

Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*: Re-narrating Roman Britannia, De-essentialising European History

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Abstract

Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) contributes to the imaginative disentanglement of the traditional British ethnicity-and-nation nexus and questions the related founding myth of racial purity by featuring the character of Zuleika, a young black woman who is born of Sudanese parents in Roman London. Through the depiction of Zuleika, Evaristo offers a subversive reshaping of some versions of the official British national history in the context of a wider revision of the European classical past. However, in spite of its temporal setting, Evaristo's historical novel simultaneously engages with contemporary issues of gendered racialisation and national belonging. In its highly orchestrated poetic prose, Roman *Londinium* and today's London are imaginatively interwoven. This enables the reader to correlate Zuleika's attempts at negotiating her right to citizenship in the Roman empire to contemporary Black British feminist politics, committed as it is to resisting structures of sexist and racial discrimination at play in present-day Britain.

Published at the turn of the twenty-first century, Bernardine Evaristo's second novel-in-verse, *The Emperor's Babe*, by featuring the character of Zuleika, a young black woman who is born of Sudanese parents in Roman London, contributes to the imaginative disentanglement of the traditional British ethnicity-and-nation nexus and simultaneously questions the related founding myth of original racial purity. As the present analysis aims to demonstrate, through the depiction of Zuleika, Evaristo, herself a London-born writer of Anglo-Nigerian descent, offers a subversive reshaping of some versions of the official British national history in the context of a wider —albeit fictional— revision of the European classical past. However, in spite of its temporal setting, Evaristo's unconventional historical novel simultaneously engages with contemporary issues of gendered racialisation and national belonging. In its highly orchestrated poetic prose, indeed, linguistic and cultural systems that are temporally as well as spatially distant, conflate in such a

way as to facilitate their imaginative interweaving: Roman *Londinium* and today's London thus become two mutually permeating historical dimensions. This enables the reader to correlate Zuleika's attempts at negotiating her right to citizenship in the Roman empire to contemporary Black British feminist politics, committed as it is to resisting structures of sexist and racial discrimination at play in present-day Britain. And to the extent that Evaristo's novel delineates the complex identity model of an ethnically-marked woman at the centre of an intricate web of social dynamics, the categories of race, gender and sexuality furnish a fruitful theoretical frame for the analysis of the power relations in the novel.

Evaristo's specific approach to history is part of a comparatively recent literary tendency which, a few years ago, Suzanne Keen aptly described as "the historical turn in British fiction" (167). Almost ten years earlier, though in an analysis in conception and development very different from Keen's, Peter Hulme had foregrounded the emergence of a new kind of English historical novel, able to deal with issues that "[had] remained stubbornly intolerable" to English "cultural imagination" (139). Hulme also related this shift to "the growing sophistication with which the notion of historicity has been used by critics" (138). In reality, the "sophistication" alluded to by Hulme can be accounted for by a renewed academic interest in historical knowledge, and especially in historiography, an interest which, far from being exclusively restricted to the realm of contemporary literature, has manifested itself in several diverse theoretical domains since the early 1970s. In certain fields of inquiry, such as Gender, (post-)colonial and Black British Cultural studies, following the ideological turmoil of postmodern deconstructive interventions, such interest has found a parallel in the reflection on the role of the dominant politics of representation in the conceptualisation of normative identities.

One of the major outgrowths of the critical scrutiny of history as a field of knowledge has been the interrogation of the epistemological validity and autonomy of mimetic description, which, due to its supposed objectivity, had traditionally been deemed the most apt discursive vehicle to provide a faithful account of historical facts and phenomena. A significant contribution to this line of inquiry has been made by Hayden White. Admittedly aligning himself with contemporary theorists of historiography, the scholar maintains that any serious debate over the epistemological status of the discipline cannot but assume interpretation as "an irreducible and inexpungeable element" of historical reflection (*Tropics* 51). In White's analysis, the act of interpreting the data offered by the historical record has its counterpart in the process whereby, following an intentional selection, they are 'emplotted' in the shape of the historical account. Appealing to the distinction between the formalist categories of 'story' and 'plot,' White observes that, "[t]he historian...makes his story by including some events and excluding others, by

stressing some and subordinating others. This process of exclusion, stress, and subordination is carried out in the interest of constituting *a story of a particular kind*. That it to say, he 'employs' his story" (*Metahistory* 6). It then follows that the role assumed by invention in the representational strategies informing the process of history writing cannot be overestimated. As White goes on to observe, "The same event can serve as a different element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterisation of the set to which it belongs" (*Metahistory* 6-7). This means that the boundary between historiography and narrative cannot but be theorised as extremely porous. This point has been made most incisively by White in his 1987 *The Content of the Form*, a work in which he asserts that "what distinguishes 'historical' from 'fictional' stories is first and foremost their content, rather than their form" (27). Here, the critic also analyses the degree in which the process of narrativisation is embedded in historical discourse. In his words,

the narrative serves to transform into a story a list of historical events that would otherwise be only a chronicle. In order to effect this transformation, the events, agents, and agencies represented in the chronicle must be encoded as story elements; that is, they must be characterized as the kinds of events, agents, agencies, and so on, that can be apprehended as elements of specific story types. (*Content* 43)

Taken a step further, this reconceptualisation of history writing has enabled to conceive the narrative mode as endowed with truth value, so implying the possibility of narrative itself to offer a revised version of official historiography. Thus, writing in the late 1970s, White questioned the supposed universal value of history and remarked that "the historical consciousness must be obliterated if the writer is to examine with proper seriousness those strata of human experience which it is modern art's peculiar purpose to disclose" (*Tropics* 31). In the context of this rethinking, however, contemporary literature has not denied history *tout court*. So three decades after White's theoretical intervention, Evaristo's work seems to suggest that the aim of the artistic imagination should not be so much to obliterate official history totally as to unseat its conventional presuppositions and re-write its arbitrary representations in non-exclusionary terms.

With its constitutive mixture of fact and fiction, the historical novel furnishes a generic frame which is particularly instrumental for such a politically-aware intervention within both English representational practices and Western-European systems of knowledge. This is well the case of *The Emperor's Babe* which, we might say, "puts 'history' back into the English novel with a vengeance," to borrow from Hulme's 1996 review of Barry Unsworth's novel *Sacred Hunger* (138).

That *The Emperor's Babe* can be labelled as historical narrative is manifest if one is to follow Avrom Fleishman's definition of the genre. As the literary critic argues, "most novels set in the past –beyond an arbitrary number of years, say 40–

60 (two generations) –are liable to be considered historical”(3) and goes on to say that “[r]egarding substance, there is an unspoken assumption that the plot must include a number of ‘historical’ events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.), mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters” (3). In addition, Fleishman also remarks that “[t]he historical novel is distinguished among novels by the presence of a specific link to history: not merely a real building or a real event but a real person among the fictitious ones” (10). Given Fleishman’s definition, *The Emperor’s Babe* qualifies as a historical novel through several elements, the most significant of which are to be found in the choice of the temporally distant Roman London as the setting of the novel and in the depiction of Zuleika, a totally invented character, whose personal experience is deeply affected by her love relationship with the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus, a real historical figure.

The historical contextualisation of *The Emperor’s Babe* can be seen as partaking of the aforementioned renewed sensibility towards history, a sensibility that has permeated contemporary Anglophone fiction significantly, as seems to be confirmed by the growing awareness that “[t]he uses to which the past has been put is arguably the single most important development of the last quarter of the twentieth century” (Evans and Newman 148). That such new literary trend has been prompted by the postmodernist challenge to the supposed objectivity of authoritative history writing is now an unquestionable critical assumption, especially following Linda Hutcheon’s inquiry into postmodernism and her conceptualisation of the notion of “historiographic metafiction.” In Hutcheon’s view, the distinctive feature of this form of writing is the “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” which, in turn, “is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5). However, what is important to remark here, in the interest of an accurate analysis of Evaristo’s novel in the context of contemporary Black British writing, is that, as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llwynn write,

[f]or all its playfulness, ... historical fiction has a strong political resonance especially for women and ethnic writers: the imperatives behind female and ethnic (re)writings of history are inescapably different from those of white men. If one of the driving forces in the writing of historical fiction is to give a voice to the silenced Other, then for a woman or ethnic author to write into being the unaddressed past and its muted subalterns, or to rewrite an established male-authored work, presents a challenge for both author and reader. (142)

And this is because, as the two critics go on to observe, “[i]magination, the ability to look to the past, at the present and towards the future, is an essential function of the women’s historical novel” (142). In this sense, one of the strengths of Evaristo’s novel resides in its ability to stretch the boundaries of the literary genre so as to

create a robust thematic connection with political issues at stake in present-day Britain. Thus envisaged, for instance, the bustling physicality of Roman London's suburbs, which Zuleika and her friend Alba frequent as young street-wise girls and which the novel so vividly conveys, inevitably recalls that of today's London. Evaristo's stylistic choice of the novel-in-verse also contributes to the reinforcement of this imaginative superimposition in that it helps to convey the frenetic rhythms of the contemporary metropolis. As Dave Gunning observes, "[t]he predominant use of the couplet as the mode of expression...quicken[s] the pace. ...Evaristo's choice of style seems to have been freed from constraints of prose that would have slowed the frenetic tempo of the novel" (172-73). It follows that, far from being self-contained and estranged from one another, the two temporal/spatial dimensions coalesce in the reader's mind so that Evaristo's delineation of *Londinium*'s socio-political context, in being projected onto contemporary London, acts as a lens through which the current power relations of the metropolis are scrutinized and challenged. As Richard Bradford remarks, Evaristo's handling of time and space sets her apart from contemporary Black British writers, who "have chosen realism instead, and effectively disproved the view that its use involves a subjunctive complicity with white, middle-class mores of expressions and representation" (212). In contrast, *The Emperor's Babe* as well as Evaristo's *Lara* (1997) and *Soul Tourists* (2001) "match an energetic refusal to conform to the usual parameters of time and space with equally dismissive attitude toward the borderlines of literary genre" (Bradford 213).

Regarded in the light of the novel's transformative aim, the deliberate anachronisms interspersing the narrative fabric —namely the mixture of Latin, contemporary standard English and Cockney slang— also contribute to the imaginative blurring of the boundaries between Roman *Londinium* and today's London:

Then I was sent off to a snooty Roman bitch
called Clarissa for decorum classes,
learnt how to talk...

how to get my amo amas amat right, and ditch
my second-generation plebby creole.

Zuleika accepta est.
Zuleika delicata est. (4-5)

It would be reductive to interpret Evaristo's deliberate mixture of the two linguistic systems as a form of postmodern neutral pastiche. In fact, the use of Latin in the two final sentences of the quotation, further emphasised by the anaphoric repetition of their syntactical structure, is all but hazardous. Latin, that is the

language of the Roman conquerors, is here used to express the accomplishment of the process of ‘assimilation to the norm’ imposed on Zuleika shortly before her marriage to Felix (a Roman senator thrice her senior) and aimed at eliding the cultural traits of her ethnic identity.¹

The above example also helps to further illustrate that Evaristo’s representation of Roman Britannia cannot be taken as an end in itself². In the Romans’ hegemonic cultural practices are adumbrated the dominant systems of representation produced and reproduced in contemporary Britain. Regarded in this light, the fact that Zuleika is asked to abandon her “second-generation plebby creole” hints, on the one hand, at the still controversial—and often contested—social positioning of racially-marked immigrants and of their children or grand-children in Britain and, on the other, at their attempts at identity negotiation, which often imply forms of self-conscious adherence to the white normative model. The socio-political reasons behind Zuleika’s cultural assimilation lend themselves to be compared to the symbolic mechanisms of cultural homogenisation lurking, for instance, beneath the dominant political discourse of the 1980s and still affecting recent conceptualisations of British nationality. The 1983 Conservatives’ election poster, featuring a black boy in a smart suit, is a case in point. In his analysis of the signifying practices behind it, the cultural theorist Paul Gilroy argues that the image “conveys what is being asked of the black readers as the price of admission to the colour-blind form of citizenship promised by the text. Blacks are being invited to forsake all that marks them out as culturally distinct before real Britishness can be guaranteed” (65). More recently, in relation to contemporary Black British women writers’ representation of Black women living in today’s Great Britain, Sheila Sandapen has underlined that “the issues of ethnicity, skin tone and perceived beauty influence a woman self-identity” (v).

Conceiving Zuleika as the prominent vehicle for the dialogic relationship that the novel continuously establishes between past and present, makes it possible to place *The Emperor’s Babe* into the context of a specific kind of contemporary Anglophone historical novels that, although set in the past, investigate and question current power relations (Evans and Newman). There is a sense in which, through the character of Zuleika, Evaristo’s novel takes a sharp look at contemporary British society and, in particular, at the still problematic terms of the inclusion of black women within both the British nation-state and the national imagery. Thus *The Emperor’s Babe* channels into literature political issues central to contemporary Black British feminism, such as black women’s invisibility (or, alternatively, their racialisation/genderisation) in official discourse and, what is more important, their complex social positioning *vis-à-vis* the British nation-state, on the one hand, and the ethnic communities they belong to, on the other.

If analysed through the race-gender theoretical nexus, Zuleika's figuration as a London-born young woman of Sudanese descent permits us to show that the novel foregrounds in fictional form the topic of the inextricability of the multiple levels of discrimination that permeate the culturally constructed representation of black women, a representation that inevitably affects the social inscriptions of their embodied experience. In reality, joyous though Evaristo's recasting of *Londinium* is, it is nonetheless problematised by Evaristo's gender-sensitiveness and constant attention to questions of racialised identity. Indeed, deeply rooted in the narrative fabric is the unveiling of forms of gender discrimination which Zuleika is subjected to not only in the relationship with her husband, but also within her own patriarchal family. In this respect, Zuleika's marriage with the much older and physically unattractive Felix is determined by gender-biased social dynamics. More specifically, their union is the result of an actual exchange between two men: her father and her future husband. Talking to his future father-in-law, Felix himself hints at a sort of pre-marital verbal contract:

[‘]Do not worry about her dowry, it is of no
consequentialia to me, of course

you will benefit greatly from this *negotium*.
I think we can safely say that your business

is due to expand considerably.’ (17. Emphasis added)

The Emperor's Babe also discloses forms of stereotyping deriving from perceived racial difference (which in the novel coalesces mainly in the figure of Zuleika). Commenting on black women's sexualisation, Heidi Safia Mirza observes that, “[b]lack bodies are killed, displayed, watched, analysed, stroked, desired because of their embodied ‘otherness’. ...The one thing we do know as black women, is that our eroticized, exoticized bodies have become objects of desire” (17).

In the novel, Zuleika's body, for instance, is clearly constituted through the white man's gaze (that is Felix's gaze), which proves the focus of a sexist scopic regime. Indeed, in motivating his choice of marrying the eleven-year-old Zuleika, Felix hints at reasons that reveal his internalisation of intertwined symbolic processes of sexual objectification and racialisation.

[S]he is so...exquisita, so...pulcherrima,
such a delicious surprise in this, shall we say,

less than dazzling little colonia.
She reminds me of the girls back in Ægyptus, ...

I liked the mysterious, dark ones
from the south, who would oil my limbs,

waft soundlessly around me leaving

the lingering scent of musky sandalwood
from Zanzibar in their wake. ...
I have been looking for a nice,
simplex, quiet, fidelis girl, a girl
who will not betray me with affairs,
who will not wear me out with horrid fights. (14-16)

As the above quotation illustrates, Zuleika, trapped in the discursive constraints of an exoticised projection, becomes the victim of an *orientalist* vision in which her physical charm and presumed 'natural' submission are seen as inherent to her ethnicity. Thus, Evaristo's novel illustrates that, in Hazel Carby's conceptualisation, "[t]he black women [writers'] critique of history has not only involved us in coming to terms with 'absences'; we have also been outraged by the ways in which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us" (45).

Zuleika's perceived racial difference also becomes the major determinant of the symbolic ostracism she is victim of. In articulating her complex relationship to the Roman Empire, the novel thus forges a link with the present-day issue of black women's problematic negotiation of socio-political identity in contemporary Britain. In the following excerpt, Zuleika's sister-in-law, Antistia, blatantly ostracises her from the rulers' group:

'You will never be one of us.' ...
'A real Roman is born and bred,
I don't care what anyone says,
and that goes for the emperor too,
jumped-up *Leeebyan*. Felix will never
take you to Rome, Little Miss Nooobia,
he has his career to think of.' (53)

As Gunning observes, Antistia's words demonstrate that,

[t]hose who hold power are able to define the criteria for inclusion within the circle of influence. Even Severus's achievement does not necessarily allow him the right to participate within this group. Membership is always granted or withdrawn by the existing elite and, although the limits of their jurisdiction are subject to revision ..., they always remain the bearers of the deciding authority. (172)

This does not mean, however, that Evaristo's Roman Britannia is a racist society, rather it is an ethnocentric one. In her interview with Alastair Niven, Evaristo herself highlights that Zuleika "is noticed because of her colour but she is not discriminated against because of it. The Romans did not practise anti-black racism" (286). In her "new version of history," as Evaristo herself calls it (Niven 283), she seems to adopt the Black British Cultural Studies' lesson which interrogates the

"thoroughly naturalized link between 'race and ethnicity'" (Baker, Best and Lindeborg 4). Houston Baker, Manthia Diawara Best and Ruth Lindeborg remark that, according to Black British cultural theorists, "the specifically British conflation and naturalization of race and ethnicity was a function of a constructed field of belongingness and homogeneity" (4). And, as they go on to observe, "insofar as race can be articulated as ethnicity" (5), such a convergence "ha[s] produced what seemed to be clear national boundaries" (4). In the novel, Evaristo proposes a new representation of British identity in which the white group (consisting of the Romans and the populations living in the northern areas of Roman Britannia) is characterised by internal fragmentation. And considering the imaginative identification between the Roman empire and the English one, which the novel inevitably conveys, Evaristo also deconstructs the myth of an original ethnic homogeneity of the English people, a myth fuelled by the imperial propaganda obtaining in the nineteenth century. Commenting on this artificial representation, Catherine Hall perceptively foregrounds its constructedness and contingency when she writes that,

Englishness is not rooted in racially specific categories, however hard nineteenth-century writers tried to establish them, but signified an identification with an 'imagined community'. The Englishness of a particular class, the middle class in the nineteenth century I argue, was able to represent itself as 'Britishness' by its marginalization and subordination of other ethnicities – those of the Scots, the Irish, the Welsh, or indeed colonized peoples within the Empire who were also British subjects. (25-26)

Similarly, Antoinette Burton, synthesising one of the theoretical positions underlying Perry Anderson's 1968 essay "Components of National Culture," remarks that "it was colonialism which provided the opportunity for Britons of all classes to conceive of the nation and to experience themselves as members of a 'national culture'" (228). In *The Emperor's Babe* white and black people alike undergo forms of subordination due to hierarchical power structures underpinning the Roman society. Interestingly enough, Zuleika herself becomes the vehicle for imperialist practices, as her representation of and attitude towards her white Caledonian slaves attest to:

When approached, they clawed the air
with filthy talons, mucus ran in clotted rivers

from pinched little noses,
their eyes were splattered with mosquitoes ...

Fascinating, so vile, yet something
just for me, id and ego. Pets. (55)

Incorporated –albeit contradictorily– in the dominant group after her marriage, Zuleika internalises its underlying system of power. In line with Black British

feminists, Evaristo thus puts the pervasiveness of ethnocentrism in the foreground. Analysing black women's experience of the British state, Razia Aziz maintains that "if the state is racist, it is racist to everyone" (72). But the complex characterisation of Zuleika also bears evidence to the fact that Evaristo consciously eschews any simplistic reversed reductionism, the effect of which has been, in the long run, that of "represent[ing] black women as *homogenously oppressed in almost every politically significant way*" (Aziz 73). More specifically, the novel avoids the creation of fixed oppositional categories (such as 'white' versus 'black') and simultaneously unveils the contradictions inherent to the Black ethnic group. The latter is not portrayed in celebratory terms but as hierarchically structured and affected by the prevailing racist and sexist system in differentiated ways. Zuleika's own family proves to be pervaded by gender-biased relations entailing the young woman's subordination to a patriarchal system of power: her loveless marriage with Felix is, as we have seen, a case in point. As Susanne Cuevas remarks, *The Emperor's Babe*, then, "carefully avoids a stereotypical portrayal of black victimhood or idealisation" (169). Consequently, it can be argued that Evaristo has endorsed a "self-conscious project of problematizing the very nature of the authored and authorized character of historical narrative" (Heilmann and Llwynn 138).

But here is also another way in which Black British Cultural studies can provide a productive theoretical frame for the thematic analysis of Evaristo's novel. In his seminal 1989 essay, the title of which is "New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall greeted with enthusiasm the development of a new politics of representation capable of articulating unconventional Black identity models. In his view, in the late 1980s a representational shift was taking place: the "new essentially good black subject" was gradually giving way to the "extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'" (254). As Hall goes on to observe, this had been made possible by the recognition that "black," just as the signifier "white," "is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature" (254). Thus, after a first phase characterised by a substantial reaction to forms of discursive marginalisation and objectification of the Black British subject, a second phase in Black cultural politics was surfacing, with its attempt to programmatically de-essentialise Black identities.

Regarded in the light of this representational shift, Evaristo's novel has a twofold merit: on the one hand, it highlights Zuleika's contradictory position *vis-à-vis* the Empire which, in turn, forges a link with the contemporary issue of black women's belonging to the British State; on the other, through the complex characterisation of Zuleika, it provides alternative figurations of the Black British

woman, so denaturalising traditional representations of the Black identity in an attempt to re-define Englishness and its traditional historical founding myths. Thus, if it is true that Zuleika proves the victim of cross-generational and cross-gender tensions, it is also true that in her short –albeit intense– life she also experiences forms of empowerment. There is a sense in which Zuleika occupies liminal spaces –in her familial context as well as on a socio-political level; however, it would be untrue to suggest that she does not succeed in overcoming the boundaries of marginality (if only temporally) in an attempt to re-position herself with respect to the centre. This is evident in her egalitarian relationship with the Emperor as well as, after her marriage, in the progressive recuperation of her personal freedom through the crossing of the restrictive boundaries of her husband's house and her advancement in the urban space.

The articulation of Zuleika's social experience as a free black woman, rather than a slave, in the context of Roman London, along with her progressive climb up the social ladder ultimately leading her to become the Emperor's mistress, forges a link with the political urgency –long advocated by Black British feminists— of resisting ongoing discursive as well as narrative constructions entailing either black women's social effacement or their misrepresentation against the traditional normativity of whiteness. This also serves to insert within Western traditional imaginative circuits a somewhat 'disturbing' element that contrasts with stereotyped configurations of the Black identity, as Evaristo herself acknowledges:

What's interesting is that when people read about the book they always presume [Zuleika] is a slave, which I find fascinating because she isn't a slave and there are no references to her being a slave. But at certain moments of history, black people are seen as victims, as downtrodden and enslaved. (Niven 282)

As Heilmann and Llewellyn remark, “[i]n rewriting history, authors can be seen to tap into both the familiar and unfamiliar...elements of the past in order to disturb and question the comfortable aspects of their readers' previously held views of history. Historical fiction allows an effective opportunity to create a feeling of unease about both the past and its role in the present” (139).

In *The Emperor's Babe* this oppositional discursive effect is narratively achieved by deliberately setting the depiction of Zuleika, a London-born black woman, and of her own Sudanese family against the historical backdrop of Roman Britannia. This defamiliarises artificial visions of Britain as originally characterised by ethnic homogeneity and also questions nineteenth-century conceptualisations postulating black communities' immobility and cultural separateness. Based on the discursive economy of black sexualisation, such representations configured black people (and especially black women) as metonymically linked to the colonial territory. The specific mechanism of discursive sexualisation has been persuasively explored by

Lynne Segal who maintains that, “[j]ust as Africa itself is persistently depicted as female (passive and inviting, wild, dangerous and deadly), so the language of the colonial narrative is one of sexual conquest. Like Africa itself, however, Black women are but the backdrop for the white man’s testing of himself” (172–73).

Similarly exploitative are the terms of the interracial conjugal relationship between Zuleika and Felix which is tainted by gender-biased power relations. Suffice it to think that, against the background of a sexist context defined by man-made rules, Zuleika’s love affair with Severus, as soon as he dies in York, is punished by Felix with her being slowly poisoned, whereas Felix’s reiterated adultery in Rome is socially condoned. In contrast, Zuleika’s love affair with the Emperor is founded on mutual respect and, as Evaristo herself observes, their sexual intimacy “becomes the symbol of her empowerment” for “the way she takes control of her relationship with Severus is through her sexuality” (Niven 282). It follows that, productively intertwined with the historical matrix of the novel and similarly intended to deconstruct reductive stereotypes of black women’s exoticism, the romance trope in *The Emperor’s Babe* acquires a role which is substantively different from the one it generally assumes in traditional historical novels: far from being merely escapist, it “contains,” by contrast, “a transformative potential which allows the articulation of marginalized desire” (Elam 20).

That in *The Emperor’s Babe* the sexual sphere is viewed as a site of (potential) oppositional empowerment is attested to by another motific strand of the novel; the one centred on the transgender Venus, who helps and protects Zuleika and her best friend Alba, when they, as little girls, explore the streets of London’s suburbs. Reverberating through the ways in which Venus’s sexuality—as well as her own sexual self-identity—is portrayed is a notion of identity formation as processual and disentangled from the heterosexual paradigm. In this sense, Venus’s own words act as an explicit vehicle for both the blurring of the ‘Man/Woman’ binary couple and the liberating voicing of sexual preference:

‘The thing is,’ she’d say, ‘a life without a past
is a life without roots. As there’s no one

holding on to me ankles I can fly anywhere,
I became the woman you see before you.’ (Evaristo 48)

Thus, the representation of Venus’s sexual sphere, imbued as it is with fluidity and change, further corroborates the novel’s programmatic deconstruction of identity constructs posited, within dominant discourses, as normative and transhistorical.

The re-centring of those marginal voices that official historiography has silenced for their being, in the logic of a white androcentric normalizing discourse, ethnically and sexually marked is, then, the underlying aim of the novel. This is further attested to by Evaristo’s deliberate emphasis on Zuleika’s and Severus’s

African origins. Evaristo's historical excavation has a twofold narrative effect which inevitably entails a "rethinking of basic assumptions" (Fryer ix). Firstly, featuring the character of the Libya-born Severus as the chief of the Romans provokes a representational fissure in the supposedly homogenous ethnic group of the invaders which, in turn, destabilises the fixity of the binary opposition White/Black. Moreover, the choice of representing England as a "less than dazzling little *colonia*" (Evaristo 14) experiencing a phase of political instability results in the symbolic de-centring of England as an imperial power. The marginal position to which England is confined also enables the novel to call into question the legitimacy of England's claim to be the inheritor of the Greco-Roman past, a claim dating back to the Middle Ages (Birkholz) and significantly reinforced during the imperial age (Bradley).

Secondly, Evaristo's historical sensitiveness comes to testify to an English past characterised by racial plurality and long obscured by the hegemonic representations of British history. The historical motif of *The Emperor's Babe*, as Evaristo herself acknowledges in the epigraph of her novel as well as in her interview with Niven, is inspired by Peter Fryer's *Staying Power* (1984), a pioneering text on the black presence in Britain. In his seminal work, on the basis of documentary evidence, Fryer argues that "[t]here were Africans in Britain before the English came here. They were soldiers in the Roman imperial army that occupied the southern part of our island for three and a half centuries" (1).

Although fuelled by the need for a revision of Britain's history, Evaristo's novel, however, is not circumscribed to it. In casting light on the fact that Severus was an Africa-born Roman emperor, Evaristo's narrative intervention aligns itself with a revisionist hystoriographic project aimed at questioning the supposed neutrality of the whole European hystoriographic tradition as well as the conventional 'truths' on which it has been constructed. In calling attention to the deliberate processes of historical selection, which have been activated over the centuries in order to elaborate exclusivist models of European identity, works such as Martin Bernal's two-volume *Black Athena* (1987), which is centred on the Afroasiatic origins of Greek civilisation, urge us "*not only to rethink the fundamental bases of 'Western Civilization' but also to recognize the penetration of racism and 'continental chauvinism' into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history*" (Bernal 2).

In conclusion, then, by giving a voice to Zuleika, Evaristo's novel intervenes — albeit exclusively on an imaginative level — in the transmission of European classical history so as to unseat the conventional views on which the Western official historical archive has been built. Moreover, the literary visibility Evaristo bestows on Zuleika and Severus much more than hints at the African presence in Europe during the Greco-Roman classical period: it absorbs recent theoretical

positions which now look at the cultural contribution of ethnic groups other than the white ones as integral to the development of Western civilisation. Finally, Evaristo's complex articulation of gender power relations prevents the novel from developing the ethnic motif in simplistic celebratory terms and simultaneously enables the narrative to introduce topics relevant to the contemporary debate on black women's socio-political position *vis-à-vis* the nation-state. Her ability to render the representation of fictional as well as historical characters the vehicle for the concerns of black Britons living in present-day Britain is one of the most innovative aspects of her novelistic production.

¹ A similar use of Latin can be found in the following lines in which Zuleika ventriloquizes Theodorous, her tutor: 'You should hear him go on about Virgil,/ *noster maximus poeta*' (Evaristo 84). Here the use of Latin alerts attention to the cultural colonization activated by the Romans.

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