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Reimagining the Past and Rethinking the Other: The Significance of Creative Historical Revision in Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and *Blonde Roots* (2008)

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Abstract In *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and *Blonde Roots* (2008), Bernardine Evaristo employs historical revision and counter-discursive narrative techniques to rethink the paradigm of self and Other. At the forefront of contemporary postcolonial feminist literature, Evaristo uses humor and personal stories to address contemporary cultural issues. Her novels challenge Western historical narratives, which have often been constructed to reinforce specific ideologies and structures of power. Evaristo's use of the alternate history or uchronia genre offers a way to reimagine historical moments, particularly those of Roman ruled Britain and the transatlantic slave trade, revealing alternative possibilities and highlighting the experiences of those often erased in traditional historical accounts. Through intersectional feminist close readings, this paper examines how Evaristo subverts epic and utopian narrative structures and questions entrenched notions of race, gender, and identity while providing new ways to understand history and its impact on global social dynamics.

Keywords uchronia; otherness; alternate history; postcolonial; feminism.

1. Introduction

Bernardine Evaristo is a leading author of contemporary postcolonial feminist literature. Her humorous and captivating writing often exemplifies postmodern narrative techniques such as intertextuality, hybridity, irony and genre experimentation. The two novels that will be comparatively analyzed in this essay, *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and *Blonde Roots* (2008), illustrate her ability to synthesize serious discussions of present-day socio-political issues with highly personal and witty narratives.

Her verse novel, *The Emperor's Babe*, begins with an epigraph by Oscar Wilde (2015), stating, "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it." Similarly, the prose novel *Blonde Roots,* starts with a Friedrich Nietzsche (1888)

quote: "All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth."[1] Together, these quotes aptly summarize the motivation behind much of Evaristo's work. Departing from a discussion of the characteristics and function of uchronia, this paper argues that Evaristo's creative reimaginings of Roman ruled Britain and the transatlantic slave trade are, in Helen Tiffin's (1987:19) words, uniquely successful "counter-discursive responses to the dominant tradition[s]" of history and storytelling. The close readings performed here, will demonstrate how these reimaginings serve to deconstruct the paradigm of the self and the Other, which has been largely established through dominant literary and historical narratives. Specifically, this paper will examine the ways in which Evaristo redeploys epic and dystopian narrative strategies, alters the visibility of marginalized subjectivities, and subverts historical and cultural myths, all while placing "transnational themes…alongside a transhistorical dimension" (McConnell 2016: 113). Through these strategies, Evaristo illustrates the transformative capacity of uchronia, and its potential to subvert persistent and problematic epistemologies.

1.1 Context and Definitions: The Uchronia Genre and Our Historical Imagination

Evaristo is writing in the wake of celebrated 20th-century postcolonial authors like Aimé Césaire, Jean Rhys, and Derek Walcott, who appropriated and reimagined canonical Western literary texts to challenge hegemonic cultural practices. This "self-conscious reinscription […] of European texts has been a widespread phenomenon" over the past six decades (Tiffin 1997: 219). Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo (2016) discuss this, and other counter-discursive techniques in their article on 'restorying.' According to Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016: 313) 'Storying' is "the process by which stories are shaped and told over time." Paraphrasing a 2009 TED talk given by acclaimed writer and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, they say that "storying is always connected to power—who can tell stories, how many, when, and under what circumstances—and that some stories, if told often enough, can become the sine qua non of a person, a group, or a nation" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo 2016: 313).

[1] In this epigraph, Evaristo cites a common misquote from "Notes (1888)." The original quotation is "Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying 'there are only facts,' I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations" (Kaufmann 1976).

In other words, the dominant narratives that are told over and over again are products of systems of power and inequality, and they tend to reify those very systems through their continued and unquestioned dissemination. 'Restorying,' in its many forms, is required to challenge these dominant narratives and to "better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences. [It] is an act of asserting the importance of one's existence in a world that tries to silence subaltern voices" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo 2016: 314).

According to Thomas & Stornaiuolo (2016: 315) there are six types of restorying: time, place, perspective, mode, metanarrative, and identity.[2] The primary form of restorying that will be discussed in this paper is the reframing or manipulation of time through "The speculative fiction genre known as alternate history [which] features stories that have an identifiable point of divergence from the history of our present reality" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo 2016: 18-319). According to Gavriel Rosenfeld (2002), the alternate history emerged with the rise of postmodernism – a mode which blurs the division between fact and fiction, privileges alternate perspectives, and is skeptical of official narratives. As will be argued in this paper, it is an effective decolonial and feminist 'counter-discursive' method, much like the rewriting or reimagining of canonical texts.

Genre critic Andy Duncan defines the alternate history, or uchronia,[3] as simply "a work of fiction in which history as we know it is changed for dramatic and often ironic effect" (2003: 209). Generally sparked by a 'what-if' question, the genre arose in the latter half of the 20th century as a way to "articulate different possible solutions to societal problems, those problems being of sufficient importance to require an alteration in the overall history of the narrated world" (Rosenfeld 2002; Suvin 1983: 149). Adapting the counter-discursive writing strategies successfully deployed by earlier postcolonial authors, Evaristo's work considers the questions and problems that have arisen in our present cultural context, while challenging the truthfulness and completeness of our dominant historical narratives – narratives which uphold problematic relationships between cultures and communities.

Contemporary postcolonial theory makes it clear that history has largely been constructed to fit a certain worldview. This is argued by noted historian

[2] Refer to "Figure 1: Forms of Restorying" in Thomas & Stornaiuolo's (2016) paper on 'Restorying the Self: Bending Toward Textual Justice' for a visual representation of these six types of restorying practices.

[3] The genre may be referred to using the following interchangeable terms: uchronia, allohistory, counterfactual narrative, or alternate history.

Hayden White (1973: 16) when he writes that "the historical consciousness on which Western man has prided himself since the beginning of the nineteenth century may be little more than a theoretical basis for the ideological position from which Western civilization views its relationship not only to cultures and civilizations preceding it but also to those contemporary with it in time and contiguous with it in space." Further supporting this claim, Benedict Anderson (2006: 116-117) suggests that nations are "conceived in language," and therefore, establishing national narratives can even involve an "official rewriting of history." It is worth adding that these narratives, largely written and disseminated by white cis-men, perpetuate a heteronormative and patriarchal status quo.

Given this, one can argue that 'fantastical' reimaginings of history are different from 'official' historical narratives only in degree, because "'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations" (White 1973: 21). The struggle is not, therefore, between truth and fiction, but between "whose stories are told and circulated" and whose are not (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016: 332). Thus, when questions of Europeanness, patriarchy, and cultural imperialism are being posed, postcolonial and feminist authors like Evaristo, weaponize the shaky foundations of our historical consciousness, employing similar tactics of invention and emplotment to tell thematically juxtaposed narratives which reverse or subvert problematic associations between racial or gender identity and otherness. The following comparative analysis will show how the alternate history narrative, exemplified by Evaristo's reimaginings of Roman ruled Britain and the transatlantic slave trade, can be an effective and emancipatory strategy for 'restorying' our world.

2. *The Emperor's Babe*: Reimagining Londinium

The subtle historical revision in this example of "literary archaeology," diverges slightly from the usual characteristics of uchronia (Hooper & Evaristo 2006: 4). Rather than dramatizing one point of divergence from the 'official' historical record or depicting an ensuing utopian or dystopian society (Duncan, 2003), in *The Emperor's Babe* Evaristo reimagines Londinium in AD 211 by inventing characters and minor revisions which draw the reader's attention to the absences and assumptions that pervade the dominant historical narratives. Thus, the central 'what if' question in this uchronia is not 'what if this moment in history happened differently?' but 'what if we remembered this moment in history differently?' Evaristo's subjective revision of history includes a centering

of the black female voice, which contributes to her reimagining of a transnational Londinium and recovers the agency of historically othered black and female subjects. Additionally, she experiments with a transhistorical and intertextual use of language and the epic form. These revisions fundamentally alter how we remember the past and how that past speaks to our present and our future.

As Evaristo states in her interview with Hooper (2006: 14), for her, "history-making is about giving presence to that which is absent." Contrary to common misconception, "the history of black people in Britain [has an extensive] and important genealogy," which predates the Windrush generation (McConnell 2016: 112). However, as argued by cultural studies pioneer Stuart Hall (1996: 441-442), this history has been largely erased due to "political and cultural practices which regulated, governed and 'normalized' the representational and discursive spaces of English society," perpetuating a myth of white British nationalism. This pervasive myth upholds the constructed paradigm of self and Other, which underlies modern discourses, systems, and institutions. Zuleika, Evaristo's fictional protagonist, is born in Londinium to Sudanese parents. By focalizing her narrative through a black female second-generation immigrant, Evaristo acknowledges the fact that "it's quite hard to locate black female historical figures at all" (Hooper & Evaristo 2006: 12). Although fictional, Zuleika's agential voice works towards recovering the many nameless and faceless women of color who have been underrepresented in our historical consciousness.

Evaristo's efforts to diversify historical narratives to more accurately reflect Britain's multicultural and multiracial history are further illustrated by the fact that "very few prominent characters in the novel have not experienced a dislocation from their ancestral homeland" (McConnell 2016: 104). Zuleika's Londinium is populated by many migrant characters, including the "Syrian, Tunisian, Jew, and Persian" immigrants who work with her father, a local baker named Lucan Africanus, who is also a part of this early African Diaspora, and of course the Nubian Emperor Septimius Severus (Evaristo 2002: 4). These inclusions contribute to the representation of a diverse, transnational, and multi-ethnic Londinium, "disrupt[ing] the notion that Britain was only populated by white people until recently" (Collins & Evaristo 2008: 1200).

Not only does this depiction of Londinium recover the diverse and transnational identity of early Britain; it also reflects a city whose demographics "[resonate with…] many in twenty-first century London" (McConnell 2016: 104). Thus, Evaristo's narrative propounds that present-day migrant

communities do not need to justify their presence in the United Kingdom – and indeed the wider European continent – because historians can trace African and Asian diasporas in Britain to before the country became a colonial power (Hooper & Evaristo 2004). By telling a story about African immigrants in Roman-ruled Britain, utilizing a genre inspired by the classical Homeric and Virgilian epics of continental Europe, set in a city which reflects the demographics and culture of modern-day London, Evaristo shows that the creation, dissemination, and claiming of historical narratives is a complex dialogical process, and that all these spaces and nations – both contemporary and historical – are "rhizomatically connected" (McConnell 2016: 112).

As this paper has begun to argue, Zuleika's complex personality, desires, and bildungsroman-like development challenge the othering and essentializing of the black female subject. In interviews, Evaristo has mentioned that "on hearing about *The Emperor's Babe*, many people assume that Zuleika is a slave" (McConnell 2016: 111). This incorrect assumption is based on centuries of objectifying and victimizing portrayals of black men and women in literature and historical narratives, which, as Paul Gilroy (1993: 6) argues, prohibits black individuals from being "perceived as agents, as people with cognitive capacities and even with an intellectual history." In opposition to this assumption, Zuleika herself is, in fact, a slave owner: "Two ginger girls arrived, captured up north, the freckled sort (typical of Caledonians) […] Fascinating, so vile, yet something just for me, id and ego. Pets" (Evaristo 2002: 55). Zuleika's ownership and dehumanizing treatment of these two white female 'Pets' inverts the paradigmatic portrayal of a white master and a black slave. While Evaristo is certainly not denying the existence of color-based racism and enslavement, she draws attention to the fact that although "scientific racism premised the rationale for transatlantic slavery" (Iromuanya 2017: 177), in ancient Greece and Rome "there was no equation of black skin color with slavery," nor did they "attach prejudicial attitudes" to blackness (McConnell 2016: 111, 103).[4] For example, while Zuleika's skin color may be noticed by others in Londinium, and she is affectionately referred to as "Illa Bella Negreeta!" she does not face discrimination or mis-treatment as a result (Evaristo 2002: 3). Thus, by reimagining a free black woman in the context of Britain's history, Evaristo constructs an alternative narrative which centers black bodies as complex agential selves and recovers that which has been erased.

[4] These claims are also supported by conclusions drawn by other historians such as Frank Snowden, author of *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (1983).

By telling the tale through a female narrator and protagonist, Evaristo "unsettles the expectations of [the] classical epic" (McConnell 2016: 105), reclaiming the genre much like Derek Walcott did in his celebrated epic *Omeros* (1990). As McConnell (2016: 107) observes, like this earlier example of postcolonial rewriting, Evaristo's counter-canonical verse novel similarly functions to "illuminate the importance of literary form in postcolonial writing and the rich repercussions of appropriating a genre that has been so inextricably connected with imperialism." However, Evaristo also writes with the specific goal of recentering women's voices and drawing attention to the persecution of both women in antiquity and women in the modern day. At the age of eleven, Zuleika is forced to marry an older Roman businessman, becoming a victim of sexual abuse and rape. She has no say in this transactional agreement, and it is made clear that her father views her merely as an object with reproductive potential who he can trade for his own financial gain. Her wedding night is described using graphic imagery and references to the Roman god of death: "[He] held a candle to my vulva until flames tried to exit my mouth as a scream but his hand was clamped over it. I passed out. Pluto came for me that night, and each time I woke up, it was my first night in the Kingdom of the Dead" (Evaristo 2002: 29). Following this account, Evaristo makes "frequent and recurring indirect references to the raped women of myth," such as Persephone, Ariadne, and Medusa (Roynon 2017: 141). Statues and images of these women decorate Zuleika's home, constant reminders of her subordination and exploitation, as well as the persistent mistreatment of women throughout history.

These references contrast with Zuleika's characterization as the modern "It Girl of Londinium" (Evaristo 2002: 28), who wears Armani and Versace robes, goes to concerts to get drunk with her friends, gossips about Venus's "break-up drama," and tells her father to "sod off" when he ignores her efforts to become a successful poet and pressures her to have a "bambino" (Evaristo 2002: 86). Throughout the novel, Evaristo contrasts the classical verse form and uses of Latin with modern day slang and vernacular. For example, in Zuleika's opening verses, which take the place of the classical invocation, she says "Then I was sent off to a snooty Roman bitch called Clarissa for decorum classes, learnt how to talk, eat and fart, how to get my amo amas amat right, and ditch my second-generation plebby creole. Zuleika accepta est. Zuleika delicata est. Zuleika bloody goody-two shoes est" (Evaristo 2002: 4-5). This intermixing of ancient Latin and modern day British and Caribbean slang "reflect[s] the same intermingling that Zuleika feels with regard to her own identity" (McConnell 2016: 109).

In this creative manner, Evaristo constructs a transnational and transhistorical narrative that asks her reader to confront the structural and social issues that have persisted throughout millennia, prolonging the othering and abuse of women-identifying people, and to consider Zuleika's story and circumstances within the context of both the past and the present.

Zuleika regains some autonomy through her independent and active pursuit of erotic pleasure with Emperor Septimius Severus. Although they have different social standings, Zuleika actively pursues the Emperor Septimius Severus's affections. This quest is an act of independence and a desire to seek fulfilment outside her forced marriage. For example, after a consensual and pleasurable encounter he asks: "What does life offer you, strange creature?'" She responds: "When did anyone ever ask? 'I'm a nobody wanting to be a somebody. I was born in this town, but I've never been outside. I blame my parents, refugees from the Sudan. This was the first place they felt safe, So they never left" (Evaristo 2002: 154). Here, Zuleika gives voice to her complex desires, separate to those of her parents and husband, which reflect the emotional experience of being a second-generation immigrant. As critic Tessa Roynon observes (2017: 142), during this conversation between the two lovers, "Erotic pleasure and autonomy are represented as inextricable." Although it is her relationship to a man of power which briefly liberates her, "This, as the title suggests, will be Zuleika's story, not the emperor's, no matter how much traditional societal structures may recognize her only in connection with him: the emperor's babe, rather than Zuleika" (McConnell 2016: 109). In other words, by imagining an affair between a fictional girl and a historical male figure, but choosing to tell the story from the woman's perspective, the novel suggests that there are many women whose stories have been forgotten and need to be recovered. Evaristo is therefore "simultaneously critiquing the violent distortions of history while recovering and re-presenting a dynamic, indisputable, creative and empowered black female personhood" (Roynon 2017: 140).

Evaristo gives voice to another historically absent perspective through Zuleika's friend Venus. A clever and sassy, trans woman with a cockney accent who has carved a niche for herself in Londinium, Venus's character "explodes the myth of Englishness by refusing to submit to its compulsory heterosexuality" (Cuder-Domínguez 2004: 182). Evaristo's simultaneous consideration of issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality makes this novel a distinctly intersectional reimagining of British history. Through Zuleika and Venus, Evaristo shows that the perspective and experiences of "great leaders"

and "great men" are not the only foundations of British history and identity (Anderson 2006: 125). Even if they are fictional, these central characters shed light on the existence of real people who have been erased or omitted from the historical record.

This unique allohistorical appropriation of the epic form for the twenty-first century is a prime example of Thomas & Stornaiuolo's (2016) 'restorying.' Through the mixing of past and present in both form, content, and language, Evaristo creatively manipulates time, and challenges readers to rethink the historical narratives they have been told. Her decision to shift the subject-perspective in her feminist novel to a young black woman draws "focus away from privileged voices that have traditionally narrated or published single stories and occupied primary subject positions and opens spaces for multiple stories to emerge," thus challenging the archetypes of alterity (Thomas & Stornaiuolo 2016: 330). These deliberate acts of restorying have significant implications, because, as Hall (1996: 443) argues, the "'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role." Therefore, the representation of an autonomous young black woman and an outspoken trans business owner in an alternate history about Roman-ruled Britain has a potentially formative impact. It works towards countering the practices of representation that typically position women and black bodies as the objects rather than the subjects of cultural and historical narratives (Hall 1996: 442). This constitutive process of restorying and subjectification has the potential to change the ways in which we collectively perceive and discuss this period in European history, and even how we define Britishness and Europeanness today.

3. *Blonde Roots: Transatlantic Inversions*

Blonde Roots, written seven years after the publication of *The Emperor's Babe*, carries on Evaristo's efforts to imaginatively reconsider, retell, and restory history. Told through the eyes of a female slave named Doris, the prose novel is a more traditional uchronia, which imagines a specific change in the events of the past and poses the question: 'what-if the transatlantic slave-trade was reversed, and white Europeans were enslaved by black Africans?' Evaristo poses this question to again identify absences, biases, and inconsistencies in our historical consciousness, motivating readers to view this moment through a new lens.

The novel contains "a series of almost infinite inversions" (Tiffin 1987: 32), the most obvious is that white Europeans, or 'Europanes', as they are called in

the novel, are enslaved by black 'Aphrikans.' These inversions satirize Manichean racial discourse, and, in the words of postcolonial theorist Helen Tiffin (1987: 32) "question the foundations of the ontologies and epistemological systems which would see such binary structures as inescapable." As Evaristo discusses in an interview with Michael Collins (2008: 1202), "Anti-black racism, as we know it, developed in tandem with the growth of the transatlantic slave trade. The reason for its existence was to provide an ideological basis for the trade, to justify it." In *Blonde Roots*, anti-whyte racism is predicated on familiar narratives sensationalizing European traditions and aesthetics as 'savage,' and 'primitive.'

Book Two of the novel, narrated by the wealthy landowner and Doris's Master, Chief Kaga Konata Katamba, notably, K.K.K., is entitled "The Flame: Reflections, Thoughts, Experiences & Sentiments, Candid and Free, on the True Nature of the Slave Trade & Remarks on the Character & Customs of the Europanes" (Evaristo 2009: 111), this section satirizes pro-slavery propaganda and parodies discourses of scientific racism like "the exact science of Craniofaecia Anthropometry" (Evaristo 2009: 118), which determines that "Negroids" naturally possess "ambition, self-motivation, resourcefulness, self-discipline, courage, moral integrity, spiritual enlightenment and community responsibility," while Caucasoinids have "weakness of character, limited imagination and restricted intellect" (Evaristo 2009: 118-119). Through this inversion and her satirical reference to historical propaganda that promoted scientific racism and attempted to justify slavery, Evaristo continues her mission of challenging assumptions of alterity, and undermining the persistent myth that anti-black racism has always existed.

Although superficially presented as African, Evaristo gives Chief K.K.K., also referred to as Bwana, "the characteristics of an Eighteenth Century slave trader" (Collins & Evaristo 2008: 1202). His pride at his "Progression From Inauspicious Origins to the Highest Echelons of Civilised Society" (Evaristo 2009: 111), critically mocks European Enlightenment thinking, and what Gilroy (1993: 9) calls "discourse[s] of modern English cultural uniqueness," and "Notions of the primitive and the civilised… which generated a constellation of subject positions in which Englishness, Christianity, and other ethnic and racialised attributes would finally give way to the dislocating dazzle of 'whiteness,'" or, in the case of Evaristo's inverted alternate history, 'blackness.'

In the chapter titled 'Heart of Greyness,' Evaristo engages in counter-canonical discourse by making references to Conrad's 19th-century colonial novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and paralleling the journey and characterization

of Bwana with that of Marlow. Bwana becomes increasingly horrified at Europane cultural practices like hand-shaking, scarecrows, and Christian prayer, writing that in this country "the wilderness spread their tendrils and talons without the restraining hand of civilised Man" (Evaristo 2009: 131). By merging common everyday practices with dramatized historical atrocities, such as the persecution of women as witches, the continent of Europa, through Bwana's eyes, is seen as a savage and barbaric land. Again, referencing the language and style of Conrad's novel, Bwana writes: "It was like returning, Dear Reader, to the earliest days of the world when the trees and vegetation of the wilderness spread their tendrils and talons without the restraining hand of civilised Man" (Evaristo 2009: 131). Through this postmodern and metafictional example of intertextuality, Bwana is painted as an unreliable narrator with a vested interest in justifying the 'saving' of Europanes through slavery. Thus, Evaristo creatively challenges "the status of texts, both literary and historical," scrutinizing the manipulation of historical narratives by powerful people wanting to maximize their own wealth and authority (Burkitt 2012: 411; Dagbovie-Mullins 2017: 4).

And yet, simultaneously, and "Perhaps most radical[lly]" the character and voice of Bwana "allows Evaristo's black "Ambossans" to write history in a way which was denied to black slaves" (Burkitt 2012: 413). Thus, the novel becomes both a reclaiming of the narrative, an indictment of the invisibility of agential black subjectivities and voices in historical narratives, and a commentary on real-world racial injustices and the history of discourses of racism. Lastly, as Julie Iromuanya (2017: 74) says in her article on the function of humor in Evaristo's novel, "shifting from white slaver/black slave to black slaver/white slave forces readers to occupy different bodies. More than passive receivers of this history, we become active participants. Occupying new bodies and their inherent subject-positions allows readers to see the world anew and observe it with critical acuity." In other words, the inversion forces readers to rethink paradigms of alterity and the ways in which historical systems of oppression continue to position and impact communities and individuals today.

Evaristo's creative uchronia destabilizes conventional understandings of space and time, similarly to *The Emperor's Babe* with its many linguistic and descriptive neologisms. In *Blonde Roots*, the subversion is made even more obvious through the revised map of the Atlantic, which places her readers in a parallel world which is at once unfamiliar and recognizable. The map (see Figure 1) "displaces Britain and contradicts the familiarity of the Peters" and Mercator projections, which skew size and shape to focalize North America and

Western Europe (Burkitt 2012: 407). By altering these models, Evaristo "demonstrates the ways in which maps can be used to manipulate and transform with particular purpose" (Burkitt 2012: 407). As we can see, Evaristo has swapped 'Europa' and 'Aphrika,' and although 'Amarika' stays where North America is traditionally location, she renames the Caribbean islands the 'West Japanese Islands,' and satirizes the name 'West Indies' to recall the legacy of Columbus' mis-naming and the region's colonial history. Although England is now in the southern hemisphere, the physical island remains in place and is re-named the 'UK of Great Ambossa.'

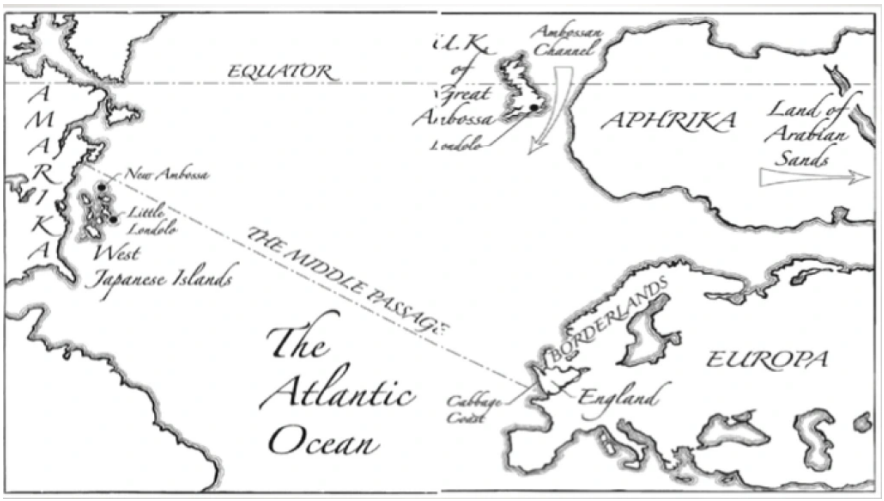

Figure 1: Map of the Atlantic in *Blonde Roots*.

Londolo, its capital, mirrors both modern day London and the London of the past, home to 'Paddinto Station," and the wealthy elites of "Mayfah" (Evaristo 2009: 28, 4). Thus, the city, "Slavery HQ," remains the symbolic seat of colonial exploitation and the ruling class (Evaristo 2009: 27). Simultaneously, Londolo becomes a center of African cultural traditions and aesthetics, recalling the depiction of Londinium as a transnational and diasporic space in *The Emperor's Babe*. This dislocation and reorientation show how biases and inaccuracies shape our historical consciousness and influence predominant notions of the self and the Other.

By blurring the past and the present, Evaristo merges both modern and historical atrocities (Iromuanya 2017). For example, while describing her flight through Londolo, Doris says she "slunk past the Cocoa tree, Coasta Coffee, Hut Tropicana, Cafe Shaka, Demerara's Den, Starbright and then the highly fashionable Shuga […] Shuga specialized in the novelty cappuccino with rum, known as rumpaccino […] and advertised in chalk on a black signboard, 'Fresh

Slaves'" (Evaristo 2009: 33). This passage satirically merges references to contemporary large-scale chains like Starbucks and their Frappuccino trends, with stark reminders of the forced labor upon which sugar and rum production in the Americas boomed. This side-by-side imagery reminds us of, as Iromuanya (2017: 182) describes it, "the role we have as inheritors of the history of slavery as well as modern-day consumers and producers of its violence." Additionally, Doris's use of modern parlance and slang terms like "crib", and "skiving" (Evaristo 2009: 174, 181), and her description of one of the young slave children "strutt[ing] about the quarter in a pair of outsized, hand-me-down cotton pants worn so that the waist hung (somehow) beneath his bum" (Evaristo 2009: 204), parallels the temporal dislocation in *The Emperor's Babe*. Both transhistorical narratives mix the past and present to "problematize static and objective readings of tradition and modernity" recognizing "the conjunctions, disjunctions, and circularity that…remain infrastructurally, and exist as residue in our everyday gestures" and language (Iromuanya 2017: 181).

An additional parallel between *The Emperor's Babe* and *Blonde Roots*, which highlights the continuity between the texts and Evaristo's broader goals as a contemporary writer, is a focus on the persecution of women, and the subject of aesthetics and femininity. Much like canonical slave narratives such as *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), Doris's story illuminates the specific abuse of female slaves. Both Doris and her friend Ye Memé are victims of a system in which it is common to miscarry due to beatings, or overwork, and "managing to actually keep your children depended on your master's whim" (Evaristo 2009: 183). Like in Zuleika's tale, rape is a central focus. After being captured, Doris's sister Sharon is chosen as Bwana's concubine, surviving only by submitting to his attentions and birthing his children. Furthermore, through the inverted master/slave paradigm, Evaristo draws attention to a significant legacy of the large-scale enslavement of black people – the reflection of white bodies in mainstream idealized beauty standards. In *Blonde Roots*, female slaves braid their hair and dye their skin in imitation of the dominant Aphrikan beauty standards, paralleling real-world societal pressures placed on black women to reflect pervasive ideals of whiteness. As a child, Doris's young master tells her "'You ugly,'… 'Me pretty,'" in response, Doris thinks "She was right, of course. And there was no one in that society to tell me otherwise" (Evaristo 2009: 97). Thus, "Doris's white body stands in…for millions of black female slaves throughout the African diaspora while sardonically exposing the black female body's historic invisibility" and oppression, which continues to position them as the Other to the white body's self in contemporary society (Dagbovie-Mullins 2017: 19).

As Evaristo says in her interview with Collins (2008: 1201), although *Blonde Roots* is "a 'What if?' book it's also a 'This is what was' book!" Many postcolonial literary critics, like Newman (2012), classify *Blonde Roots* as a dystopian novel, arguing that it fits the category of alternate histories that imagine "Bad societies that might have been" (Duncan 2006: 212). However, by the end of the novel it is clear that regardless of the inversions, the society Evaristo constructs both was and is. This is most apparent in the postscript: "In the twenty-first century, Bwana's descendants still own the sugar estate and are among the grandest and wealthiest families in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, where they all reside. The cane workers, many of whom are descended from the original slaves, are paid" (Evaristo 2009: 261). This is a familiar narrative. In both Evaristo's novel and the real world, people continue to benefit from the legacy of slavery, structural racism is rampant, and social models of alterity persist. Therefore, Evaristo actually utilizes dystopian strategies to tell a fairly faithful representation of history, destabilizing the reader's confidence in the dominant historical narratives, and forcing them to wonder whether the 'dystopian' stories we read are actually closer to our reality than we would like to believe.

4. Conclusion

Through both of these novels, Evaristo engages in a complex dialogue about history, truth, alterity, and representation. She foregrounds her progressive views within satirical alternate histories, populated with headstrong, relatable and witty characters, and successfully "shift[s] and disrupt[s] the broader narratives and metanarratives that so powerfully shape people's lives through their historical legacies" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo 2016: 330). However, as Rosenfeld (2002: 103) reminds us "The primary function of alternate history-the answer to the question "why do we ask 'what if?'" is not just to retell the past, but to "express our changing views about the present."

Evaristo accomplishes this through the pedagogical nature of her imaginative texts, deconstructing assumptions and fixed notions of nation, race, and gender, challenging a teleological view of history, and identifying what social changes need to be enacted to continue working towards a more compassionate and socially just future. Indeed, in her creative uchronias, Evaristo responds to quite specific and identifiable material problems, including "anti-Affirmative Action policies…the systematic denial and erasure of blackness throughout British history," and "debates concerning reparations

and the extent to which the profits of slavery still prop up Western economies" (Iromuanya 2017: 178; Newman 2012: 289). While these may seem like big problems for one writer to confront, Evaristo's writing has already caused tangible changes. For example, after *The Emperor's Babe* was published "the [British] Museum introduced a black Roman character played by an actor who guides people around the Roman part of the Museum" (Hooper & Evaristo 2004: 6). While this may seem like a small change, as Evaristo's novels illustrate, many small changes can have a big impact. Ultimately, Evaristo's novels, and their continuing impact, like many alternate histories, "[remind] us that we all change the world" (Duncan 2006: 218).

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