

**"Blonde Roots, Black History:
History and the Form of the Slave Narrative in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*"**

Katharine Burkitt (University of Liège, Belgium)

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between literary form and the representation of history in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2008). The text is premised on an ironic racial reversal of the Atlantic slave trade. As such, this single moment in international history is mobilised, brought into different contexts and demonstrated to be inherently malleable. In addition, Evaristo makes a critical engagement with the slave narrative form and highlights its limited and limiting nature. *Blonde Roots* is self-consciously full of narrators and narratives and contradicts any sense of a fixed historical vision of Atlantic slavery. Evaristo's novel mindfully disrupts this history in order to demonstrate the myriad ways in which the Atlantic slave trade is relevant to a contemporary context. Although *Blonde Roots* retains Atlantic slavery as its central moment, it is a radical re-vision of its familiar history, and the texts which narrate it. Through these distortions Evaristo's novel paradoxically demonstrates both the unreliability of the historical event and the shockwaves that still resound from it, and calls into question easy constructions of black British identities that are based upon the history of Atlantic slavery.

Keywords

Bernardine Evaristo; *Blonde Roots*; slave narrative; genre; slavery; meta-fiction; black British history

If I had to pinpoint a moment when the human race divided into the severe distinctions of blak and whyte, that was it: people belonged to one of two colours and in the society I was about to join my colour, not my personality or ability would determine my fate. (Evaristo, *Blonde Roots* 75)

Bernardine Evaristo's most recent full-length novel, *Blonde Roots* (2008), explores the role of the Atlantic slave trade in the construction of racial stereotypes. *Blonde Roots* reverses the

familiar history of Atlantic slavery in which black Africans were enslaved in the name of Western civilization. In Evaristo's novel, black "Ambossans" (7) are the masters and the "whyte" (29) Europeans (28) are their slaves. This wordplay reveals that from the outset, what might appear to be a straightforward reversal of the history of the Atlantic slave trade is much more nuanced. *Blonde Roots* is a densely layered and complicated text. As a slave narrative, which charts the emancipation of a white British woman enslaved by black African men, it ridicules the apparent security of the white master/black slave paradigm and refuses to allow the real history of the Atlantic slave trade to remain a stable moment in the past. This motif also has implications for black British identity today, as the history of Atlantic slavery is distorted and reflected onto the present day.

I will suggest that although the dividing line between black and white is key to the construction of *Blonde Roots*'s slave narrative, Evaristo presents a historiography of slavery which complicates it as a purely black experience. The discussion of slavery in *Blonde Roots* is not limited to the Atlantic slave trade, or even the modern era, as medieval serfdom and contemporary human trafficking are resonant within the text. This does not lessen the atrocities of the black Atlantic but it does become dislodged as a single instance of slavery in black – and world – history. In a further complication, Evaristo's text is a self-reflexive slave narrative, which questions received notions of history, and, perhaps more radically, also critically examines those personal anecdotes which have been seen to displace history as an incontrovertible discourse in the postmodern era. Although in *Blonde Roots* Atlantic slavery is presented as a moment in an ongoing history of inhumanity and persecution, the novel's final sentence hints at the persistence of slavery even into the present day: "The cane workers, many of whom descended from the original slaves, are paid" (261). In this postscript, Evaristo suggests that the plight of workers on the former slave plantation differs from that of their forerunners only in terms of payment, thus implying that post-slavery conditions are little more than nominally different. This sense of contemporaneous slavery is figured in a number of ways in the text and contributes to the complication of time and place in *Blonde Roots* – Doris Scagglethorpe's slave narrative is impossible to place. Furthermore, the novel is dotted with the anachronisms that characterize Evaristo's work and that frustrate attempts to locate it within a single historical moment. Not only does *Blonde Roots* destabilize time – there is no clear temporal setting, as the historical moment of Atlantic slavery is imbued with contemporary images as well as medieval practices including witch trials (136) – but the novel also dislocates space as the UK is figured as "The United Kingdom of Great Ambossa" located in "Aphrika" (6). As the novel opens with a map of the world that displaces Britain

and contradicts the familiarity of the Peters projection – the most commonly used map of the world in the UK – it demonstrates the ways in which maps can be used to manipulate and transform with particular purpose.¹

Blonde Roots reverses racial stereotypes, dislocates time and place and interrogates the history of the Atlantic slave trade. These are complex issues, when, as Hazel V. Carby suggests, Atlantic slavery is essential to an understanding of the contemporary world: "The economic and social system of slavery is [thus] a pre-history (as well as a pre-text to all Afro-American texts), a past social condition that can explain contemporary phenomena" (126). Carby's context is Afro-American, and in this article she writes about American historical novels, but the history of slavery has a similar status for black British writers. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) also supports Carby's reading, as he argues that for black people in America and in Europe, the quest for identity in the present is always a struggle with the history of slavery: "A concern with the Atlantic as a cultural and political system has been forced on black historiography and intellectual history by the economic and political matrix in which plantation slavery – 'capitalism with its clothes off' – was one special moment" (15). As Gilroy refutes a strictly national black British identity, he draws attention to the interplay of transnational racialized cultures within his "black Atlantic" (19).

The sense of the Atlantic as "one single, complex unit of analysis" is replicated in *Blonde Roots* by Doris's travels from her homeland to "The United Kingdom of Great Ambossa" (6) and onwards to Kaga's plantation on "Paradise Island" (172), thereby retaining the sense of transnationalism that is vital to Gilroy's notion. However, in contrast to Gilroy, *Blonde Roots* does not claim these as the experience of a single race – even Evaristo's slaver's yawl is populated by captive slaves from "as far away as Spain, France, Belgium, Portugal, Denmark and Germany" (62), countries that might be "Europane" (28) but are quite socially and culturally distinctive to the contemporary reader. Thus, the novel insists on the history of slavery as a series of interracial and intercultural relationships that are one-sidedly coercive yet implicitly codependant and this reflects onto contemporary black British identity in quite a different way from Gilroy's discussion. Like the work of Gilroy – and Carby – Evaristo's text sees the Atlantic slave trade as the basis of an overall conceptual and metaphorical remit of modern history, or "one special moment" in that history. However, as *Blonde Roots* foregrounds the importance of Atlantic slavery for the construction of black and other, British – and European – identities, it cannot be claimed to represent a single racial experience. If Evaristo's slave, Doris, is one of the "Whytes" (29) then her black "Ambossan" (7) master

radically dislodges the power-dynamics that Carby and Gilroy place at the heart of the social and cultural identities of black people today and in the past. There are conservative connotations to this stance as Evaristo de-racializes and potentially depoliticizes this "pre-history" of Atlantic slavery in a way which conflicts with Carby and Gilroy's insistence on it as the nexus of black history and identity. However, her use of a self-reflexive slave narrative form demonstrates a history of Atlantic slavery which retains the binaries of race but urges us to read past them. By which I mean that *Blonde Roots* does not eradicate the real history of the black Atlantic slave trade, but it does allow for that "pre-history" to be considered as part of a wider context.

Doris's slave narrative is deployed as an implicitly racial mode of textual resistance which is also always a complicated negotiation between literary convention, imagination and historical fact. Rather than simply memorializing the victims of the Atlantic slave trade – although that is certainly one aspect of the text – *Blonde Roots* uses the slave narrative to explore the physical and psychological effects of slavery with an immediacy that rejects it as a secure moment in British history. By providing both the slave and the slaver with a voice, Evaristo demonstrates the trauma of slaves' experiences as well as considering the concerns of the slave owner: "a reasonable man and a man with reasons" (110). The novel further destabilizes the history of the black Atlantic by demonstrating its narrative construction which confounds notions of historical and anecdotal veracity. Doris, the charismatic, yet inherently compromised, first-person narrator shows that her slave narrative is set within a series of political and formal conventions. As *Blonde Roots* questions the narratives of Atlantic slavery as a basis for contemporary black British identities, it seeks to recuperate a black British identity that is not solely determined by that historical moment.

The title, *Blonde Roots*, recalls one of the most notable 20th-century slave narratives, Alex Haley's *Roots* (1977), a text which constructs family history through a series of generations of slave narratives. Haley's novel draws attention to its paradoxical form as novel and family history, fiction and historiography. He claims to rewrite his own genealogy: "To the best of my knowledge and of my effort, lineage statement within *Roots* is either from my African or American families' carefully preserved oral history, much of which I have been able to conventionally corroborate with documents" (686). His disclaimer demonstrates the fundamental contradiction of this narrative form that makes a claim to truth in the name of black history. Despite the research that Haley undertook, and carefully documents in his text, it is a historical representation only "to the best of [his] knowledge". Haley's awareness of the limitations of his text explicitly foregrounds the problems of reception for texts that are

representative of lived experience but also inherently compromised in terms of autobiographical content. This is particularly problematic when, as Timothy A. Spaulding suggests, "the traditional slave narratives, as a form of autobiography offer a narrative representation of black identity itself" (9). Therefore, these biographies, autobiographies and private narratives of individuals become metonyms for the whole system of the Atlantic slave trade and consequently potentially unreliable signifiers of its transnational history. As Haley's and Evaristo's texts show, the identities deployed by slave narratives are necessarily anecdotal, marginal and formed on the basis of recognizable literary conventions as well as those histories of suffering and shame. Likewise, Spaulding discusses the role of slave narratives in the work of contemporary writers:

Ultimately, the slave narrative provides the contemporary writer with a complex model of narrative hybridity. Even in the most basic terms, the form represents the intersection between creative and autobiographical expression, between historical and fictional representation, between the individual quest for freedom and the larger political goals of cultural critique. (11)

Spaulding draws attention to the conflicts within the structure of slave narratives that render them contradictory yet powerfully ambivalent spaces. Just as the "narrative hybridity" of the genre reiterates the polyglot nature of the form, so it also insists that there is no single narrative of slavery and that the historical moment is itself hybrid, constructed by multifarious stories and voices. As the form simultaneously illuminates and blurs the borders of truth and the imaginary it provides a space within which they are inseparable and this ambivalence implicitly problematizes the slave narrative as a basis for black – or any – history.

In a similar way, Philip Gould suggests that this indeterminate mode of representation has been inherent within the politics of the slave narrative form since it found its political impetus in the late 17th century and early 18th century as part of the campaign for the abolition of slavery in Britain and America:

Many of the narrative and thematic conventions, which were apparent yet not fully developed in eighteenth-century works, take shape in this period – the depravity of Southern planters and the irrepressible fact of sexual miscegenation, the hypocrisy of Southern Christianity, scenes of brutal whipping and torture, rebellious slaves who are murdered, and the strategic mechanisms by which the

plantation maintains what Douglass called the "mental and moral darkness" of enslavement – all become standard fare. [...] These conventions were usually rehearsed orally before they appeared in print. The abolitionist lecture circuit was an important development shaping the style and content of the antebellum slave narrative. Most slave narrators made their names as speakers before they became writers per se. (19)

Like Spaulding, Gould demonstrates that the slave narrative genre is based upon a series of formal conventions; he points out that the slave narrative has always been formulated within very specific traditions and with aims that are both political and populist. Furthermore, these traditions are not just individual but communal, as the stories were "usually rehearsed orally before they appeared in print". The genre is, therefore, characterized by "the narrative and thematic conventions" that were popular with the contemporaneous audiences at abolitionist rallies rather than being based on the claims of verisimilitude which are implicit, and demanded, at least in early versions of the form. This tense relationship between narrative truth and fiction is well demonstrated by the ongoing discussion surrounding the birthplace of Olaudah Equiano. Whilst Equiano's narrative hinges on his African genealogy, the uncertainty about that history continues to raise questions about the veracity of his narrative. When Vincent Carretta suggests that "one could argue that the author of the *Interesting Narrative* invented an African identity rather than reclaimed one" (xi), he not only highlights the importance of Equiano's narrative authenticity but also demonstrates the futility in any claim to textual accuracy. Equiano's African identity relies on creative forms that are "invented" or "reclaimed" and, as such, it is always a process of imagination, or re-imagination, and even the most famous of autobiographical slave narratives is constructed by generic convention, audience expectation and poetic licence.

The generic politics which characterize the slave narrative remain at the fore in contemporary engagements. As Spaulding has suggested, the genre provides "a complex model" which is inherently self-aware of its own fictional nature and literary genealogy. In the context of contemporary British writing, Abigail Ward has identified this self-consciousness as an aspect of David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999). She demonstrates the restrictions that Dabydeen's narrator faces as he retells his autobiographical narrative: "Mungo is, therefore, uneasy with his British readership, all too aware of the constrictive form of the slave narrative and fearful of 'alienating his readers'" (256). As Ward draws attention to the consequences of Mungo's subversion of narrative convention, she explicitly identifies the

"constrictive form" to which Dabydeen's protagonist is enslaved. There is an irreconcilable tension between the expectations of "the British readership" and the historical reality through which Mungo has lived. As such, Dabydeen's text captures the contradiction at the heart of the slave narrative in which history is manipulated by literary convention and readers' expectations. This articulates the conflicted relationship between the form of the slave narrative and the history of slavery that it seeks to represent. Although there is parity between the two, there is no guarantee that the slave narrative represents a singular moment but is a conflation of literary conventions and oral histories. Furthermore, contemporary texts that emerge from the form, like *A Harlot's Progress*, are self-conscious of these structural conceits and literary requirements. For instance, in both *A Harlot's Progress* and *Blonde Roots* there are detailed and shocking descriptions of "scenes of brutal whipping and torture" that Gould identifies as a motif of the slave narrative. In *Blonde Roots* these are not presented in Evaristo's characteristic ironic mode, as she ensures that the horrors of Doris's life recall the torture and the degradation of a real slave. Therefore, within the form of the slave narrative there is an inherent self-awareness of the past and the consequences of writing that history – something that *Blonde Roots* retains even from the distance of the 21st century.

Evaristo's manipulation of this already ambivalent form questions the stability of the history of Atlantic slavery. As the text interrogates the status of the histories that shape black British identities in the present day, it demonstrates the unreliability of their narrators and draws attention to the way in which histories recur and overlap. This is notable from early on in *Blonde Roots* as Doris introduces herself:

I am proud to declare that I come from a long line of cabbage farmers.

My people were honest peasants who worked the land and never turned to theft even when it snowed in summer or rained all winter so that the crops miscarried their pods and turned to mulch.

We weren't landowners, oh no, we were serfs, the bottom link in the agricultural food chain, although no actual chains clinked on the ground when we walked around. Nor were we property, exactly, but our roots went deep into the soil because when the land changed hands through death, marriage or even war, so did we, and so tied we remained, for generation upon generation. (8)

This passage is self-conscious of its own context within a longer history of slavery as it draws comparison between medieval serfdom and slavery: the Scagglethorpes were "honest peasants", enslaved "although no actual chains clinked on the ground when we walked around". Although Doris does not explicitly recognize her former life as a mode of slavery, the implications are clear, as land and workers change hands "for generation upon generation". But this is a British pastoral form of slavery, a far cry from the physical displacement of the Atlantic slave trade and the atrocities of the Middle Passage that come later in the novel. *Blonde Roots* is not alone in contextualizing the history of slavery in this way. For instance, Haley's *Roots* also recalls a form of slavery which is older and more benign than Atlantic slavery: "Others left town, seeking another village to beg someone who had food to accept them as slaves, just to get something into their bellies" (11). But in Haley's text this voluntary slavery is the best option for survival after a failed harvest in rural Gambia and is contrasted with Kunta Kinte's abduction later in the novel. In *Roots* there is a sharp juxtaposition between this fraternal enslavement and the Atlantic slave trade, something that Evaristo's text does not allow. Although Doris's recollections are couched in nostalgic terms, they are fully conscious of the hierarchy of slavery, as the Scagglethorpes remain "tied" to the estate on which they live and work. Therefore the notion of slavery is freed from the temporal, racial and colonial specificities of the Atlantic slave trade. As such, the motif of slavery expands and takes on a wider relevance; as Atlantic slavery is dislodged, though not completely dislocated, as the decisive moment of black and European history, Evaristo's text points towards a longer history of slavery that though not racially constructed is nonetheless restrictive and disabling. In this context, then, Atlantic slavery, although marking a moment of racial division, is not singular in its history of human suffering and atrocity.

As such, the novel seeks to deconstruct the history of slavery that James Walvin suggests has become "the big metanarrative of Atlantic slavery" (xviii). Although slave narratives do disrupt monolithic representations of slavery more generally, like Dabydeen's, Evaristo's text is overtly postmodern in its metafictional perspective and questions the status of texts, both literary and historical. This is in line with Spaulding's suggestion that "[i]n their critique of traditional history, the postmodern slave narrative engages in the dismantling of Enlightenment conceptions of history and identity and the totalizing grand narrative of Western cultural superiority" (3). Whilst this is true of Evaristo's text as it reworks the history of slavery, I would also contend that its self-conscious slave narrative form complicates not only that "traditional history" but also those narratives and histories with which it is replaced. Furthermore, this mode of critical analysis ensures that the history is never allowed to remain

in the past: "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon 110). As Linda Hutcheon points out, the postmodern rewriting of history reflects onto the present and Evaristo's complicated temporal setting ensures that neither the past nor the contemporary world are allowed to remain static or inevitable. It is in this way that *Blonde Roots* interrogates Walvin's "big metanarrative" most clearly; it destabilizes not only the history of Atlantic slavery but also those slave narratives of resistance which underpin conceptualizations of "the black Atlantic" in the contemporary world. As such, Evaristo's take on slavery and its history does not merely foreground what Iain Chambers has called "a pluralist gaze" (78). Rather, *Blonde Roots* reworks "the very sense of history, culture, society and language that had previously excluded or silenced such voices, such a presence" (Chambers 78). In Evaristo's text this comes through postmodern literary practices which impact on the narrative form; the re-imagining of post-slavery language and focus on the processes of storytelling reveal the fictionality of the slave narrative as a genre and through this reflect on the history of Atlantic slavery and its status in the present day.

This is made most apparent as Doris repeatedly draws attention to her role as a narrator and storyteller. For instance, the above passage opens with "I am proud to declare", as Doris insists upon her ownership of the story she narrates. From the outset of her journey she "imagined telling [her] sisters" (53), and she draws attention to the circulation of the stories and oral histories that construct her narrative by preceding them with "the story goes that" (17) or "we heard that" (29). In this way, her experiences of history of Atlantic slavery are constructed on a series of unreliable, colloquial narratives. Whilst these stories are not intentionally misleading, they – and their narrators – are often shown to be as interested in the process of storytelling as they are in the events that they narrate. Thus, the patchwork of anecdotes that construct Doris's slave narrative draws attention to the storytelling process and implicitly reflect on ways in which histories are constructed. In this self-conscious engagement with the function of narrative and its implications for history, *Blonde Roots* challenges the notion of a single history of Atlantic slavery:

Jane was thirteen. She wept with relief the first time she got to lie down on the shelf and stretch her whole body out. (Little did she know.) A prisoner of war, she had been incarcerated in a fort on the coast for months before being shipped out. Hundreds of slaves had been stuffed into an airless, windowless dungeon. She had

expected special treatment on account of her condition – pregnancy. How she prattled on for hours. Maybe her own cabin? A bed? Dress? Basin? Soap? Washrag? Comb? Blanket? Chamber pot? Plate?

Yes, any day now.

Jane had travelled so deeply into fantasy she had lost her way back. (87)

The above passage is shocking in many ways; it highlights Jane's youth, her naivety and eventual decline into madness as well as the inhuman conditions in which the slaves were kept and the processes of dehumanization inherent in their degradation. As Jane envisages luxuries in the face of suffering and torture, her tragedy is revealed and named as "fantasy". However, the assertion that "Jane had travelled so deeply into fantasy she had lost her way back" also has consequences for the narration of her history. Jane's lack of reliability as a narrator demonstrates the problem of oral histories. At other moments in the text, similar motifs reveal the way in which these histories are constructed through a series of perspectives, anecdotes and sometimes contradictory narratives. For instance, although Doris is not aware of the fate of her family, in the second section of the novel, Kaga, Doris's "Bwana" (3), encounters them as slaves ready to be sold, a conceit that has implications later as Doris is reunited with her sister who has become Kaga's mistress, "Miss Iffie" (234). Kaga's first encounter with Doris's family is with "Jack Scagglethorpe, a hard-working, God-fearing, law-abiding citizen from the north" (141). Even in this short sentence Jack is allowed to declare his identity. Like Jane, his narration of self affronts the eradication of that identity just as it is about to occur and demonstrates the power of narratives, even when they are necessarily compromised. Furthermore, Kaga's somewhat hackneyed, coincidental encounter with Doris's family demonstrates quite clearly that his narrative of slavery and Doris's are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, through the telling of stories *Blonde Roots* counteracts the anonymity of the Middle Passage and draws attention to the myriad experiences of imprisonment and slavery whilst also exploring the ways in which communal and oral histories are constructed and transmitted through slave narratives. Whilst this means that the normally silenced are given a voice in *Blonde Roots*, it also draws attention to the ways in which these narratives are subjective and compromised.

Blonde Roots does not dismiss these unreliable narrators but reveals the history of the Atlantic slave trade as a moment of competing, unreliable, interlocuted and inevitably lost

narratives, as the plethora of storytellers that the text accommodates demonstrates the way in which oral histories are produced and passed along. Whilst insisting on the importance of the history of the Atlantic slave trade for the contemporary world, in *Blonde Roots* Evaristo's reversal of the racial dynamic shows that this history is relevant as an essential part of a larger national and international past. The questioning of the autonomy of black history is a recurrent motif in all Evaristo's work, but is perhaps most prominent in *Soul Tourists* (2005). In this text the protagonist, Stanley, undertakes a spiritual and actual journey through European history as he encounters the ghosts of people of colour who have been obscured by time and historiography. In an interview with Karen Hooper, Evaristo discusses the symbolism of these ghosts and their impact on the second-generation Jamaican Stanley:

The ghosts expand his concept of Europe and its history. Prior to the trip, at the beginning of the novel, he has questions about his sense of belonging, questioning his father's viewpoint that he, Stanley, is a Jamaican (even though he's born in the UK) and that he doesn't belong. The ghosts, in one sense, show him that European history has broader and deeper African/black connections than he realized – which really excites him. (Hooper 10)

Here Evaristo understands the racial dynamics of European history in a way which is similar, but not identical to, Carby or Gilroy. Whereas for those critics the narratives of black history are figured through continual critical re-engagement with the history of Atlantic slavery, for Evaristo, "European history has broader and deeper African/black connections". In this discussion and in *Soul Tourists* she considers the role of black people in the history of Europe and demands their recognition within that. In the same interview she discusses the importance of British history in her writing: "It seems that I'm only really interested in exploring contemporary British society, if, for example, I can connect it to its past, to history" (Evaristo, "On the Road"). Whilst this echoes the ideas of both Carby and Gilroy, again, the omission of a racialized discussion of "contemporary British society" highlights Evaristo's point. In texts like *Soul Tourists* and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) she reclaims the rightful black presence in the same history that has ignored it for so long. In *Blonde Roots* the reversal of the racial paradigms of the Atlantic slave trade engages with history in a similarly critical way as the racial construction of slaves and masters is reversed in the fictional realm. Perhaps most radical is this reversal of the racial dynamics of slavery that allows Evaristo's black "Ambossans" to write history in a way which was denied to black slaves. Yet again, the

distortion of a real historic moment in Evaristo's novel is self-conscious as it allows Kaga to tell his side of the story – only to reveal the lack of reliability in his narrative.

In *Blonde Roots* the metafictional slave narrative form and focus on oral histories and anecdotes are set against fixed, monolithic versions of the history of the Atlantic slave trade in a way which is postmodern. As Robert Young suggests, this has implications for the construction of historical narratives and particularly for those which are positioned Eurocentrically:

Contrary then, to some of its more overreaching definitions, postmodernism itself could be said to mark not just the cultural effects of a new stage of "late" capitalism, but the sense of loss of European history and culture as History and Culture, the loss of their unquestioned place at the centre of the world. (76)

It is in the ambivalent space created by the postmodern "loss of European history and Culture as History" that Evaristo's work inserts itself. By reworking both received European history and slave narratives in *Blonde Roots*, the text draws attention to the way in which the latter has replaced the former as a version of postmodern history. In so doing, the novel critically examines both forms of history and refuses to privilege either. Its self-conscious nature foregrounds the generic conceits of the slave narrative as well as the history of atrocity that underpins them and finally both are rendered unreliable as historical discourses. As such, the novel's preoccupation is with the consequences of the history of Atlantic slavery and its repercussions in the contemporary world. This is in line with the slave narrative form in the work of other contemporary black British writers. As Bénédicte Ledent has suggested in relation to the work of Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar, these writers aim "to fathom and expose its [slavery's] complex mechanisms and so fight the racism it has given rise to" (279). Like Evaristo's, the work of Phillips and D'Aguiar brings history to bear on the contemporary world and traces the "complex mechanisms" of slavery to highlight the inherent racism at its heart. However, Evaristo's text is also very different. Unlike the work of Phillips or D'Aguiar, in *Blonde Roots* the reversal of the historical accuracies of the Atlantic slave trade complicates the text's interrogation of contemporary racism and points towards a time and place where the racial binaries of the early 21st century are based on an altogether different past. As the motif of black slavery is replaced with the image of the white slave, so the focus of the text shifts away from the politics of race, and in *Blonde Roots* the interrogation of contemporary racial prejudice is combined with other kinds of critique. The different versions

of slavery which Doris encounters represent an exploration of the history of racism which is combined with discussions of sexual discrimination, physical brutality, the dissolution of the family unit, and the psychological effects of slavery.

Yet it is the enslavement of women and the subject of femininity that are all pervasive motifs in this text; for instance, Doris is "trussed up in the bottom of a slaver's yawl" (75), forced to "spread [her] legs so that he could 'inspect' [her] vagina" (93) and can still feel the "little kicks" of the children that she bears and is forced to give up (22). In each of these instances, and many others, the abuse of Doris's physical being as well as her humanity and her femininity is foremost. In these ways, the position of women in slavery is demonstrated to be precarious and compromised, and the focus on their corporeality privileges the female body in place of the racialized body of Atlantic slavery. In its focus on the feminine, Evaristo's text recalls *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), and is perhaps most notably foreshadowed by the work of contemporary writer Toni Morrison, in particular *Beloved* (1987). However, unlike the work of these writers, *Blonde Roots's* projection of collective feminine trauma into the contemporary world explicitly crosses boundaries of time and race.

The novel's examination of the position of women in contemporary society and the critique of the ideals of feminine beauty is a discussion which Evaristo has already entered into in *Lara* ([1997] 2009), and which she identifies as the main drive in *The Emperor's Babe* (Evaristo, "On the Road") – both texts that are also concerned with discussions of race and slavery. *Blonde Roots* takes this discussion further as Evaristo's criticism of the socially constructed nature of feminine beauty, and the effect of being outside that limited paradigm, is represented as a form of enslavement:

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

In the Burbs tanning was all the rage too, and you could get a nose flattening job done quite cheaply, we heard, although I always thought that flat, fat, nostrils on whyte faces looked ridiculous. The very thought of a mallet smashing down on my nose was just too scary for words. (30)

This passage is couched in humour although it is an explicit discussion of the brutality of the stereotypes of feminine beauty. However, in the context of this text, and the slavery which it describes, where bodies are repeatedly prematurely aged, scarred and violated, Evaristo demonstrates the futility and tragedy of conforming to an ideal of physical beauty. A similar point is made in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Like Evaristo's "Burbite women" Smith's second-generation Jamaican, Irie, is repeatedly faced with her own physical and racial otherness set against a socially constructed, and naturalized, ideal: "There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie without a reflection. A stranger in a stranger land" (266). Irie's lack of reflection and inability to recognize herself in the "gigantic mirror" of England leads her to the "cryptically named P.K.'s Afro Hair" (273) with the intention of bodily "transformation" and "fighting her genes" (274). In *White Teeth*, however, Irie's physical otherness is reflected back onto the "stranger land" and it is England rather than Irie that is put on trial; its racist standards of beauty are revealed to be oppressive and misplaced. Both Evaristo and Smith suggest that the construction of the female self is always a social as well as a personal matter and, as such, follow Kobena Mercer's influential discussion in "Black Hair/Style Politics":

[H]air is never a straightforward biological fact, because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally worked upon by human hands. Such practices socialize hair, making it the medium of significant statements about self and society and the codes of value that bind them, or do not. In this way, hair is merely a raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meanings and value. (118)

Mercer draws attention to the "cultural practices" that are always involved in the processes of feminine beauty, and, similarly, Evaristo highlights the "(un)naturally Aphrican" effect of hair extensions and hair dye. Therefore, in *Blonde Roots* a racialized ideal of feminine beauty is attacked and rendered abject. In the same way that she deals with the physical effects of slave labour, Evaristo does not shy away from the brutality of those ideologies of beauty that render the racism in slave histories continually relevant: "The very thought of a mallet smashing down on my nose was just too scary for words." The bodily replication of the slave-owners by their slaves might thereby be read as an act of brutal self-eradication, but, importantly, Evaristo also highlights the dual responsibility in its practice and dissipates her criticisms of both the slaves and their owners through humour. Although the irony of white women

adorning themselves as black is tragicomic, as is also suggested by Smith and Mercer, these reversals are "never a straightforward biological fact" and are not only determined by race. Rather, they demonstrate the enslavement of women to naturalized conventions of beauty – something which is hinted at by the text's title, *Blonde Roots* – a direct reference to the paradoxical fact that it is naturally blonde hair that looks "plain tacky".

These reversals of racial stereotypes, dislocations of time and place, and interrogations of historical and literary narratives in *Blonde Roots* combine to produce a text that is at once fixed in black British history but which also destabilizes the foundations of the historical moment of the Atlantic slave trade. As Evaristo centralizes the Atlantic slave trade in the context of her novel, she demonstrates it to be a crucial moment in the construction of the racial dynamics of the 21st century. Yet as the reversal of the racial divides of black and white (or "blak" and "whyte") in *Blonde Roots* demonstrates the easy slippage of power, it also insists upon the interrelation and inseparability of their narratives. This is destabilized further by Evaristo's self-conscious engagement with the slave-narrative genre which complicates historical representation and refuses to allow the Atlantic slave trade to become a stable point of recognition for a history of race. By revealing the inherently fictional nature of the genre, *Blonde Roots* problematizes those narrated histories and reveals them to be unreliable signifiers of racial, national and gender identities. Despite this critique, Evaristo's text does not dismiss the form: *Blonde Roots* reveals the – potentially emancipatory – power of slave narratives whilst also demonstrating the inevitably compromised nature of narrators and their narrations. Through *Blonde Roots*'s polyglot of voices, Evaristo's version of the Atlantic slave trade refuses to remain static or monolithic. Furthermore, Doris's slave narrative becomes a receptacle to explore slavery in other contexts – including medieval serfdom and those discourses of feminine beauty that privilege specific races. In particular, her focus upon the female slave evokes a version of slavery that is not solely based on racial divides but on oppression more generally. Therefore, although race remains a lens through which to view *Blonde Roots*, the effects of this racism are more abstract, more long-standing and more widely relevant. Just as present and past are inseparable in *Blonde Roots*, so are discussions of time and space, race and gender, slave and master, and Evaristo's vision of this moment in history is filtered out of and reflected onto the contemporary world. Therefore, when Doris recalls the slogan of the Black Power Movement – "Yes, I may be whyte. But I am whyte and I am beautiful!" (32) – it is a metonym for the whole text. As *Blonde Roots* highlights the power of the racial binary of the Atlantic slave trade (albeit ironically reversed) it

demonstrates the exploration of the physical and psychological effects of slavery that surpass their strictly racial context.

Notes

1. <http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_gb0623460#m_en_gb0623460>.
2. There are a number of examples of this: Caryl Philips's *Cambridge*; David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*; and Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter*, amongst others.

Notes on contributor

Katharine Burkitt teaches in the English department at the University of Liège in Belgium. Her research interests are migration and diaspora in contemporary writing, postcolonial poetry, literary form and gender and sexuality. She has published on the work of Bernardine Evaristo, Derek Walcott, Les Murray and Michael Ondaatje and is currently preparing a monograph for publication with Ashgate under the title, *Literary Form as Postcolonial Critique: Epic for the Contemporary World*.

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