who face intersecting scenes of oppression in unique and subjective modes.

What is important in this symbiotic relationship is that one side is not more pertinent than the other and the identity/politics/experiences of this group of authors do not make them less or more qualified to be definitive voices in the genre. What this class of authors contribute to is a larger project of visibility. For example, Evaristo prefaces her historically (re)descriptive texts like *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and *Blonde Roots* (2008) with Peter Fryer's *Staying Power* (1984) whose narrative contended the idea that there were no Africans in pre-WWII Britain (Muñoz-Valdivieso 160; Evaristo 344). This ambition "to inscribe into the narrative of Britain the experience of the African diaspora" beyond post-war immigration, labour and suffering is much of Evaristo's occupation in her earlier work as well as in her latest novel (Muñoz-Valdivieso 159). The author has been known to attribute much of her conception of Black presence in British society to Fryer's work that contributed to her claim to ownership of a legitimated and hybridized British national identity (169).

This *clinging* to a hybridized and amalgamated British national identity that acknowledges the roots and routes that brought generations of Africans to Europe is ultimately a bid for legitimacy that occupies this class of contemporary diasporic authors. Collectively, Evaristo, Smith, Bulley and Bernard's work re-inscribes, re-describes and legitimates the experience of Black diasporic identities from a particularly gendered and experimental orientation that has been seen to reinvigorate this sub-genre of fiction (Bekers, Burnett and Cousins; Muñoz-Valdivieso; Phillips). For example, in *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo's focalisation on the maternal, complex and relational nature of Black British womxn's lived experiences in spatial, temporal and social dimensions is an active disruption of "monolithic discourse" written about a Black, gendered experience from an external position.

The form of Evaristo's plurivocal text is the vehicle for this disruptive centricity and interiority of the Black British womxn's subjectivities that the author renders. This motive of centricity is not to be confused with an ambition to place Black British women's narratives at the centre of an existing exclusive domain of literary voices. Nor for their representation to act as a kind of wedge into the traditional British literary canonical convention. Instead, Geisler, Bucknell and de Léon discuss Evaristo's work in terms of the destabilisation of these pre-existing master narratives through unconventional aesthetic and political renderings of the twelve stories in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019;

2022). Here, Rodríguez Magda's conceptualization of transmodern notions of "the network" rather than "the centre" in the trend toward dispersion in postmodern scholarship exposes the duality of *Girl, Woman, Other* and its polyphony that subverts the idea of one central "progressive chronology" in favour of interwoven narratives and perspectives that swing back and forth from past to present (Sarikaya-Sen 305).

Carolina Sánchez-Palencia discusses this encounter between past and present through the corporeal and temporal embodiments of the black (mostly) queer womxn in the text as a deviation away from "chrononormative assumptions" of "domesticated gender, capital accumulation and national coherence" (316). In this critically feminist, queer reading of Evaristo's novel, Sánchez-Palencia complicates the reading of the characters as "time-objects" who disrupt a diasporic continuum that has traditionally effaced the gendered, sexual and queer dimensions of Black womxnhood (317). What Palencia argues is an expansion of the "social imaginary" that *Girl, Woman, Other* facilitates through its form and content. For example, the related yet non-chronological moments in time where the chapters begin and end and the use of a central organising event of Amma's play serves as a vehicle for the presentation of different perspectives of shared histories, encounters and relationship dynamics. This is evidence of the text's chrononormative disruption through the form. Similarly, this strategy is evident in the content's oscillation between moments narrated in the present and memories from the past that the characters reflect on and reveal themselves through. This organising scene at the National Theatre, at the premiere of Amma's play, time and place "coalesce, thicken for their racialised and gendered interconnected subjectivities" (317). Ultimately, this is a strategy that further legitimises the connection between Blackness and Britishness by illustrating the closeness of the past and present that is carried and queered by these twelve Black womxn (Kamali 216).

The appropriation of history and identity to centre Black, diasporic (queer) women's narrative is an apt description of the contemporary conditions of the literary domain. Since the 1990s, Black British woman authors remained invisible and in the last thirty years, the field has been "characterised more and more by the work of women writers" (Brennan 5). Moreover, these authors and their "experiments with language, style, and genre put Black British women at the vanguard of the British literary scene more broadly" (Bekers & Cousins 211). Developments within diasporic rhetoric as well as within the Black British literary domain appear to mirror similar progressions away from colonial narratives that focalise on the ideals of an originary home and inherent displacement of black bodies in Britain toward "the mutually constitutive relations". What this thesis argues is how these mutually constitutive relations are inherent for experimental literary representations of the experience of blackness from multiple perspectives through aesthetic and political modalities (Borbély 2021).

Geisler situates Evaristo's novel at the intersection of aesthetics and politics in reference to the modes and strategies through which these twelve voices are rendered. In the ongoing analysis of form and

content in the efficacy of Evaristo's novel, Geisler argues that it is the interdependence between the two that facilitates the contestation of "formal literary traditions" and the "destabilisation of the dominance of master narratives" (2022). This is similarly evident in Geisler's situation of *Girl, Woman, Other* relative to authors within the black, diasporic, women's literary domain such as Adichie, Smith and Emecheta whose appropriation of traditional forms such as the Bildungsroman are distinctively different from Evaristo's fusion-fiction (2022). Ranciére and Courtois similarly position Evaristo's novel at this intersection of politics and aesthetics as the novel as an art form is a "mode of visibility that [re-configures] the fabric of sensory [experiences] for the identities it represents. (Courtois 13; Ranciére 140).

In her article for the London Review, Bucknell describes Evaristo's novel as a place for inequities and reticence in the multiple and mirrored narratives. These narratives often render the same encounters from different perspectives. Bucknell argues that "the inequities of information that make irony possible are used to [reveal] the larger inequities – of knowledge, of power –"that frame the characters and their decisions (Bucknell 2019). For example, Shirley's inaccessibility to the knowledge of the affair between her mother and her husband as well as her mother Winsome's resentment of Shirley is evidence of these inequalities and the privileged position of the reader as witness to the complex structures of power, sexual desire, motherhood and womxnhood. Like Bucknell, I argue that this structure is necessary as the novel's goal is not to construct neat narrative arcs filled with dramatic revelations, forgiveness and reconciled relationships. Instead, the form that drives these complex narratives addresses the inequities and ambiguities of oftentimes gendered and racialised encounters between lovers, friends and families that tell deeply subjective stories.

This concept of inequalities and reticence suggests that there are larger and more deliberate obstacles imposed within and between the twelve characters that get in the way of a flattened, linear reading of these deliberately difficult characters. In her interview with Alison Donnell, Evaristo shares that she "disrupts possible reader expectations [by] creating characters who defy reductive notions of who we (Black British womxn) are in this society" as a strategy to convey the "multiplicity and variety" (Evaristo 2019; Donnell 99). This suggests Evaristo's aesthetic practices act as "weapons against stereotyping and invisibility" through the literary (Evaristo 2019; Donnell 99). This complication of how these characters are rendered is made possible by the privileged position of the reader who gains intimate access to what the narrators think, feel, experience and omit from one another. In that space between the character's knowledge and the reader's privilege, there is space for the complexity, contradiction, irony, and relational consciousness through which the novel produces its portraits (Bucknell; Muñoz-Valdivieso; Donnell, Evaristo in an interview with Donnell 2019)

This suspended space I describe mirrors the space, moments and experiences between the stages of "girl", "woman" and "other" as the title suggests. Sarikaya-Sen describes the cast of the novel as

"diverse Black women on their journey from being a girl, to becoming a woman and an other given their colour, gender, class and ancestry" (303). This process of becoming suggests different encounters and lessons that these characters progress through as they remain *othered* in different ways (303). Bucknell discusses how "Evaristo also dramatizes forms of differential treatment within communities, examining the ways her characters see one another" which further complicates how this active othering is not simply external but part of the character's relation to one another (Donnell 101). This complex space also relates to the proximity within the novel's form and content that Donnell describes as a "compelling quality of the novel", capturing the "network of relationships" and essential connectedness between the characters (Donnell101). Evaristo describes the contingencies and configurations of these proximities and connections as the manifestation of her interest in "how people respond to each other, and limit, change, enrich and expand each other, and manipulate and abuse – even women-to-women abuse in a power imbalanced" relationship (Evaristo 2019).

In her essay, "Constructing Selfhood Through Re-Voicing The Classical Past", Roynon situates Evaristo's earlier work alongside that of Marlene Nourbese Philip, and Robin Coste Lewis. These authors' work similarly "embodies a mode of resistance that both protests the historic oppression of women of colour and asserts a Black female agency, insisting (to a greater or lesser degree) on an empowered present and future" (Roynon 137). Unlike *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) which has received much critical acclaim for its revisionist and innovative representation of slavery, *Girl, Woman, Other* is less about the revision of history and more about the revision of character. Along with the subversion of the generic distinction between prose and verse, the novel similarly subverts the generic distinction between Black diasporic experiences through spatial, temporal and material domains across almost an entire century (137). This revision of character and the deviance within this process lies at the intersection of the politics and aesthetics of the text. From my findings, this process of the revision of character presents a gap in the research surrounding Evaristo's text. Thus, I argue that the ways these characters inform, inflect and transpose onto one another in their network of subjectivities and how the free-flowing contingent form of the novel facilitates a non-normative rendering of the twelve characters functions as the root of this affirmatively deliberate and inevitable deviance produced by Evaristo.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Introduction

In this first chapter, Bernardine Evaristo will be discussed in terms of her situation within the Black British literary domain and the kinds of narrative voices that define the landscape. An understanding of the overlapping between Black political, queer and diasporic theoretical silos will be drawn as a preface to discussing questions of diaspora and diasporic identity in the contemporary moment. An overview

of Evaristo's corpus will also be conducted to trace the relevant themes throughout her published texts between 1997 and 2019.

Chapter Two: Fusion-fiction: Fluidity and Subjectivity

Evaristo's experimental form, termed fusion fiction is central to the discussion of *Girl, Woman, Other* and the diasporic subjectivities it renders. Evaristo's signature free-flowing style, prose poetic style that features poetic patterning facilitates expansive renderings of the twelve Black British womxn's narratives. The text also necessitates a topographical consideration of the text during critical moments. In this chapter, fusion fiction as a strategy of aesthetic deviance will be discussed in terms of how it facilitates further subversion of the material and relational dimensions within the text. The theoretical framework of Transmodernity that underpins the relational consciousness Evaristo renders.

Chapter Three: Deviance and Destabilisation: Identity and Relation at the intersections of Black/Queer/Diasporic

Chapter three focuses on the instability within diasporic scholarship as well as the malleability of diasporic identity and its literary representations. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the malleability of further identity markers such as queer, womxn, wife, mother, lover and friend are similarly rendered as unstable and deviant through the non-normative relationships between the twelve characters across their respective chapters. Cohen and Allen's conceptions of deviance as resistance and the representation of Black/queer/diasporic narratives from within the complex and intimate contours of relation form the basis of the discussion of the womxn's interconnected portraits.

Chapter Four: Portraits of Motherhood: Love, Labour and Identity

Chapter four sketches Evaristo's world-of-womxn in a close, textual analysis of *Girl, Woman, Other* according to the author's use of deviant portraits of motherhood across various chapters. Through the lenses of love, labour and relation, the ways that Evaristo engages with motherhood will be shown to not only surface subversive portraits of Black, diasporic mothers but similarly address normative constructions of diaspora by re-covering and re-imagining Black British history through matrilineality.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The final chapter summarizes the argument of this thesis and presents Evaristo's novel whose objective has been discussed as the strategic relocation, re-imagination and re-representation of deviant Black diasporic womxnhood into British historical, geographic, and temporal dimensions. It concludes by presenting the formal and narrative strategies utilised by the author, alongside critical theoretical frameworks that complement the text's engagements with race, gender, sexuality and diasporic identity from the perceptive of the twelve interrelated character portraits.

Chapter Two: Fusion-fiction: Fluidity and Subjectivity

Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) is the arrival of the author at her unique sub-genre of fusion fiction that is characterised by its experimental aesthetic style. From theatre to prose poetry and the fragmented novel, Evaristo's fusion fiction is fully realised in her latest novel. Along with the relentless formalism of her prose poetic, fusion fiction style, the experimental novel not only renders the subjective fragments of Black British diasporic womxnhood but is also forged from it. By reaching back into the author's corpus, the strands of theatre, poetry, semi-autobiography and the traditional form of the novel, these fragments coalesce into *Girl, Woman, Other*.

In an interview with Waterstones in 2019, Evaristo describes the creative process of her writing the plurivocal novel featuring twelve Black womxn whose stories emerge from one another (Evaristo 2019). This interdependence between narratives is where the concept of "fusion" may be denoted as each narrative is in some way tethered to the next. Beyond the content, this idea of fusion also emerges in the form of the text through the triptych stacking of the named chapters. The author describes this kind of fiction as a kind of "poetic patterning on the page" that utilizes very few full stops, lots of commas and line breaks to punctuate the free-flowing passages that flow into one another (Evaristo 2019). These characteristics of this experimental form facilitate the fluidity that these subjective narratives necessitate in the development and intersection of the characters. This poetic patterning that Evaristo uses to describe the formal conventions within *Girl, Woman, Other* similarly necessitates a topographical consideration of the text the author utilizes to strategically tether critical events and relations between characters. In this thesis, these considerations look at not only the location of diction and the patterns embedded into the narratives but also at the narrative moments the author employs this patterning. These considerations are crucial in the assessment of the effect of fusion form.

What this form allows is for both the reader and the author to meander between the past and the present as each character's narrative develops. It also facilitates oscillation between internal dialogue, speech, memories and observations alongside the characters. This aesthetic style and the narratives it produces create a closeness or intimacy between the reader and the characters as their innermost thoughts, experiences, feelings and orientations reveal the dense and complex inner world of the twelve Black British womxn. This complexity, constructed and strategically organised by Evaristo, prompts an exploration of how this kind of rendering of Black British womxnhood is possible and why this experimental form of fusion fiction is suitable for the kinds of characters Evaristo renders.

Evaristo forms part of a relatively new class of experimental novelists who in the past century have turned toward the fragmented novel to render "holistic and coalescent" narratives (Gioia 3). This sub-genre is characterised by its polyphony and "complicated coherence" that allows authors to deviate and pivot from traditional form and content while in what scholars have described as a "relentless

formalism" embedded in the texts (Gioia 6). What the fragmented novel weaves together are the contradictory, dissonant strands of multiple voices, characters, plots, spatial and temporal threads in a loose yet organised helix. Gioia credits the dance of the fragmented novel to its "deference to complexity" and its "intense devotion to plot, pacing and other elements of traditional craft" (8). Among critics, there is almost a tendency to personify the sub-genre as the complexity and fluidity it is able to possess make it its own living, breathing body of works.

As is with the novel's characteristic fusion fiction style, the loose fragments that form the plot are woven across intersecting and overlapping spatial and temporal dimensions. Each character's chapter marks the beginning of a new fragment set to overlap and intersect with at least one other character. This is how Evaristo builds her network of womxn at relative points in their individual narratives. This narrative structure strategy typifies non-conformity, ultimately deviating away from the conventional novel that organises the form and the characters according to more linear, successive patterns. Evaristo's deviation from conformity through the form of fusion fiction is the first and most apparent instance where deviance is evident in the novel. This aesthetic non-conformity or deviance carries with it the capacity to render disruptive portraits of Black British womxnhood through its experimental engagement with these twelve complex diasporic identities

Evaristo's Subversion of Time and Space

If one thinks through each character portrait in Girl, Woman, Other as its own fragment that forms part of a larger network of Black British womxn, the ways in which these fragments are organised becomes a crucial consideration. Rather than organising each character's narrative in a linear, successive pattern, Evaristo bends any chrononormative expectation in favour of the character's narrative instead of the reader's expectation. For example, Dominque's narrative concludes the first triptych stack of narratives in the first chapter where she is closely linked to Amma and Yazz whose narratives feature before hers'. Chapter two, the consecutive chapter, begins with Carole's narrative, a character whom the reader would expect to intersect with Dominique, Yazz or Amma in the previous chapter but surprisingly does not at this point in the novel. Thus, although the succession of chapters between Dominique and Carole is consecutive, their relational tether remains loose. Contrastingly, both of these characters (and all twelve protagonists) in the novel establish each of their chapters with their names as a cue to whom the narrative belongs at that particular point. This deliberate and patterned way of introduction is how Evaristo binds the narrative fragments of the content together, through its form. By way of bending and subverting traditions of formal structure, Evaristo effectively embeds inherent and intentional deviance from the onset of this experimental novel.

In "Black In Time: Exploring New Ontologies, New Dimensions, New Epistemologies Of The African Diaspora*",* Michelle Wright addresses the central organising principles that have defined Black identity

in the 20th century. Wright argues for a more inclusive, non-normative chronology to underpin African diaspora and identity (Wright 70). Citing Edwards, Clarke and Campt, Wright reconsiders the Middle Passage and slavery in the West alongside the constitution of Black identity. Wright theorises in favour of a more inclusive, transatlantic and horizontal engagement of Black identity constituted through difference (70). Wright discusses how space and time are constitutive of Blackness and how the subversion of these dimensions in the discussion of Black diasporic identity formation facilitates a more inclusive and expensive imagining of these identities.

In an interview with Anita Sethi (2019), Evaristo discusses this similar necessity to alter temporality in order to tell "alternative" stories that do not adhere to normative assumptions of diasporic Blackness and Black British womxnhood (Evaristo, 2019). What both Evaristo and Wright caution against is the projection of univocal and chrononormative assumptions of identity onto Blackness in the real world and within the literature. For Wright, the danger lies in academic disciplines which remain exclusive to diasporic subjects whose histories lie outside of ontologies and epistemologies of transatlantic slavery and civil rights movements in the West. For Evaristo, this danger emerges in the mythologising of Black characters within fictional texts. In both authors' instances, there is a threat of flattening and alienating Black histories and narratives from the groups they are intended to represent.

What both authors consider is a concept of "relativity" necessary for any inclusive renderings of Black consciousness or diasporic relational consciousness to allow for plurality in representing Black subjectivities (Wright 71). This points back to the kind of fragmented and fluid subjective thinking that is necessary for rendering expansive and relational narratives of diasporic subjects in the literary form. A networked consideration of Blackness and its relation and production through time becomes the necessary strategy for coalescing and transcending limited traditional narratives toward pluralism.

In *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), the primary encounter with this kind of plurality is via the inclusion of twelve sub-chapters, each with its own protagonist whose distinctive narrative voice remains at the forefront of their sub-chapters. In many interviews, Evaristo argues that the novel is non-hierarchal with its chapters that occupy similar lengths and close engagements with the characterisation of each of the protagonists. Nor is the novel a collection of twelve short stories that can be read independently from one another. What the author reinforces is the plurivocality of the text whose only ideological agenda is to be "a reflection of plurivocality" for Black British womxnhood (Evaristo 2019).

This plurivocality or polyphony is facilitated through the author's experimental style of fusion fiction that is characterised by its "prose-poetic patterning on the page and non-orthodox punctuation while fusing the women's lives together" (Borbély 284). In her latest published text, *Manifesto* (2021), Evaristo describes the function of this form as facilitating her to flow "from interiority to exteriority, from the past to the present, from one character's narrative to the next" (Evaristo 80). With this

definition, it is evident that the layered dimensionality of character is integral to Evaristo's fiction as a means to complicate the twelve Black British characters across nearly a century of urban and rural life.

As such, chronology or rather the use of time within and between related chapters in *Girl, Woman, Other* is one of the first indications of Evaristo's subversive narrative strategies in the text. The reader is introduced to the first two characters, Amma and Yazz (middle-aged mother and teenage daughter) whose narratives successively occupy the first triptych set of chapters. These two individual stories appear to be organised around similar organising events but they do not experience time and space in the same ways. At the beginning of the novel, Amma's opening night of her play, "The Last Amazons of Dahomey" is a central organising event for many of the characters, particularly herself and Yazz whose knowledge and experience of the work leading up to the play are conflicting. For Amma, this is the pinnacle of years of "heckling" offensive and reductive shows that "offended [her] political sensibilities and putting on ill-attended, indie-plays for her fellow radicals (Evaristo 2). From Yazz's perspective of that event in time, the evening is potential for "another embarrassment" and a drab display of her mother's "snooty" attitude towards her "struggling theatre mates" (Evaristo 43).

Evaristo utilizes closely linked physical spaces and moments in time as a point of entry into these two characters' narratives. She does so to reveal the differences and deviations between the characters' perceptions of those shared moments and the subjectivities that inform their experiences and observations. This allows the author to further construct the individual narratives horizontally as opposed to a linear construction that may occlude "other types of information" or "dimension" necessary for complex and differential characterisation (Wright 72).

Within the first chapter of the novel, at the start of Amma's narrative, the temporal lapses between the present and the past as well as between dialogue recounted through memories, Evaristo constructs the dimension of both Amma and Dominique's familial and social backgrounds simultaneously. While the author omits punctuation such as full stops or quotation marks, the free-flowing form of fusion fiction allows the reader to move between the construction of Dominque's character both through her own memories and Amma's perceived memories of their shared moments.

While recalling the initiation of their friendship, Amma moves from narrating Dominique's "mission to educate herself in black history, culture [and] feminism" in the third person to a memory of Dominique recounting this mission in the first person and then back into the close third narration of Amma's memory (Evaristo 8). Although fluid and free-flowing, Evaristo uses line breaks, mid-sentence that aesthetically differentiate between levels of narration.

> when I was accepted into a very orthodox drama school, I was already politicised and challenged them on everything, Amma
>
> the only person of colour in the whole school"

> she demanded to know why the male parts of Shakespeare couldn't be played by women and don't even get me started on cross-racial casting…
>
> (Evaristo 8)

Dominique's narration in the first person within Amma's narrative without any quotation marks that signal the beginning or end of the dialogue between the is exemplary of the depth of dimension this style of fusion fiction can facilitate. This is an example of how Evaristo utilises the experimental form to meander between a narrative past and present, all within a singular passage. Although at first disorientating, the reader becomes attuned to these lapses between time, memory, observation and direct speech due to the line breaks and placement of diction in the broader construct of the passage.

> the next day I was taken aside by the school principal…
>
> (Evaristo 9)

In this successive line, "the next day" places the reader and both Amma and Dominique's memories of this moment back into Dominique's personal past timeline while Amma recounts it in her present narrative. This oscillation between narrative timelines is achieved due to the lack of punctuation but the deliberate construction of the passage that allows the ordering and placement of phrases and passages to drive the narration.

This disorientation between past, present, memory and speech effectively disturb a linear reading of the character's personal and relational timelines. This disturbance of narrative chronology is what Wright discusses as the necessary distortion of space and time to create a more expansive and inclusive imagining of Black subjectivity in the narrative form. Instead of reading along a singular linear narrative, the form forces the reader to weave together the fragments of intersecting characters' narratives to begin to form a relational network and consciousness as the novel progresses. This disturbance of constitutive chronologies of individual characters in relation to one another is necessary for the construction of a relational consciousness that a transmodern framing of *Girl, Woman, Other* requires. These aesthetic choices that produce the topography of the text will be discussed throughout the following chapters as crucial to the subversive and strategic ways in which Evaristo practices and renders intentional deviance in the form and content of the novel.

Transmodernity: A New Relational Consciousness

Transmodernity serves as a theoretical framework through which to describe and analyse the relational consciousness that the fusion fiction and polyphony in *Girl, Woman, Other* establishes. There are no doubt various reasons as to why Evaristo employs the aesthetic and narrative style of fusion fiction to build the twelve narratives. What this thesis argues is the use of this form as a means to transcend the limited univocal ways Black diasporic womanhood has traditionally been rendered through these deviant portraits. This kind of transcendence may be explored through the framework of Transmodernity which points to experimental aesthetic practices that recover and reimagine marginalised narratives from within.

Transmodernity, as proposed by Rodríguez Magda, is a critique and response to the previous realms of modernity and the "consequences of globalisation" in favour of a "culture of interconnectedness, participation and emancipation…" (Ateljevic 39). Ghisi discusses transmodernism as an emergent paradigm to address the fragmentation caused by the deconstruction of modernity and the incoherence of postmodernism (Ghisi 5; Ateljevic 39). The proposition of Transmodernity as conceptualised by Magda and Ghisi is to look toward a "shared story" of human history to forge a "global relational consciousness" that ultimately appropriates modernist and postmodernism ideologies in order to transcend them (39).

Both Magda and Dussel attribute this paradigm shift to increasing "globalisation and the availability of formation technology" that facilitates rapid forms of intercultural exchange (39). This kind of paradigmatic response to socio-political, economic and cultural exchanges similarly emerges in Evaristo's canonisation of *Girl, Woman, Other* which rose to global critical acclaim in 2019 in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. This global moment received international attention for the plight of African Americans and prevalence of racially motivated police brutality at the time (Salisbury, Connelly & Wangari-Jones, 22). In response, a Black, global community and its allies prioritised minority stories,–experiences, businesses etc as a way to combat the global systemic exclusion and brutalisation of Black people (predominantly) in the West (Salisbury et al, 22). The synthesis and subsequent reception of Bernardine Evaristo's Booker-winning novel can be seen as an urgent response to an urgent situation that is the voicelessness and invisibility of Black British women's voices within the English literary canon.

Transmodernity denotes "a new relational consciousness" that Evaristo's novels, namely *Lara* (1997), *Blonde Roots* (2007), *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), *Mr Loverman* (2013) *and Girl Woman Other* (2019) reside in due to their respective narrative forms and themes. In each of these novels, the author surfaces the complexities of diasporic relation from generational, gendered and racialised subjective narratives through polyphony. The literary response to this progression into transmodernism is a generative phenomenon to observe within women's diasporic narratives as this paradigm presents a "willingness

to accept contradicting realities and multicultural perspectives" that have historically resided in the margins of canonical literature in the contours of subaltern experiences (Ateljevic, 213). Ultimately, transmodernism in literature advocates for an interdisciplinary and intersectional horizontal consideration of narrative form and subjectivity (Pellicer-Ortín, Martínez-Falquina & Arizti 223).

This framework presents itself as a critical literary tool that facilitates multi-dimensional conversations between past modern literary histories, present-day globalised social realities and a deeply empathetic, decentralized pluralistic future that is inherently feminist. Much like J.S Allen's proposition of the Black/queer/diasporic frame of analysis, in this context, transmodernism offers a liberatory philosophy that reaches across epistemic boundaries of queer, black political, diasporic and feminist theories in reach of more relational models of knowledge (Krishnaswamy 1214). Within this model, there is more space to address the shortcomings of these related frames of analysis, allowing us to discover and imagine strategies for alternative and self-determined ways of knowing and practising.

As Transmodernity calls for coalescence and transcendence of predefined historical, cultural, religious, political, social and economic suppositions for new epistemologies to emerge, fusion fiction such as *Girl, Woman, Other* turn to intersectionality and vulnerability to render transmodern relational consciousnesses through the literary form (Ateljevic, 40). Haring discusses how the novel "[problematizes] the intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and age" within and between the twelve (mostly) Black British protagonists who negotiate space and time in relation to one another throughout the course of the text (93). In this discussion, vulnerability is presented as a means of resistance within these interdependent narratives. Similar to Haring, Şaikaya-Sen offers an analysis of *Girl, Woman, Other* that underscores the hybridised text and narratives as a text of resilience based on the "empathic relatedness and solidarity" facilitated by the intersectional and relational consciousness rendered (303).

Comparatively, both authors' arguments for the text's inherent Transmodernity surface from its insistence on relationality as necessary for any authentic and dimensional construction of diasporic subjectivity. Thus, the character's vulnerability and complexity is evident as a means for both resilience and liberation.

With this understanding of transmodernism in mind, it is evident that the themes of race, class, migration and gender surfaced in *Girl, Woman, Other* qualify the novel as a transmodern novel that presents a "diverse group of subaltern [mostly] female characters exposed to the mechanisms of exclusion" (Sarikaya-Şen 305). The author's own identity and the narratives she centralises suggest the novel is a response to similar mechanisms of exclusion. Concerning Rodriguez Magda's conception of Transmodernity that describes the framework as capable of capturing the "aesthetic aspects of our present", *Girl, Woman, Other* similarly serves as an experimental aesthetic response to an exclusive, normative literary domain that has historically marginalised and flattened the kinds of deviant narratives

the novel centres from the position of the author's lived and imagined subjectivity (Sarikaya-Şen 305). Ultimately, Transmodernity insists on the privileging of marginalised voices on their own terms to reposition their subjectivities at the centre of narratives seeking to represent them.

With the coalescence and transcendence of post-modern socio-political, economic and cultural conditions necessary to build the inclusive relational consciousness that Transmodernity calls for, Evaristo surfaces the inevitable hypervigilance and schizophrenia that younger characters like Yazz and Megan/Morgan character endure. Yazz, Amma'a daughter is presented as a feminist, queer, "countercultural experiment" whose birth abandoned all heteronormative models of procreation and parenthood aside from an innate yearning desire for motherhood by Amma (Evaristo 36). Born of a Black, gay, "champaign socialist" and a mixed-race, polyamorous, lesbian mother, Yazz is depicted as (and understands herself to be) the poster child for a transmodern future where minorities are not only visible but also powerful. Yazz understands herself as the relational biproduct of the people and the structures around her with whom she engages, participates and critiques all at the same time. Her own relational network is populated by her loose parental structure (with tiered secondary and tertiary parental figures who take care of her to remain in the favour of her mother) and the "Unfuckwithables" (her ethnically diverse group of complicated university female friends) (Evaristo 41). This entire network and its actors exist and participate within the heteropatriarchal formal structures of the theatre, broader London, the Ivy League university circuit, all of which she both clings to and rejects in the formation of her own identity as a Black-British Gen-z woman.

> this is the problem with having a daughter with X-ray vision
> she can see through the parental bullshit
> (Evaristo 37)

The feigned politeness and congeniality that Yazz sees through points to the superficial buffer between the parental figures that Yazz's narration is a vector for. Throughout her chapter, Yazz's hypervigilance gives the reader nuanced and intimate access to the complicated dynamics of the romantic, platonic, political, sexual and relational contradictions within each of the actors in her relational network. From her mother who curses gentrification yet is a home-owning member of this insidious frontier in South London, or be it her father Roland, who self-sacrifices "proper fatherhood" and his solidarity with other Black British men in favour of expensive fashion and media attention as an esteemed academic (Evaristo 46).

These layered contradictory portraits that Yazz sketches of each of the relational actors in her life are deeply complex yet held together in a fluid and at times poetic form. In Yazz's narrative, each relational actor's extended synopsis typically begins with the character's name, isolated on its own line, then followed by their role in her life or similar identity markers such as national origin, occupation or patterned behaviour that is central to Yazz's conception of their character. For example, her father's

friend Kenny is introduced as "(Godfather Number Two who wisely gives her birthday cheques starring *two* zeros)", while her friend Waris is introduced as her Somali friend who "says yes to the hijab and sex outside of marriage [but], no to booze and pork" (Evaristo 55).

Ultimately what this patterned structure of introduction and description achieves is complexity and contradiction within even the most insignificant sub-characters within Yazz's narrative. This effectively draws together all the social, political, cultural and influences that construct Yazz's relational network and consciousness. The structure of Yazz's presentation of these relational actors and their contradictions is how the transmodern hypervigilance surfaces in the narrative form. For Yazz's character, it arrests her in a state of perpetual observation with very little action toward her own identity formation.

> I haven't suffered, not really, my mother and grandmother suffered because they lost their loved ones and their homeland, whereas
>
> my suffering is mainly in my head
>
> (Evaristo 60)

In interviews about the twelve characters in the texts, Evaristo emphasizes that one of the driving forces behind her characterisation process is that the characters need to want something and want it badly. What keeps her fiction moving is her insistence that they often do not get it (Evaristo 2019). For Yazz in this instance, her desire to mature into someone with something important to contribute to the world is what her hypervigilance keeps from her. She remains unable to reflect inwardly with as much commitment and decisiveness with which she judges the external world and those closest to her. By afflicting Yazz with this inner conflict, Evaristo effectively problematizes the character making her not just the subject but the object of her inner conflict. Ultimately, this transference between subject and object deters the reader from oversimplifying and victimising the characters as they often create and participate in their own difficulties. What Evaristo insists upon is the flawed subjectivities of each protagonist in order to allow for their desires, flaws, complexities and conflicts to emerge. This is not just to render an interesting story and drive the fiction but to render the complexity of Black British womxnhood.

Diasporic Aesthetic Practices and Transmodernity

Amongst authors who offer transmodern readings of Evaristo's work and similar literature, connectivity lies at the core of why texts such as *Girl, Woman, Other* achieve nuanced reimagining of subjective stories. The relationship between Evaristo's text as an aesthetic practice and Transmodernity is the paradigm's facilitation of the experimentation necessary to not only render and reimagine marginality but privilege it as a productive and restorative field of subjective representation. Ultimately, this deliberate deviation away from the traditional scripts of diasporic representation that Gopinath points

to and the privileging of the narratives that emerge from within the intimate gaps of diaspora allows for intentionally deviant visions of power and identity to surface.

In Evaristo's novel, an example of the close relationship between diasporic aesthetic practices and the application of a transmodern reading of the novel surface in the case of Bummi and Carole's mother-daughter dyadic relationship and their individual romantic relationships. In Bummi's chapter, once the reader is quite familiar with this *strong*[2], widowed maternal figure, the deviant queering of her character's sexual identity emerges in an unexpected encounter between Bummi and a fellow employee "Sister Omofe from church" (Evaristo 177). The two women engage in an erotic and sexual relationship with one another at the point where Bummi is willing to self-actualize as a queer, Nigerian woman away from the prescribed conventions of widowhood and motherhood that have previously deterred her. At this moment, Evaristo renders her hyphenation as a queer/Black/immigrant-widowed/mother as an intentional and inevitable response to Bummi's desire. While these layered identity markers effectively plunge Bummi further into the depths of marginality, they simultaneously expose a more fulfilled and self-actualized portrait of her character.

The undercurrent of Bummi's entire narrative is punctuated by her careful navigation of her maternal, social and economic (limited) power. Bummi's hypervigilance on how to acquire and retain this power illustrates how Evaristo renders deviance as the intentional abdication of power in favor of fulfilling, intimate relationships that are in line with the character's desire.

> she imagined them lying together as man and wife
> and instead of it feeling bad, it felt right
>
> (Evaristo 178)

Aesthetically, Evaristo employs fusion fiction to render the switch that happens within Bummi during this deviant love affair. By way of line breaks and the fluidity between what the character observes and experiences, Bummi's script as the strong Black immigrant mother is interrupted by the softness and vulnerability that she is capable of with Sister Omoefe. Distant from the critical, hypervigilant Bummi the reader is introduced to in the beginning of the narrative, with Sister Omeofe, Bummi's narrative turns inward with a tender and reflective observation of the new intimate inner world. In these moments when the two women relinquish control "as if in a trance" to engage in "the most intense pleasure", Bummi's desires surface (Evaristo 179). This effective abdication of her (very limited) social power doesn't last long as Bummi later abandons her queer relationship in favor of a monogamous heterosexual relationship in a safe, pleasant yet unsatisfactory union.

[2] Here, the term "strong" denotes Birdsong and Harris' discussion of strength as a virtue ascribed to Black women who have been constructed in colonial and post-modern literature as "more suprahuman than human" due to their perceived ability to endure, sacrifice and bare physical, financial, parental and societal burdens.

Bummi's daughter Carole makes a conscious effort to bolster her social power and drive its mobility by choosing a succession of white, upper-class male partners who provide her with the social mobility otherwise unavailable to her due to her Nigerian, lower-middle-class upbringing. For example, her first romantic partner Marcus, the white Kenyan with "a thing for black girls" who "made her more socially acceptable than she could ever achieve on her own" was one of the first instances where Carole was able to exercise the very limited social power she possessed (Evaristo, 136-137).

Ironically, Carole's obsession with forward social mobility through her ambitious financial career, white partners and general high achievement is presented in juxtaposition to the fixed, frozen trauma she literally and figuratively" runs from in her everyday life.

> she runs for her life because to slip up is to begin descending the slippery slope to
> giving in to failure, to inertia, to feeling sorry for herself about the moment in her life
> which still creeps to the front of her memory when she least expects it
>
> (Evaristo 139)

Due to the nature of Carole's rigid character, Evaristo relies more heavily on the fluid and poetic patterning of fusion fiction to both suspend and drive pivotal moments in Carole's narrative. In a way, this forces the character to confront painful moments such as her rape, her marginalization at university and her disdain for her Nigerian mother with the reader in tow. Carole's chapter is the first narrative in the second triptych stack where Evaristo almost immediately lapses into poetic patterning when Carole reflects on the inconvenience of suicide by train for the morning commuters.

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

The structure of this passage and its isolated words mimic the suspension of pain Carole carries and just how close to stepping over into despair she is without the context of what has brought her to this edge. This drives the narrative by beckoning the reader to discover just what has brought the productive, go-getter to equate suicide to peace. Throughout the course of Carole's chapter, Evaristo routinely ends

passages with these poetic tails or fragments with minimal diction that capture incredibly dark moments that Carole struggles to reconcile such as the

Bad things [that] happen
to bad little girls
who
ask
for it.
(Evaristo 116)

It could be argued that the theme of isolation and stagnation runs through Carole's narrative and the author's approach to the more restrained and fragmented structure of this chapter in comparison with other more fluid, prosaic chapters. While the narratives in the first chapter of the novel follow more fluid, open and revelatory patterns, Carole's character and thus her narrative is held back by the trauma it must reluctantly represent. Carole doesn't oscillate between the past and present as freely as her co-narrators nor does she lapse into overlapping perspectives and stories about secondary characters as frequently as Yazz or Amma do in their narratives. Ultimately, Carole's fragments that inform her diasporic, racial, gendered and sexual identity remain untethered and unreconciled within herself and between those closest to her. The consequences of this more violent and isolating fragmentation are evident in Carole's narrative ending which finds her stagnated in the same tokenized yet financially fulfilled relational and spatial circumstances where the reader originally met her. In contrast to her mother Bummi, Carole very rarely enjoys the moments of respite that come with the abdication of her social power in favour of fulfilment. Carole is ultimately unable to turn inward to use her potentially deviant desires to guide her decision-making during her narrative. This is due to the deep trauma that resides within her. Rather, the character turns her effort outward in pursuit of a social and physical safety that only conformity to white, upper-class, English standards can afford her.

There is an emphasis on how Carole must "force herself" to do and be things in order to move and transcend a past she guards behind the compulsive and obsessive behaviour of her fragile present (118). As a result, this motif of isolation runs in tandem with the narrative structure and strategies within her narrative that further illustrate the necessity for a reckoning with the past for a transcendent and relationally sound present as posited by Transmodernity. Carole is not able to reconcile her painful past and is thus isolated from those closest to her.

This lack of neat reconciliation captures both Evaristo and Wright's insistence on subversive representations of time and space whose bending facilitates a more expansive conception of diasporic identity formation and expression. In the novel, Evaristo folds this subversion or chrononormative deviance aesthetically in the organisation of the individual narratives in relation to one another as they experience themselves, each other and shared moments from diverging perspectives. Through these

negotiations of power and identity that these two characters confront in their intimate matrilineal and romantic relationships, the expansive potential of reading the text as a transmodern novel is revealed. With fusion fiction as a tool to render and centre Bummi and Carole's subjectivity that emerges from their racialised, sexualised and gendered experiences, Evaristo effectively illustrates the productivity in presenting intersectional, deviant portraits of Black British womxnhood through this aesthetic modality.

Chapter Three: Deviance and Destabilisation: Identity and Relation at the intersections of Black/Queer/Diasporic

Representing nonnormative racialised, gendered and sexualised navigations of Black Britain is not a new phenomenon in this particular literary domain. It is important to acknowledge and locate some of the constitutive themes, practices and modalities that have allowed for an arrival at the current conjecture of transdisciplinary conceptions of Black British diaspora and how Evaristo wields deviant portraiture and aesthetics to engage deviance in *Girl, Woman, Other*. This allows for the location and application of deviance as a critical analytical framework for this text that presents more expansive, lateral and fluid representations of subjective diasporic identities from multiple perspectives.

Donnell writes that the social and literary "construction of the Windrush experience... has aligned with wider political narratives to emphasize the ongoing challenges around the recognition and accommodation of Black subjects within British culture and society" (Donnell 195). Although disputed as the originary event of Black British presence and identity by theorists such as Hall, Campt and Clifford, celebrated post-war authors like Sam Selvon who published literary texts domestically, narrating the experience of life in London effectively defined and reimagined the literary construction of the Windrush generation and Great Britain. As part of the resistance to colonial narratives of African, Caribbean and West Indian identities in Britain, a class of authors produced from the 1950s such as Samuel Selvon [3]brought attention to British life in "[deliberately] discomforting and difficult ways" through experimentation with form and fiction (Donnell 200).

Their work was differentiated by their experiments with form, language, style and perceptions of Britain and Britishness that notably challenged "the literary definition of the novel" that decentered colonial narratives and focalized Black British navigation of the empirical center (Donnel 200). This distinctive deviation away from a quintessential English literary tradition is in line with Cohen's[4] assertion of deviance as lived or embodied opposition by oppressed groups in response to and reclamation of their limited power and agency (Cohen 25). Cohen describes this kind of opposition, or deviance as a strategic bid for agency by those relegated to the margins of standard, normative society. This intentional formal and representational deviance marked destabilization of prevailing colonial narratives of arrival and the promise of life in the empire primed the literary landscape for forthcoming Black British authors to redefine and reimagine Black Britishness within the canon.

[3] Selvon, Samuel. *The Lonely Londoners.* New ed. / introduced by Susheila Nasta., Penguin, 2006

[4] Cohen, Cathy J. "Deviance As Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2004, pp. 27–45., doi:10.1017/S1742058X04040044.

Deviance as Doing

Cohen describes deviance as "lived opposition" that holds the potential for cumulative and sustained resistance (27). This conception of individual and organized opposition as deviance points to this kind of action as a means of reclamation of agency from an oppressive force. This idea of a "lived opposition" reinstates a relative degree of autonomy in the hands of the intentionally deviant individual instead of framing deviance as a stagnant place to which certain people may be relegated by these external, oppressive forces. In relation to deviance and how it can be defined as a state of being rather than a stagnant, fixed position, intentional deviance emerges in circumstances of little agency whereby the deviant individual or group actively choose non-normative ways of being and living. This enables them to reclaim a sense of autonomy with the awareness of the social consequences that may follow. These consequences may be in the form of social exclusion, punitive measures, systematic repression, or psychological or physical harm.

The framing of deviance as "lived" underscores deviance as an ongoing state of being, or even a practice. Conceptualizing deviance *as doing* allows us to acknowledge the dynamic and unstable nature of certain identities such as Black, diasporic groups who live in opposition to normative cultural, racial, geographic and gendered models. Thus, deviance as a framework facilitates a more critical and expansive investigation of why, how and through what modalities overlapping marginalised identities are represented through literature. Positioning intentional deviance as a strategy toward self-liberation by and for these marginalised, intersecting identities forces the reader to pay closer attention to not solely the content of novels like *Girl, Woman, Other* but the aesthetic practices that facilitate the deviant renderings of Black British womxn.

Locating Deviance among Academic and Literary Silos

In Cohen's conceptualization of deviance as resistance, the author reaches across disciplines to identify shortcomings of African American political studies and queer studies to situate deviance between these two ever-changing paradigms. In this formation of a conceptual framework of deviance and its function, Cohen borrows the "malleability of categories" from African American political studies and "understandings of normalization" from queer theory to relate these ideas to the matrix of power between race, gender and class (28). For example, Cohen acknowledges the cumulative contestation by authors and scholars like Butler (1990), Sedgwick (1990) and Warner (1993) whose formalization and proliferation of what we generally understand as "queer theory" has offered different conceptualizations of gendered and sexualized socio-cultural identity markers (28).

However, what Cohen sees as a shortcoming within these differentiating models of sex and gender is the inability of labels/categories such as gay, queer, lesbian or trans to address the power disparities

between intersecting identities within a matrix of class, race and gender. Ultimately, what Cohen argues for is the malleability of such labels and the literature used to inform them to understand and represent the subjectivity and fluidity of these deviant portraits of personhood more effectively. Cohen posits that with this intersectional and malleable frame of analysis of the lived experiences of marginalised groups, the necessity of their deviant behaviour or action emerges.

Thus, with deviance as an intentional and inevitable strategy for a more nuanced representation of subjective identities and experiences, Cohen's framework facilitates a critical analysis of diasporic literature that serves to represent subjective, subaltern identities and experiences. This is the position from which Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* will be engaged as the text renders the intimacies and contradictions involved in navigating Britain from the perspective of twelve Black, queer and diasporic womxn whose deviance is crucial to their characterization. Not only will this deviance be explored as intentional and inevitable for the character's self-actualisation and liberation from forms of oppression, but the ways it is facilitated through the aesthetic of the novel will also be discussed as similarly critical in the rendering of these twelve portraits of Black diasporic womxnhood.

In a lecture series by the ICI Berlin titled "Norms, Deviance and the Queer Ordinary" (ICI Berlin June, 2015), Heather Love addresses the disciplinary relationship between Deviance and Queer studies in relation to how both respectively address questions of: (1) interaction and labelling and (2) constitution and violation of social norms (Love, 2015). In this lecture, Love turns to the ways in which post-war queer studies have borrowed theories of difference from deviance studies. Love posits that, along with these theories, the study of norms and deviance is central to "the intellectual genealogy of queer studies" (Love 74). Much like Allen in his conception of Black/Queer/Diaspora at its current conjuncture, Love counters the shortcoming of these silos by acknowledging and converging with deviance as "a challenge to the stability" of a normative world and its representation (Love 74-75). While Love challenges the prescription of "single meanings" onto representations of deviance, Allen similarly emphasises the malleability and inextricability of the domains of Black/queer/diasporic work that aims to "deepen and broaden the ineluctable connections" between scholarship and the artistic practices that wield deviance at their core (Allen 213).

As part of this discussion of the interdependence of queer and deviance studies, Love points to the risks involved in the representations of deviance as a practice. Although risky, representing deviance effectively stabilises the nonnormative world's complexities and contradictions to describe and understand it (Love 2015). In practice, this kind of stabilisation threatens to utilise deviance as a prescriptive device that confines fixed meanings and labels onto representations of nonconformity. From this, Love proposes literary studies as a demonstration of "how to respond to representations of experience, as representations rather than social or natural facts" (2015). Essentially, what Love emphasizes is the ability of a literary reading of representations of deviance to liberate scholars and

authors from the confinement of "single meanings" that reach for the "resolution of contradictions" (2015). This approach to rendering and reading deviance from the literary is where I locate Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* as a practice and representation of intentional deviance through the form and content of the novel. This active resistance to singularity through the multiplicity of the narrative form and content within the twelve overlapping portraits of Black British womxn is productive of deviant representations of British identity that hinge on the character's connections between each other based on their racialised, sexualised and gendered identities and relations.

An Overview of Evaristo's Deviant Diasporic Portraiture

Evaristo organises the twelve characters in a triptych stack that features three-character portraits for the first four chapters of the novel. I consider each triptych stack as a triangulation of the three characters whose narratives construct the chapter as they reflect and refract onto one another, revealing deeper contradictions and complexities to their individual and relative portraits. As established in the previous chapter, the way the novel's twelve portraits are organised against any kind of chrononormative convention is one of the ways one can apply a deviant analysis to the form of the novel. Similarly, the introduction of the novel through the character portraits of Amma, Yazz and Dominique immediately assert these representations of Black diasporic womxn as deeply complex, rebellious and inextricable from one another.

This first triad of Amma, Yazz and Dominique in some ways captures the kinds of non-normative representations of a queer Black Britain that the reader will encounter throughout the subsequent chapters. Amma, one of the more central characters in the novel is a queer theatre director with an insatiability about her. Whether it's through her romantic and sexual non-monogamy, communal parenting style or personal complexes about the mainstream British art scene, Amma is a character riddled with contradiction. Her narrative serves as a central organising tool that allows the other narratives to emerge. Her daughter Yazz is constructed as the Gen-Z "hurricane" riddled with the schizophrenia of her generation that is exposed to a digitized, globalised, and gentrified experience of the world. Armed with almost militant (and at times misguided) ideologies of feminism, sexuality, gender and capitalism, Yazz and the "Unfuckwithables" are constructed as a band of Black and Brown British womxn (except for a singular white friend) navigating class, race, gender and sexuality in present-day Britain. The third portrait in this opening chapter is Dominique whose long history of platonic intimacy with Amma and tumultuous lesbian relationship with an African American woman surfaces the darker sides of love, loss and belonging in particularly radical ways. These nonconforming portraits of Black British womxnhood and layers of relation produced through the mother-daughter dyad between Amma and Yazz as well as the complexities of the platonic and romantic connections all

three characters navigate set up the rest of the novel with the kind of complex relational consciousness required for full emersion into Evaristo's world-of-womxn.

In chapter two, Carol introduces the second triad of womxn whose portraits represent a similarly queer navigation of sexuality, motherhood, and self-actualisation. Their ties are held together by their intimate relationships with one another and their relation to their social environment. The three narratives triangulate in the way that their relational trauma lays down the tracks for habitual avoidance and repression that surfaces in the ways Carole, Bummi and LaTisha confront their traumatic histories and subsequent inner conflict. Carole's violent sexual history and rejection of her Nigerian heritage render her as an emotionally repressed overachiever, hyperfused on upward social and economic mobility. Her mother Bummi is a representation of the self-sacrificing immigrant mother and widow who has a similar fixation on upward social mobility. Much like her daughter, Bummi effectively masks and represses any kind of sexual or emotional deviance (her desire for other women) to avoid jeopardising her normative identity as a wife, mother and productive member of a working-class British society. LaTisha, whose narrative intersects with both Amma and Carole, renders the trauma of a troubled father-daughter relationship (or rather lack thereof) and how it can trigger a series of sexually and romantically dysfunctional relationships with men. As a triad, these three characters and their narratives offer parallels of perceived sexual and romantic deviance and the complexities of how they manifest through desire and self-actualisation.

The following chapter, constructed through Shirley, Winsome and Penelope's stories offers particularly tangible narratives on the disenchantment and resentment experienced by working-class Black British families. This chapter is marked by Evaristo's ability to complicate the characters by creating contradictory portraits of Shirley, Winsome, Lennox and Penelope whose deep personal and institutional repression lead to socially and sexually deviant behaviour. Passed through and between these four characters is a deep compulsion to conform, "blend in" and "[make] the right choice" ((Evaristo 243-245). The repress themselves in these ways in a bid to assimilate into a heteronormative, white British society whose values of education and the patriarchal nuclear family govern them. Against these sanitized portraits of Shirley as the ambitious educator, her Husband Lennox as the humble, dutiful solicitor and father and Winsome as the retired wife and mother of three who left London to return to a quiet life in Barbados, Evaristo exposes the inevitable dissatisfaction and resentment with these heteropatriarchal normative lives. By exposing a deep void within each character, the author illustrates how a desire to be seen and celebrated is the driving force behind their collectively deviant behaviour that manifests in the form of Winsome and Lennox's extramarital affair as well as Shirley's spiteful rejection and disassociation from her career. In both these instances, the character's relational deviance is in line with Cohen's description of deviance as a bid for agency despite social or material consequences as all three characters are overridden by their sexual desire and dissatisfaction.

Penelope's portrait is marked with a similar normative structure yet, as her narrative develops, her racial ambiguity, dissonance with her parents and general disorder during her adolescence is underpinned by her adoption as a newborn. Like the other two women in this triad of narratives, Penelope turns toward marriage and work to "put her back together again", resulting in a dissatisfying domestic and social life to recover her lost cultural and biological origins (Evaristo 284). Penelope's narrative exemplifies the inability to escape or distract from one's lack of identity and belonging through prescribed normative models of marriage and motherhood. At this point in the novel, Penelope's portrait as a non-Black woman appears out of line with the previous chapters whose narratives are punctuated by their navigation of Britain as Black diasporic individuals. What her narrative and its position in the structure of the novel presents is a tether to a century-long gene pool of womxn. In this transgenerational network of womxn, patterns of migration, marriage and motherhood give the reader access to the multiplicities and complexities of racial identity, the inherent instability of diasporic identity formation and social formations against the British backdrop.

In the final triptych stack, Megan/Morgan's portrait develops around the abandonment of the "misguided expectations" of gender expression for womxn that the previous characters like Shirley and Penelope remain oppressed by (Evaristo 321). Megan/Morgan is introduced to the novel as a hyphenated Black British girl, born in the nineties, whose identity is weighed down by her "part Ethiopian, part African American, part Malawian, and part English" heritage (311). Her white-passing parents and social circle uncomfortably grapple with her multiple identities throughout her troubled adolescence (311). As the character actively breaks away from "patterns of oppression based on gender", sexuality and race, Evaristo constructs a journey of self-definition for Black bodies who within them hold multiple geographies, cultural affiliations and gender identities (326). Although set in the 1990s into the 2000s, Megan/Morgan's narrative extends back more than a century into a tradition of non-conforming womxn whose embodiments of deviance through migration, marriage and motherhood epitomize the novel's overarching project of liberating representations of Black British womxn.

The intimately linked portraits of Hattie and Grace deepen and broaden the geographic and historical roots of the character's Black Britishness and its inherent multiplicity. Through these portraits of Hattie and Grace, Evaristo undoes the reiterated assumption of a Black population's recent arrival in Britain as discussed by scholars like Phillips and Campt. From the introduction of Hattie's chapter, the chronology and deep roots of her lineage's claim to England and British identity are emphasized by the reference to her living "descendants" and the gravitas of the old "banqueting table" in her two-hundred-year-old "Greenfields farmhouse" (341). Within her immediate family, Hattie retells the movement during the 1960s of her own two children, Sonny and Ada Mae who migrated from the "Scottish Borders" of their Greenfields farm all the way to "a slum area called Notting Hill" in London as teenagers to eventually settle in Newcastle "only seventy miles from the farm" (Evaristo 359).

This is just one of the examples of how Evaristo locates Black British identity into the material and temporal dimensions of British history through biological lineage and effectively disrupts the assumption of a native, stable (white) British national identity. Positioned as the final triptych stack of narratives at the end of the novel, the active location of Blackness into the social and geographic fibre of rural and urban Britain grounds not only Hattie and Grace's narratives but similarly the narrative arcs of many of the closely related characters of Megan/Morgan and Penelope. Evaristo effectively embeds Hattie and Grace's racialised and gendered experiences at the forefront of their portraiture that in turn function as the historical and cultural backgrounds, middle grounds and foregrounds for the previous characters' narratives.

For example, Grace's tumultuous journey as a mother and wife lead her to acquiring ownership of Greenfields farm. Her daughter Hattie later inherits the same farm leaves to her own granddaughter Megan/Morgan to turn into a safe space for queer people. This kind of queer advocacy, enabled by the support of her grandmother Hattie, is the very reason Yazz, one of the earliest and youngest characters, comes to know Megan/Morgan through social media and feels empowered to explore her own identity as a Black (sometimes) queer young British womxn. The Greenfields estate exists as this omnipresent artefact that tethers even the most lost and distant characters together. For instance, Hattie and Penelope return to one another as mother and daughter after decades of unknowing and unbelonging. This point of return in the narrative structure of the novel exemplifies how Evaristo uses space, time and place to inextricably tether not just the characters to particular places but to one another across these dimensions as part of the historical fiber of Britain. This kind of poetic relation, across various dimensions, is how Evaristo constructs this narrative relational network of Black, queer and diasporic subjectivities.

Returning to Allen, Cohen and Love's perspectives on the overlapping theories and experiences of Black/queer/diaspora, the twelve portraits and their organisation in this narrative form allow us to situate their representations within this matrix. Allen's conception of the interlocking articulations of Black/queer/diasporic engagements and practices is apt in capturing the multiplicity that characters like Yazz, Dominique and Amma represent. Marked by their ability to continuously contradict themselves and the versions of themselves they assert in their relationships, these characters effectively challenge any opportunity to be read as stable representations of a Black, queer and diasporic girls, women or (m)others respectively.

Dominique's narrative addresses the danger implicit in the representation and embodiment of a singular meaning of diaspora through her relationship with Nzinga. Nzinga is introduced to the reader as the African American amazon who is "so wise and knowledgeable about how to be a liberated black woman in an oppressive white world that she's opening my eyes to, well, everything, it's like she's Alice and Audre and Angela and Aretha rolled into one, seriously.. "(Evaristo 80).

What Dominque encounters here is the exposure to an asymmetrical representation and expression of diaspora dominated by African American, Black political rhetoric that Nzinga embodies. Carrying all the markers of an African American hegemonic construction of diasporic identity, Nzinga is effectively a subjective representation of the traditional assumption of a stable or settled Black character that draws on the raw materials of diaspora to express herself and oppress others (Brown 29-32). From her pilgrimages to her African "homeland", to her accent that evokes "the sensory delight of warm cornbread, sticky ribs, gumbo, jambalaya, collard greens, cracklin', fried cabbage [and] peanut brittle", Nzinga carries with her a "Black world" that fabricates Dominique's desired diasporic identity tangible and accessible (Evaristo 76; Brown 29-97; Campt 3). Nzinga surfaces the dangers discussed by Allen and Love in relation to this idea of fixed representations of historically marginalised Black and queer groups. The authors warn how, without space and reference to more malleable conceptions and markers of Black, queer and diasporic identity, one runs the risk of stabilizing complex parts of our identities that only further oppress those it they are meant to represent.

> Yazz
> sits on the seat chosen by Mum in the middle of the stalls, one of
> the best in the house, although she'd rather be hidden away at the back in case the play
> is another embarrassment
>
> Yazz is reading English Literature and plans to be a journalist with her own column in a globally-read newspaper because she has a lot to say and it's about time the whole world heard her
> (Evaristo 41-42)

From the onset of her chapter, Yazz's self-importance and demand for attention are contradicted by her resentment of her mother's hypervisibility as an artist although she enjoys the social and financial benefits of Amma's theatre success. Yazz's internal hypocrisy and self-contradiction are constructed in parallel to Amma's which manifests most prominently in her relationship with her feminist politics and identity as a mother.

> Yazz was the miracle she never thought she wanted, and having a child really did complete her, something she rarely confided because
> It somehow seemed anti-feminist
> Yazz was going to be her countercultural experiment
> (Evaristo 36)

Both womxn struggle to align their personal desires with their political affiliations in this performance of the liberated, countercultural, intentionally deviant Black womxn they embody. Cohen describes this kind of friction between the expectations from the outer world and one's desires from their inner world as the "everyday politics" that those at the bottom of the "race, gender and class" practice (27). Cohen

goes on to discuss the relationship between political practices and/or affiliations, from the position of marginalised Black communities in a white, middle-class hegemonic society, and personal practices or behaviour of non-conformity by marginalised groups. There is an effect that these two practices of political affiliation and personal desire have on one another. This effect is the construction, embodiment and perception of deviance by the nonconforming individual or group (Cohen 30).

In instances where this deviance is intentional, those embodying it are reaching for their limited agency through self-actualising in alignment with their desires with the knowledge of possible or guaranteed consequences. These consequences may manifest socially, physically or economically. In the case of Amma's character in *Girl, Woman, Other*, she is aware of the perceived social and political consequences of having a child with a man.

> Amma didn't discriminate, she bragged to her friends that her
> tastes were truly egalitarian as they traversed culture, class, creed, race, religion and generation…
> non-monogamous relationships are her thing, or is it called polyamory now?
> (Evaristo 20-22)

Her portrait as the rebellious theatre director with a bohemian, free-loving, three-some-having approach to her carefully curated gender and sexual identity is vulnerable to distortion by her relatively heteronormative desire to mother a biological child (Evaristo 4-21). Beyond Amma's perceived deviance through her alternative, artistic lifestyle, Evaristo very subtly reveals what truly drives her character beneath the politicized, *polyamorised* façade.

> then her mother died, devoured from the inside by the ruthless,
> ravenous, carnivorous disease that started off with one organ before
> moving on to destroy the others
>
> Amma saw it as symptomatic and symbolic of her mother's
> oppression
> Mum never found herself, she told friends, she accepted her sub-
> servient position in the marriage and rotted from the inside
> she could barely look at her father at the funeral
> (Evaristo 34-35)

Through its form and diction, the above passage reveals that there is a deep-rooted fear of oppression and resentment that drives Amma's intentional deviance and counter-culturalism. Out of fear of ending up like her mother and her resentment for her father, Amma's identity became entangled with the rejection of her parent's diasporic heteronormativity as a measure to protect herself from a similar fate. Evaristo strategically locates this revelation near the end of the character's narrative to emphasize this disturbance of who the reader perceives Amma to be and the motivations behind her deviant practices.

The aesthetic, and topographical choices in positing words like “ruthless”, “ravenous” and the isolation of “oppression” at the beginning and end of the above lines deliver a similar impact that forces the reader to confront the more difficult textures of Amma (34-35).

As Cohen, Allen and Love assert, the purpose of the countercultural or deviant representations of marginalised groups is not to render their unique or hidden dysfunction but functions rather to explore the potential for counter-normative behaviour, identities and experiences from positions of reclaimed agency. The overview of the above twelve portraits and the complexity of their narratives that is produced through their deviance provides us with the opportunity to apply what Cohen, Allen and Love posit as a more expansive and critical consideration of representing marginality. This practice, while risky, allows us to assess how rendering nonconforming identities does not seek to stabilize or reconcile deviant identities. Rather, this achieves the rendering of subjective portraits of Black/queer/diasporic womxn whose overlapping identities and representation thereof rely heavily on the relational network of subjectivities that inform their individual and collective narratives.

The Sable Venus: Constructing the Deviant Black Woman

To be deviant or to live in opposition is to exist in direct and active conflict with normative assumptions of white, hetero-patriarchal standards. In “What Black Girls Don’t Do?: Constructions Of Deviance and the Performance of Black Female Sexuality” (2015), Hill, Shoaff, McKnight and Raimist investigate the “hypersexual/asexual binary” imposed on Black American female bodies and how this imposed model of social and sexual behaviour is (re)produced and consumed (Hill et. al 1). Ultimately, through lived experiences and scholarship across disciplines and mediums, it is understood that the construction of Black womanhood in the nineteenth to the twentieth century has been (and continues to be) a strategy of the dehumanization of Black women. This process whose racial, social, sexual and gendered identities have been manufactured in direct opposition to white, Eurocentric, heteropatriarchy and femininity (Hill et al 6).

Eighteenth-century portrayals of Black women in the context of the Middle Passage and slavery are historically fraught with the depiction of the Black female figure and its sexual exploitation. In “The Sable Venus and Desire for the Undesirable” by Regulus Allen, the uneasiness and violence with which the Black female figure has been constructed as oppositional is discussed with the conflation of this Black gendered figure with “monstrosity, savagery and lasciviousness” within the English, imperial tradition (667). As the antithesis of white (European) femininity characterized by “beauty, civilization and chastity”, the concept of an oppositional beauty manufactured through the Black became archetypical of “African female beauty and sexuality” (Allen, 667). This has simultaneously represented the repulsion and attraction toward this figure by a white, male, colonial gaze (Allen, 667).

The Black Venus, or the Sable Venus as depicted and narrativized by Thomas Stothard's nineteenth century etching of the idyllic Black female figure from the West Indies and narrativized by Isaac Teale's earlier 1793 poem, *The Sable Venus, An Ode* illustrates the construction of the Black female figure and its [5] sexuality. In her analysis of both works, Steph Reeves describes Teale's composition of this figure according to her likeness to her (white/original) Venus in terms of her limbs and beauty (Reeves 2018; Teale lines 85-89). Throughout the narrative poem, the Sable Venus is constructed as an allegory for the white, colonial male gaze and how the monstrous beauty of this suprahuman being holds the power to seduce white men into sexual depravity. This ultimately reinforced the notion of the Black Venus's inherent and active deviant seduction.

> the invocation of black beauty ultimately
> is employed to show the beauty and superiority of whiteness,
> the Black Venus remains a sexually desirable figure despite her
> representation as aesthetically inadequate, and this attraction to
> the inferior undermines the very pretences of white supremacy
> that the figure was created to uphold

(Regulus Allen 668)

Although aware of the opposing analyses of the poem as either admiration of Black beauty by white colonialists or the ironic celebration of the rape of Black female slaves by white sailors and slave owners, Regus argues that both the poem and painting of the Sable Venus "actually establishes Black female beauty only to undermine it and acknowledges the sexual desire for the Black woman only to disavow" (669). The uneasiness and the anxiety involved in white, colonial obsession and subjugation of the Black female figure is Allen's preoccupation as he investigates how this simultaneous production and consumption of the Black female figure in English literature has served to reinforce racial hierarchy and the superiority of European morality (Allen, 685).

The ways authors like Robin Coste Lewis appropriate this construction of the Black female figure is through the redirection and repetition of this trope of the Sable Venus that is refracted through their experimental narrative form. In 2015, Lewis published her debut collection of poetry, *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems,* which uses Teale's 1765 narrative poem and imagery of the Black Venus as an allegory for the white, imperial, male gaze and its dehumanizing construction (exploitation) of Black femininity and sexuality.

In her collection, Lewis begins by formally acknowledging the methodology and limitations she imposed upon herself when formulating the narrative poem which is "comprised solely and entirely of the titles, catalogue entries, entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a Black

[5] I invoke the term. "it" in this context to point to the reductive objectification and dehumanisation involved in these modalities of representing the Black female figure.

female figure is present" (Lewis 35). Lewis imposes this figuratively distant and disembodied approach to appropriating art dating from "38,000 BCE to present" to illustrate the disembodiment and fragmentation of the Black female figure. Lewis's formal treatment of the language and patterning in the narrative poem, "Voyage of the Sable Venus" renders images and descriptions saturated with horror. By wielding the very language used historically to describe the literal and figurative capturing of the Black female body in a colonial context, Lewis repeats and redirects this violent history by experimenting with this form.

For example, in *Catalog I: Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome*, a series of couplets describe various portraits of Black women named "Black Slave Girl"; "Young Black Woman"; "African Princess"; "Black Statuette" and "Female Full-length Figure" are written in conjunction with disembodied body parts such as a "Right Half of Body, Head Missing" or "Arms Missing" (Lewis 43, Line 1-18). As the poem is made up entirely of stanzas, this repetition in form enforces a rhythm that naturalizes the horrific imagery depicted by the individual lines. These lines similarly imitate the short description beneath photographs in catalogues or museums. Without any punctuation and only structure and spacing to support the poem and drive this rhythm, the placement of particular words such as "Black Dancing Girl", "Concubine", "Black" and finally "Monkey" at the end of the poem demand attention (Lewis 43, Line 1-26).

This appropriation of this descriptive style used within historical catalogues and archives as well as the direct transposition of the language used to describe the Black female figure (and its parts) is how Lewis utilizes form to recover and redirect this narrative. The author demands the reader to engage with the dehumanizing imagery and reductive measures used to historically categorize and describe Black women without reinscribing the embedded violence in the process.

Bernardine Evaristo employs a similar strategy in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) with how she depicts the physical and sexual violence characters like Carole are confronted with by way of this same poetic patterning and repetition.

> then
> her
> body
> wasn't
> her
> own
> no
> more
>
> it

belonged
to
them…

after minutes or hours or days or several lifetimes had
passed, it stopped
you were gagging for it, and by the way, you were great
then they were gone
and
so
was
she.
(Evaristo 125-127)

In the above except from Carole's chapter, Evaristo utilizes this distinctive poetic patterning that isolates single lexical items to signal the sexual violence that Carole encountered at age thirteen at her friend LaTisha's house party. Without explicit mention of the act of rape itself, Evaristo embeds the sexual violence and the disassociation that Carole experiences with the intensity it warrants, avoiding re-inscription of the horror through explicitly violent language. Like Lewis, Evaristo relies on the poetic patterning and limited punctuation of these related passages to depict the horror done to a Black girl's body. The significance of this event and Evaristo's untraditional method is also evident in the contrast between the incredibly detailed prose used to construct each of the twelve characters and their social environments throughout the novel in comparison to the restrained, implicative language and cadence used in this violent moment.

Similar to Carole's portrait, Evaristo utilizes this same poetic patterning throughout Dominique and Nzinga's abusive relationship. In the moments where these two characters interact, the tension and isolation created by their unbalanced power dynamic is mirrored by the narrative form and Evaristo's aesthetic choices.

with me, you're safe, Nzinga said, although Dominique wasn't
feeling particularly unsafe
with me, you're complete, although Dominque wasn't feeling
incomplete
(Evaristo 90)

From this excerpt, it's evident that Nzinga insists that Dominque's sense of self and safety remains grounded in her (Nzinga's) image as the dominant partner in their relationship. Evaristo's isolation of this rhythmic passage in relation to the surrounding text on the page mirrors the kind of isolation that Nzinga forces onto Dominique. Simultaneously, the repetitive diction that bounces between Nzinga's dialogue and the third-person narration of Dominique's inner thoughts carries the tension between the characters, foreshadowing the co-dependency and implicit violence that approaches in the rest of their

sub-chapter. Again, this poetic patterning is how Evaristo signals the implicit violence that confronts the Black womxn in the novel with a tact that carries the weight of the violent encounters without reinscribing it.

> the day Nzinga punched Dominique on the arm was the day she thought she'd leave, reasoned it was a one-off, discovered it wasn't when a single punch progressed into multiple ones
> Dominique didn't want to escalate Nzinga's aggression by fighting back, until she confessed to herself she didn't really have it in her to do so, she was genuinely non-violent
> when she tried to storm out of the house to get away during rows, Nzinga blocked the door with her imposing size, legs astride, ordered her to sit down on a chair and breathe deeply…
>
> all day Nzinga's voice megaphoned into Dominique's consciousness, resounding, pounding, she spent such little time alone, she forgot how to spend time alone, she took to sleeping in late and going to bed early, she hated being outside in the unrelenting brilliance of sunshine
> (Evaristo 105)

Later in Dominque's narrative when the physical violence she experiences is rendered more explicitly, the form of the passages takes on a different structure. Evaristo lapses into extended, run-on lines and passages void of line breaks and punctuation. Where the use of these stream-of-consciousness passages wherein the insidious and overwhelming control Nzinga has over Dominique physically, emotionally and mentally is rendered, the violence is embedded into the passing narrative that takes on an entirely different cadence. What this achieves is the seamlessness with which Nzinga enacts violence onto Dominique and Dominque's own reluctance to pause to acknowledge the pervasiveness of the violence she experiences.

Narratively and aesthetically, this orientation to how violence is depicted in relation to Evaristo's characters is how the author, like Lewis, effectively liberates the Black female figure through fusion-fiction. Evaristo complicates portraits of Carole and Dominique as victims of violence whose exploitation will inevitably be reinscribed through language. This effectively subverts the tradition of perpetuating a particular gaze that is committed to constructing the Black female figure alongside naturalised and warranted violence. Evaristo reveals how Carole and Dominque complicate their narratives as victims by showing their implicit submission to people and circumstances. While both victims find themselves in these adverse circumstances in their bids for personal agency as a mature woman of a radical feminist respectively, their deviant behaviour achieves the opposite effect.

However, the author doesn't make the violence they experience definitive of their portraits/identities. Rather, she surfaces how the experience of this kind of violence is part of a larger complex of these

characters who attempt to actualise themselves as grown women, or the right kind of queer, diasporic Black woman. Carole and Dominique's misguided decisions that lead to their vulnerability to the violence they experience are strategic in rendering how reaching for these particular labels that heteronormative, radical or countercultural prescribed behaviour does not necessarily serve or satisfy the desires of the individual.

What Lewis and Evaristo similarly achieve is the suspension of this violence and dehumanization experienced by the Black female figure through their manipulation and experimentation with language and tropes. This aesthetic and narrative deviance through both the form and the content of these respective portraits of the Black female figure and its relationship to violence ultimately deviates away from how the Black female figure has traditionally been constructed to warrant violence by virtue of their deficient womanhood, femininity or humanity.

With this understanding of how Evaristo and Lewis subvert traditional constructions of Black womxnhood through portraits of the Black female figure, it becomes possible to critically assess just how deliberate and liberating these experimental strategies are. By complicating the forms and modalities that render the implicit violence that walks alongside representations of this racialised, sexualised and gendered experience, Evaristo deviates from the normative constructions of Black diasporic womxnhood through these textured portraits that addresses the violence, asymmetries and contradictions that punctuate instead of define Black/queer diasporic experiences.

Chapter Four: Portraits of Motherhood: Love, Labour and Identity

Throughout the first four chapters of Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, motherhood is central in the relational web held together by the bonds between the characters who form part of mother-daughter dyads. The significance of motherhood as a relational tether between the characters is evident in how the triptych chapters are organised around a dominant mother-daughter pairing. Through these often-deviant portrayals of Black diasporic motherhood, Evaristo draws textured portraits of motherhood through the themes of love and labour.

In one of the final chapters of the novel, Hattie and Slim are presented as a portrait of diasporic relation in line with Hall [6] and Gilroy's [7] conceptions of diaspora as a "complicated process of positioning in relation to a sense of belonging vis-à-vis the creation of psychic, symbolic and material communities and home(s) in the sites of settlement" (Campt 96). This approach to diaspora and relationality as a process of positioning is useful in that it acknowledges the state of diaspora as constantly in flux and consistently undergoing organisation and redefinition depending on the social and spatial conditions. In the portrait of Hattie and Slim, their diasporic identities are complicated by Slim's African American roots and his conception of a Black identity. In contrast, Hattie has a deeper maternal history whose ties to the English land of Greenfields farmhouse create tension in the spaces between their diasporas. Their individual diasporas and histories converge at Greenfields farmhouse which exists as a material and symbolic home or settlement that Hall and Gilroy point to, holding its own complexities that personify the land as its own character in the novel.

Gilroy and Campt's discussion of diasporic relations is punctuated by the mutuality and transnationality that bind diasporic subjects together. Hattie and Slim's relationship to not just each other but their own identities as Black is an example of how Evaristo addresses these notions of transnational and transcultural exchange and the tensions that emerge in the space between diasporas. Slim's portrait is painted with an aggravated and violent history of growing up in a Jim Crow America where "the Negro had a reason to be angry, having spent four hundred years in America enslaved, victimized and kept downtrodden" (356). His understanding of the burden of his Blackness creates tension in his marriage with Hattie who is a "high-yaller..living in the back of beyond" (356). Evaristo reveals this tension as a result of Hattie's physical and symbolic conception of Slim's Blackness and diasporic experience as something that is far removed from their reality in the English countryside. Throughout their marriage and parenthood, Hattie dismisses Slim's confrontational and contemptuous engagement with race

[6] Hall, Stuart. "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?." *Questions of Cultural Identity.* Edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011: 1-17. *SAGE Knowledge*. Web. 1 Apr 2022, doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907.n1.

[7] Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

because they're "a million miles from America and its different [here], Slim, not perfect but better (Evaristo 367).

Contrastingly, Hattie's racial and diasporic identity is informed by a softer, more ambiguous *in-betweenness* due to her being mixed-race. Her "creamy complexion" coupled with the substantial land she would one day inherit are explicitly presented as part of the reason Slim chose her to be his wife. In some ways, this was his way to re-write his own narrative as a diasporic subject whose historical relationship with colour, land and ownership couldn't be more different to Hattie's. The tension between their two subjectivities is apparent in the narrative, particularly in the poetic form where Slim's lack of ownership and Hattie's reinforcement of it are emphasised by their isolation.

> Slim came from sharecropping stock, his people farmed land but
> never owned it…
>
> now he was married to Hattie, the land he worked was one day
> going to be his
> hers too, she reminded him
> (Evaristo 363)

This evident tension between Hattie and Slim's characters reveals that a conception of diaspora that is founded on shared racialised experiences or a transferable sense of belonging is inefficient in bridging the gap between subjective diasporas. Especially those that are complicated by asymmetries in geography, history and cultural context (Campt 98). In Campt's discussion of Diaspora in "The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diasporic Relation" (2002), the author asserts that "the concept of diaspora does not constitute a historically given or universally applicable analytic model for explaining the cultural and historical trajectories of all black populations" (98). While we similarly acknowledge the utility in Hall and Gilroy's conception of diaspora mentioned above, what Campt and Evaristo address is the tensions in the intimate contours of a relational conception of diaspora when influenced by different historical and geographic trajectories.

So then, what is presented as a possible solution to this tension or gap within diasporic relations wherein asymmetries and diverging trajectories collide? In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo presents motherhood as the bridge between diasporas. Throughout the narrative and particularly at the end of the novel, motherhood functions as the relational link that Hall and Gilroy's "process of positioning" is anchored by in terms of how characters mend the tensions and relational gaps between one another. The portrait of the mother serves as the psychic, symbolic and material home for her diasporic subjects and their complexities.

Destiny O Birdsong discusses the inextricability between the matrilineal relationship and identity formation in Black women's literature with an emphasis on the matrilineal inscription that occurs within

a mother-daughter dyad (2012). In her discussion she surfaces Trudier Harris's text, A Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character (1995), she investigates the relationship between early Black American novelists and the construction of the Black mother through a "paradigm of invincibility" (Bridsong 2). Through the narrative form and content of *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo explores the intimacies of the mother-daughter dyad from their respective perspectives while traciong varying portraits of motherhood that complicate this portrait of (predominantly) Black motherhood. What I find most productive in this line of inquiry that privileges motherhood as a foundation of identity formation and a bridge across diasporic subjectivities is the unique location of motherhood at the very intimate intersections of love, labour and identity.

Evaristo facilitates a similar investigation through the narrative construction of the Black mother from particularly racialised, gendered perspectives where the mother's identities and their embodiments of love and labour are complicated by their diasporic trajectories of migration, nationality, cultural affiliations and desires. I find motherhood to be a particularly generative line of inquiry into unpacking deviant representations of Black diasporic womanhood. This is due to the rigid and prescriptive qualities that often confine the character of the Black mother to the traditional narrow portrait of the Mammy figure. Through characters like Amma, Bummi, Shirley, Winsome, Penelope, Daisy, Grace and finally Hattie, the ways that mothers reach for their agency through embodied opposition to normative models of motherhood, the author is able to render deviant these portraits. Ultimately, these portraits effectively complicate the figure of the Black mother as well as its pertinence as a dominant tether for a diasporic relational consciousness.

Amma's portrait of motherhood undoes a perception of biological motherhood as somehow un-feminist. The deviance in this character's portrait of motherhood is rendered through her radical approach to poly-parenting and her continued commitment to her artistic career. As a contrast to Amma's "countercultural" and "experimental" motherhood that empowers Yazz as a "free spirit" equipped to resist "the oppressive regimentation of the education system", Evaristo draws a more normative model of Black motherhood through Bummi whose self-sacrifice re-inscribes what Harris and Birdsong consider a problematic fictionalisation (Evaritso 37; Birdsong 3).

> Even though many fictionalized mothers make dangerous sacrifices for the sake of their children, these traits also alienate their spouses and families because the women are so often portrayed as "more suprahuman than human, more introspective than involved, more silently working out what [they] perceived to be best for [their] children than actively and warmly communicating those desires to them.
> (Harris 111; Birdsong 2-3).

The alienating introspection that Harris and Birdsong discuss is evident from the onset of Bummi's chapter. Bummi, immediately following the focalization of her character through her name, makes her consistent sacrifice and knowledge of what's best for her daughter explicit to both the reader and Carole.

> Bummi
> did not foresee the long-term negative impact of her daughter
> going to the famous university for rich people
>
> Carole, have I raised a fighter or a quitter? you must return to the university and get your degree by hook or by crook or I cannot vouch for the consequences of my actions
> (Evaristo 150)

Bummi's portrait of motherhood is one entangled in the embodiment of maternal love through labour and self-sacrifice. A significant portion of Bummi's narrative is from the distant observation of how her daughter behaves and develops as she assimilates into a normative, white, British upper class at the expense of her Nigerian and working-class diasporic upbringing. The way Bummi observes and describes her daughter, almost pathologically, suggests that Bummi perceives Carole as not just an extension of her and her efforts but as a projection of her sacrifices and perceived failures.

> did she think her mama did not notice the external manifestation of her internal mind? eh! eh!, you do not raise a child without becoming an expert in non-verbal signals they think you are too stupid to see
> (Evaritso 151)

The alienating and erosive nature of this kind of stereotypical Black motherhood manifests in Bummi's schizophrenia surrounding her daughter Carole and the way she chooses to internalize their emotionally distant mother-daughter bond. In response, Carole asserts her own identity as a second-generation immigrant in the white world she participates in. Harris and Birdsong discuss this contentious mother-daughter dyad as a way for Black woman authors to explore broader themes within Black literature. These explorations include "the portrayal of the Black female mind and body in the quest for autonomy and personhood [and] the formation of a racial identity separate from external violations of the body; and the black subject's connection to national, regional, gender, and other communal histories" (Birdsong 4). What I find significant in this constriction of Bummi's portrait of motherhood is how Evaristo counters this critical, pathologized and schizophrenic portrait of Bummi with her portrait as a lover.

> Bummi looked forward to seeing Omofe at work and at church,
> Where they sat together, she began to miss her when they were apart, found herself longing to touch her new friend in ways that were not

acceptable…
and instead of it feeling bad, it felt right
(Evaristo 178)

Away from the responsibilities of single motherhood and being a business owner, Bummi and the demeanour of her narrative soften and turn inward in relation to her lover, Sister Omofe. In contrast to Bummi's language previously, sharpened by critical thinking and assumption, Bummi now has the freedom to *imagine, feel and long* for another woman. This switch from a critical, almost dissociative observer to an internally reflecting, present and embodied observation of her inner, intimate world is where Bummi's deviance emerges. In the beginning, her relationship with Omofe requires no sacrifice or pathologizing, thus subverting the portrait of Bummi as the alienated and sacrificial Black maternal figure whose needs and desires are secondary to those of others. Although it briefly appears in her narrative, this reconstruction of Bummi complicates her portrait as a Black mother and effectively liberates the character from the stereotype she is originally portrayed as.

Bummi and Penelope's narratives intersect when Bummi "as Chief Executive of BW Cleaning Services International Plc" takes on Penelope as a client (174). As her domestic worker, Bummi and Penelope enter into a deeply intimate yet asymmetrical relationship that allows the reader to compare the women's relationship with maternal love, labour and identity. In contrast to Bummi's self-reliance and resilience, Penelope Halifax's dependence yet ironic loneliness illustrates the disparity between the burdens of Black motherhood versus white motherhood. While Bummi arms herself with a great sense of accountability and the knowledge that "there was only one person to be relied upon, herself", Penelope retains the luxury to "[moan] about her awful first husband Giles…and her godawful second husband Phillip" who are both seemingly responsible for her unhappiness, dissatisfaction and general apathy with life from her "big [house] in Camberwell" (175-176). Beyond the frustration and pity that Bummi paints Penelope's portrait with due to their asymmetrical class, racial and cultural contexts, there is a deeper sense of repression and unbelonging that characterises Penelope's particular portrait of girlhood, womanhood and (m)otherhood.

they remained seated on the high-backed chairs in their allotted
places around the oval dining table covered with a fringed tablecloth
they unravelled the napkins rolled up in wooden rings with their
names etched into them
they ate the lamb chops, minted potatoes and buttered peas they
had for Saturday lunch
passing the gravy
passing the pepper
passing the salt

(Evaristo 280-281)

In this passage that follows the revelation of Penelope's mysterious adoption by her (white) parents, Evaristo's aesthetic and poetic construction of the narrative carries with it the sterile, restrained and uncomfortable upbringing that Penelope experiences throughout her adolescence. In my own reading of the character, this passage almost exemplifies Penelope's experience of the world. The opening lines that describe the static, fastened parental structure and home environment that is meant to provide and represent stability are interrupted by the repetition of the word "passing" which is meant to signal movement but instead creates intense friction in this scene. This moment is suspended in Penelope's memory as the turning point in her perception of her identity and sense of belonging. This passage carries with it the tension in her realisation that "she was not of their blood or history" (282). In the narrative that follows, this becomes a theme in Penelope's relationships as she turns to ill-fitting romantic and platonic relationships in an attempt "to put her back together again" (284).

Penelope's portrait of motherhood is marked with a similar sense of alienation from the mother's self, spouse and community that Harris and Birdsong point to, but for an entirely different reason due to the character's social, racial and cultural context as one of the only white characters in the twelve narratives. As the "golden girl", quickly turned housewife mother of two to "gurgling-dribbling", and "*vampiric*" babies, Penelope unwillingness to her "role as an earth mother" quickly disturbs her fantasy of home that she so desperately desired (286). After the resounding dissatisfaction of motherhood and marriage, the remainder of Penelope's narrative is marked by a distinct cynicism and emotional volatility that doesn't come to any resolution by its end. This lack of resolution and uncomfortable positioning of Penelope's narrative at this point in the novel is a narrative strategy by Evaristo who suspends this sense of disorder or disarrangement that is later resolved through even further complicated portraits of Black motherhood. Penelope serves as a link to a deeper and wider lineage of Black womxn whose motherhood Evaristo utilises to build and connect this world-of-womxn.

Love, Labour and Identity

In the final triptych stack of narratives in the novel, Megan/Morgan, Hattie and Grace's narratives introduce unique portraits that render the complex intersections of love, labour and diasporic identity that punctuate motherhood in the text. The matrilineal path that renders Hattie, Grace and Daisy's portraits as mothers offers a particularly rich line of inquiry that allows us to investigate the intimacies of love, labour and diasporic identity.

Like the previous chapter that paints the portraits of motherhood for Amma, Bummi, Winsome and Penelope whose deviance is rendered more tangibly in the foreground of their characterisations, Grace's narrative paints a similarly intimate and complex portrait of motherhood. By way of Grace, the daughter of Daisy, Evaristo surfaces issues of intimate labour and maternal tragedy through both characters'

experiences of motherhood. Going back two generations from Hattie's narrative present, Grace introduces the reader to the tragic story of her Ma (Daisy), who fell pregnant to Wolde, and Abyssinian seaman "who sailed into South Shields in 1895…leaving behind the beginnings of Grace hidden inside her Ma who just turned sixteen" (372). Almost immediately, through the poetic patterning in the narrative structure that details Daisy's embodiment of motherhood, Evaristo constructs the maternal portrait of Daisy as the nurturing, protective figure whose job it was to "protect and care for [Grace]", ferociously.

> Daisy
> moved out, vowed never to talk to her Ma again, who was too
> weak to stand up to a father who cared more about what other
> people thought than helping his own child
> she found a job making artificial flowers for a hat factory, shared
> lodgings with Ruby, another youngster who had a five-year-old son
> called Ernest for a sailor who'd come and gone
> he came from somewhere called Aden next to the Red Sea
> can you imagine, Gracie? a sea that's red?
>
> Daisy
> carried Grace everywhere in a sling because there was nobody to
> leave her with, nobody she trusted, enough
> after her entire family had cut her off
> certainly not Ruby, who didn't clean Ernest very often
> I washed you every day, Gracie, in a bowl of water I collected
> from the standpipe and warmed in the hearth where the iron pot
> stewed vegetables
> I washed you until you were squeaky clean and the lovely little
> curls on your head shone like dewdrops…
>
> Daisy
> promised to take Grace to the countryside
> what I'd give to see you run freely on the soft, springy grass with
> the sun shining on to your lovely caramel face, to hear you calling
> out, you can't catch me, Ma, you can't catch me
> (Evaristo 374-375)

The way Evaristo organises Daisy's sudden and complicated initiation into motherhood emphasises the physical and intimate labour necessitated by motherhood that marks the end of childhood, even at the age of sixteen. By isolating "Daisy" at the start of each short passage that narrates the character's expulsion from her childhood home, her struggle to find accommodation and childcare as well as her unwavering commitment to keeping her looked after, Evaristo asserts Daisy as the quintessential traditional maternal figure. The placement of Daisy's name that punctuates each passage simultaneously asserts the alienation and isolation involved in the labour Daisy must perform in fulfilment of her role

as a single mother to a mixed-race child in her social context. Evaristo accompanies each reiteration of Daisy's name with a verb that describes this labour. Whether it be "moved", "carried" or "promised", this repetition of the physical and emotional action that Daisy embodies characterizes the ceaseless, self-sacrificing nature of Daisy's motherhood (374-375).

> Daisy
> who didn't reckon on starting up a wet, hacking cough when
> Grace was eight, made worse by the coal dust that swirled in the air
> she couldn't afford to be ill, she told her daughter, I can't afford a
> doctor, and even so, if I take time off sick I'll not get paid and might
> not have a job to go back to
> who will feed us, Gracie, who will feed us?
> I'll feed you, Ma, I'll feed you
>
> Daisy
> was diagnosed with tuberculosis after the girls at work went in a group
> to complain to the manager that she was sick and was going to infect them
> a doctor arrived to inspect her and she was taken to be quarantined in the sanatorium
> (Evaristo 375)

In this pair of passages, there is a change to the linguistic pattern previously established. Daisy's character is no longer produced through the maternal labour she performs for Grace. Now, her portrait is bound to the illness she falls victim to. Like the previous narrative structure, Evaristo isolates Daisy's name to punctuate the beginning of the passage. This symmetry in structure suggests that Daisy's identity as a mother is as much defined by her labour and responsibilities as she is by her tragic illness and premature death. This trajectory in illness is in direct correlation to the metaphorical disease of the strong maternal figure that Harris and Birdsong critique in their analysis of the traditional characterisation of Black mothers in Black women's literature. Daisy becomes quite literally diseased by the intensive labour and exploitation she is forced to endure as a mother. Although the character is not Black, she is relegated to a marginalised maternal experience due to her Black daughter. Daisy experiences a comparable kind of social and psychological alienation and self-sacrificing that burdens her experience of motherhood much like Nigerian-born Bummi or working-class LaTisha from earlier chapters.

Through the matrilineal passage where Daisy, Grace and Hattie are related, all three women are marked by their rejection of victimhood by way of the disadvantages dealt to them by their social, spatial and racial contexts. While Grace rejects her family and society's traditional, white values of racial purity by caring for her mixed-race daughter, Grace herself furiously rejects the public perception of her as "a temptress, a tease, a seductress when she is resolutely not" just by virtue of being one of the only Black women in a small town (386-387). While these are just examples of how Evaristo embeds this trans-

generational rebellious spirit within this mother-daughter dyad, they illustrate how Evaristo utilises deviance as a strategy to grant each woman a sense of agency. The same pattern of maternal, trans-generational deviance is evident in Hattie's portrait of girlhood, womanhood and (m)otherhood. Her portrait is complicated by a string of miscarriages prior to her birth that resulted in Grace rejecting her for a significant period of her adolescence. Hattie's own abrupt induction into premature motherhood mirrors that of her grandmother, Daisy. Thus, the tethers between these three characters and their resilience simultaneously acknowledge the traditional literary productions of the strong, Black mother while complicating their portraits with a deeper narrative subversion through deviance.

By deviating from the paths prescribed to them, each (m)other forges a new, better path for the descendant who is able to live a more self-actualised, fulfilling reality that their foremother imagines and inscribes into them. This is how Evaristo constructs and complicates the narrative arch of the novel through portraits of motherhood that serve as the symbolic, psychic and material sites of belonging for these three characters. Thus, the eventual return of Penelope to her biological mother, Hattie, after decades of physical and emotional displacement, the significance of motherhood as the link within this diasporic relational web of womxn is reinforced for the final time.

Through these character portraits discussed, Evaristo produces counternarratives of Black diasporic womxnhood by rendering the intentionality and inevitability of the character's deviance as a tool toward their self-actualisation and liberation. By reinscribing and effectively disturbing traditional, stabilised literary productions of Black motherhood, Evaristo offers a revision of character that reclaims and reimagines portraits of Black diasporic womxnhood.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

As a project of relationality, Evaristo's text "maps the intersections between racialised and sexualised bodies" as they traverse time and space across Great Britain (Tinsley 193). The social bonds between the twelve characters bridge almost one hundred years of Black British history with a queer orientation that disturbs a traditional chronology that has historically muted the reality of Blackness *as part* of Britishness. Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) has been discussed throughout the previous chapters as a kind of aesthetic and narrative response to the prevailing, traditional conventions of a literary canon that has ineffectively constructed portraits of Black diasporic womxnhood. Although framed by at times diverging and incoherent diasporic rhetoric that seeks to diagnose the scholarly and artistic contemporary conditions of diasporic thought and experience, Evaristo's experimentation and subversion of these scripts through themes of race, gender, sexuality and belonging have been discussed to represent the fertility and the limitations of subjective diasporic literary representation.

Deviance has been utilized as the central point of access into this investigation of how the author is able to construct these textured and dimensional portraits of the twelve Black British womxn who produce and participate in a relational network of subjectivities. Deviance, understood as intentional non-conforming behaviour that functions to reclaim limited agency by a marginalised individual or group with the knowledge of possible consequences, has been a suitable critical framework to analyse the novel's aesthetic and narrative strategies. The ways that these strategies have been utilized are evidence of a productive and provocative response to the deficient univocal literary representations of Black British womxnhood.

Fusion fiction as an aesthetic sensibility has been presented as the experimental form apt for the fluidity and subjectivity the text renders through its multiple, layered narratives. Characterised by its free-flowing style, lack of punctuation, and prose-poetic patterning, Evaristo's aesthetic deviance has been discussed according to Gopinath's conception of diasporic aesthetic practices. It is through these practices, from within the margins of diasporic subjectivity that the occlusive cartographies, histories and intimacies of diasporic identity are reclaimed. As such, authors like Evaristo can develop and appropriate new ways of representing diaspora through deviant aesthetic modalities that recover and re-imagine Black diasporic womxnhood. By paying close attention to the use of names throughout the narratives, the topography of the passages and the poetic patterns that emerge at critical moments in the text, Evaristo's aesthetic deviance as a strategy has been argued. Not only has fusion fiction been presented as a strategy for the subjective rendering of these twelve textured character portraits, but it has also been presented as a formal strategy that facilitates the reclamation of agency through the narrative.

Evaristo's experimental form has been shown to subvert formal normative conventions of the structure of the traditional novel as part of its strategy of re-imaging diasporic chronologies through the form. By relying on poetic patterning at critical points throughout the twelve narratives, Evaristo bends any chrononormative expectation in favour of the character's centricity and dimension constructed through their narrative. For example, the patterned repetition of that character's names to introduce each sub-chapter as well as the poetic patterning and stream-of-consciousness narration that slow down and speed up time have been presented as strategies utilised by Evaristo to focalize on the character's subjective perception and experience of critical moments to ensure the centricity of their subjectivity. This approach is characteristic of a transmodern novel that reaches into the intimacies and contours of marginalised narratives to acknowledge, recover and re-imagine diasporic representation.

Transmodernity as proposed by Rodriguez Magda (2011) has similarly served as the theoretical lens through which to analyse Evaristo's novel in its aesthetic and narrative response to the shortcomings of modern and post-modern literary representations of Black diasporic womxnhood. As a model, Transmodernity has facilitated an investigation into the cornerstones and efficacy of the relational consciousness that the novel constructs through its plurivocality and the dynamical differences within racialised, sexualised and gendered identities that navigate various spatial and temporal dimensions. Ultimately, the complimentary frameworks of Cohen's conception of deviance and that of Magda's Transmodernity have framed this analysis of *Girl, Woman, Other* as a practice of centricity for historically flattened portraits of Black British womxnhood.

The mother-daughter dyads, platonic soulmates and romantic lovers foreground the portraits in the novel as characters like Amma reconcile their past traumas and political hang-ups through deviant configurations of polyamory and motherhood while others like Bummi and Winsome turn to queer sexual and romantic relationships to satiate their repressed desires. These deviant portraits, where these womxn live in opposition to normative models of racialised gender and sexuality, are forged against the backdrop of their intersecting identities of Black/queer/diasporic as discussed by Allen. The bonds between characters and the dimensions they are constructed in are what produce Evaristo's world-of-womxn. Suspended in the identity matrix of Black/queer/diasporic, Cohen, Allen and Love turn to the literary as a suitable modality for reading and rendering these capacious identities.

In the overview of the twelve portraits in chapter three, the ways the character's portraits intersect and diverge illustrate the inextricability of their varied levels of relation with one another aesthetically and narratively. This is because they are naturally tethered by the themes of race, gender, sexuality and relationality in the spatial and temporal dimensions they navigate life as Black British womxn. But, with the application of Cohen, Allen and Love's approach to representing Black/queer/diasporic subjectivities, there remains space for the dynamic differences, contradictions and complexities within each character's portrait.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, deviance is rendered through alternative parental structures seen in Amma's non-monogamous, queer parenting lifestyle or Shirley's affair with her son-in-law, and even Grace's postpartum rejection of her child after years of infant deaths. All these womxn are constructed in opposition to tropes like the Mammy or the dutiful wife that have traditionally been used to describe Black womanhood according to its utility to those around the Black female figure.

Through these author's deviant practice of representation, there is no single meaning or seamless representation of a Black/queer/diasporic individual or collective and any attempts to unify their representation are futile. Evaristo wields this futility through the polyphony of the text that embraces the inconsistencies, contradictions and complexities of the twelve characters whose narratives are not compelled to arrive at neat endings but are more concerned with reaching for their individual agency in the relational networks they produce and participate in. What Allen points to is the necessity to construct a queer, Black world not simply through the violence of global capitalism, displacement and dislocation of Black bodies, but to construct it from within the intimate contours and cavities of desire, friendship and intimacy (Allen 2015). Through the discussion of the Sable Venus and its prescriptive construction of the Black female figure according to a white, Western colonial gaze, the novel has been discussed as the intentional revision of these tropes through its aesthetic and narrative rejection of reinscribing violence and exploitation onto the Black female body. Evaristo's body of work is thus a response to this call as she locates hundreds of years of history, migration, marriage, love, betrayal, friendship, romance etc. within these twelve intricate portraits of Black British womxnhood.

In the final chapter of this thesis, motherhood has been discussed as the central and most dominant relational tether throughout the novel. The chapter structure features triptych stacks of mother-daughter dyads that offer oscillating portraits of these closely related characters who converge and deviate from one another in their navigations and expressions of their womxnhood. Evaristo's dense portraits of motherhood that are bound by themes of love and labour are rendered as the foundation of the relational network of subjectivities that the novel weaves through the polyphonic, interrelated narratives.

Hall, Gilroy and Campt locate diaspora within the psychic, symbolic and material homes that function as the location of identity formation relative to how diasporic bodies position themselves in relation to the world and one another. This framing of diaspora as a process of positioning acknowledges the status of the characters in the novel as constantly in flux and consistently undergoing organisation and redefinition depending on the social and spatial conditions. For the portraits of Hattie and Slim, Evaristo offers as the bridge between the tense gaps within asymmetrical, fluctuating diasporas is motherhood as a function of a relational link between the character's diverging and converging diasporic trajectories.

Through the portraits of Amma, Bummi, Winsome, Daisy, Grace and Hattie, Evaristo draws deviant portraiture of mothers who reinscribe and live in opposition to traditional models of racialised motherhood as they navigate their subjective social and spatial contexts within Britain. Whether it be

through Amma's countercultural, poly-parenting, Bummi's homoerotic relationship, Winsome's betrayal of her daughter by way of her affair with her son-in-law, Daisy's unwavering protection of her mixed-race child or Grace and Hattie's tumultuous journeys into motherhood, Evaristo simultaneously reinscribes and subverts these representations of (predominantly) Black motherhood through form and character. Penelope and Hattie's reunion at the end of the novel further emphasises the centricity of motherhood in the novel whose objective has been discussed as the strategic relocation, re-imagination and re-representation of deviant Black diasporic womxnhood into British historical, geographic, and temporal dimensions.

With its plurivocal, multiaxial and intersectional approach to rendering Black, queer diasporic womxnhood, Evaristo's text very exemplifies the impossibility of doing everything at the same time. The futility in neatly unifying Black British womxnhood into a singular model that holds the necessary complexity and dimension is evident in Evaristo's strategy of using twelve intersecting narratives that are an experimental meditation on what Black British womxnhood may look like in its various dynamic forms. This revision of character that Evaristo conducts and the deviance of such lies at the intersection of the politics and aesthetics of the text. The ways these characters inform inflect and transpose onto one another in their network of subjectivities and how the free-flowing contingent form of the novel facilitates a non-normative rendering of the twelve characters functions as the root of this intentional and inevitable deviance produced by Evaristo.

What Evaristo achieves is the ability to identify or dis-identify with the *other* through a novel held tightly together by the intimacies of the womxn's relationships, yet held loosely by the form, ultimately allowing Evaristo to represent the fertility and the limitations of diasporic representation. This kind of layering is achieved through the borderlessness or fluidity of *Girl, Woman, Other* whose narratives are wrapped around one another. Ultimately, what is revealed to define these Black British womxn is not their stories of diasporic origin, displacement or assimilation into British culture. Rather, what is shown is how their subjective wielding of the identities of girl, woman and other inform their relations and relationships with one another and ultimately define their world. Rather than organize these shifting identities around violence, displacements and other traditional narratives used as markers of Black British identity, Evaristo utilizes these twelve deviant character portraits to reclaim and reimagine the Black womxn figure within the cannon.

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