

“Where are you from, originally?” :

Race and Gender in Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara*

A compliment irks Paramount business executive Richard Choi Bertsch. He wishes well-meaning Americans would stop complimenting him on how good his English is. That offends him as an American of dual racial heritage; half German and half Korean. He can also do without the often asked question: “Where do you come from?” “When I say I’m from L.A., inevitably, they’ll ask, ‘But, where do you really come from?’ ”—implying that someone who looks like Bertsch cannot be American. (Kang)

In the multicultural countries we live in, ethnically diverse people feel discomfort even when one does not mean to hurt their feelings¹. In fact, for the emerging multicultural Britain Gerd Baumann states that “hyphenated identities are nothing new in England, a country which absorbed clannish Huguenot elites in the 1680s”. He goes on to argue that long before the phrase “hyphenated identities” was ever conceived, “everyone in Britain was English but also British, British but also Scottish, Catholic-English or Jewish-British, London-Irish or Anglo-Welsh: the combinations are countless because they keep multiplying” (70). As for the literary perspective of multiculturalism, Dominic Head remarks that in the postcolonial era, the question of identity and national affiliation becomes complex and indeterminate. Head asserts that “the novel has proved to be a fruitful site for investigating the hybridised cultural forms that might be produced in an evolving, and so *genuinely*, multicultural Britain” (156). In that respect, Bernardine Evaristo’s novel-in-verse *Lara*, published in 1997, explores hybrid identities from a gendered point of view; with a Nigerian-English woman as the protagonist in the context

¹ Moreover, “[t]hese unknowing offences occur in the classroom, marketplace, workplace—even at church. Caesar Peters, an African American actor, unwittingly insulted an Asian American teenager who had come to his Hollywood church to volunteer by describing her as Oriental. “I am not a rug,” she told him. (Kang)

of the pluralistic voice of generations-long racial offence and gender discrimination. Evaristo's fiction is an epic journey which covers the protagonist Lara's family history extending to Nigeria and Brazil by her paternal background. Therefore, the main purpose of this essay is to explore *Lara* in terms of how Lara's individuality is shaped by her running away from England, journeying in pursuit for the unity of her hybrid identity, trying to discover her roots because Lara is woven by the memories of her ancestor's past.

The story of the protagonist, Lara, a mixed race child of Nigerian and English parents, who grows up in the 60s and 70s in London, partially depends on Bernardine Evaristo's own life experiences.² On autobiographical writing, Bernheimer claims that multicultural conjuncture leads certain authors to write, and although this move might be seen as "narcissistic", it can be viewed more positively as complementary, rather than hostile to a global broadening perspective; it is typically the story of "the traces of cultural otherness discovered within and of ambivalent interactions with otherness confronted without" (12). Thus, it can also be suggested that Lara's quest is also Evaristo's attempt to reconcile with her alterity in the domain of multiculturalism.

Among the various voices the history of Lara's ancestor's and her present life is narrated with, the voice of the expository poem belongs to a slave woman who is raped by the owner of the plantation despite having a husband and two sons, and dies, her soul roaming over her family. This tragic "prologue" voicing a woman from 1844, darkly haunts Lara and the reader until the end because she is Tolulope- the scarred one and only

² This information is based on the discussion part of the conferences Evaristo gave both in Izmir/Turkey in October 2003 and Modena/Italy in March 2004.

towards the end Evaristo reveals that she is Lara's paternal great-grandmother who lived in Brazil.

Right after the British Nationality Act of 1948 which confirmed the right of entry to Britain for the citizens of Empire who were deemed British subjects, Lara's Nigerian father Taiwo da Costa arrives from Lagos in Liverpool in 1949 (Head 163). As Pope also points out, in the UK the consequences of the British Empire and subsequently the Commonwealth "came home (both literally and metaphorically)" from the late 1950s onwards and by 1990, around five million people from the former colonies had immigrated to the 'motherland' in search of work and better life (135). Likewise, Taiwo intends to study in his "Motherland" and become rich, so he runs away from Yoruba and arrives in Liverpool in 1949: "Mama, my dreams have been my fuel for years, /all those British films for sixpence at the movie house. /See London, then die! I was desperate to get here!" but he is discriminated as "Sambo! Darkie! Nigger!" (4) and fights them. His experience of disillusionment is slightly referred to in the never written imaginary letters he voices in his mind: "Even the West Indians say/ 'Do you people still live in trees in the bush? Mama," (4). Nevertheless "...men are needed/ to replace the fallen dead..." (6) during the post-war era, so he has to work. Thus, Taiwo's nickname becomes Bill and he explains: "... after William the Great,/ I have found that an African name closes doors" (5). His only comment on racial discrimination is revealed as: "in this country I am coloured. Back home I was just me" (4). Taiwo hence settles down, assimilating himself in his 'Motherland'.

Taiwo da Costa's education holds a secondary importance when earning money is difficult, yet, at a Commonwealth dance hall where "... the emperor's disowned sons/

congregate...” he meets an English girl, they fall in love and decide to marry. Ellen is a beautiful girl who does not seem to mind Taiwo’s alterity, yet her family and friends do. As a consequence, it is Ellen instead of Taiwo who suffers because of this union, since Ellen’s family, especially her mother Edith objects very strongly to their marriage: “A native from a colony! Good Lord! So he *is* dark! Have you no sense of morals!” (29). Since Edith is an Irish-English Catholic and sends Ellen to a convent school, both mother and daughter use Catholic teaching for arguing against each other. From Ellen’s point of view: “Faith is the spinal cord which keeps the girl sane. / Were they not all God’s children? How very silly! /Why such fuss because of colour? She barely noticed it” (36). As noted before, since Evaristo uses pluralistic narrative voice, each character voices her/his own perspective besides the presence of a neutral narration. On the heterogeneity of the voice Andrew Gibson claims that we may make sense of the divisions in the narrative voice by sorting them out into a structure of conflicts or tensions (171). Thus, the conflict from Edith’s point of view is: “I could never love darkie grandchildren. I’ve *told* her!/ But she’ll not listen to me or Father Augustus who said/ that taking the word of the Lord to the primitives/ is one thing, but it’s quite another lying down with them./Chocolate sauce on cod, for Christ’s bloomin’ sake!” (38). Everybody in their circle likewise agree with Edith: “An African, cannibal, savage, monkey, heathen, /a thing from outer space. Goodness gracious No! ... His colour will come off on the sheets, p’raps she can/scrub him white; they have tails, you know, live in/mud huts, swing from trees, were idol-worshippers/till we civilised them...Think of the poor children, half-breeds, mongrels. It’s not right bringing them into the world it isn’t” (33). However, Ellen follows her heart’s desire and supporting her bias with the religious teachings of

“saving souls”, marries Taiwo. Despite the fact that Ellen loves Taiwo, it may be pointed out here that Ellen’s regarding Taiwo as another soul to save is an indication of her seeing him racially inferior. In this case, then, Ellen’s prejudice is not directed to his color or the “savageness” of the place where he comes from, but to his “heathen” background. Yet, Edith’s parting words to her daughter reveal a terrible abhorrence which affects the relationship until the first child is born: “Marry in red! Wish you were dead!”(40). Thus, the ostracization starts with Ellen’s mother, yet, Evaristo tries to reveal the situation from the other’s point of view as well; Taiwo thinks “Ah! If only Mama were here to see her handsome son. /Would she approve? I suspect she too would be trouble” (40). Although Taiwo’s idea is mentioned slightly what Evaristo suggests here is that the feeling of racial contempt might be reciprocal. In that respect, the collective unconscious underlying racial hatred may be explained by what Zygmunt Bauman states in *Postmodernity and its Discontents*: “Great crimes often start from great ideas...Among this class of ideas, pride of place belongs to the vision of purity”. For Bauman, in German racism the social question to which people tried to answer was the question of “‘pollution’, of the stubborn presence of people who ‘did not fit’, who were ‘out of place’ who ‘spoiled the picture’-- and otherwise offended the aesthetically gratifying and morally reassuring sense of harmony” of the society (5). Yet, despite the fact that she belongs to the dominant British culture, Ellen carries the burden of this ostracizing as a woman and the reader hears no more of Taiwo’s opinion on the topic.

The first child born to the couple, Juliana, is light in colour, so Edith finally relents: “No thick-lipped Negroid child, this, but a paler hybrid, / and Nana, who’d expected a Taiwo replica, worshipped her” (45). Lara is born in 1962 as the fourth child

of the eight children da Costa family eventually has, and she is named Omilara which in Yoruba language meant “the family are like water” (43). Actually, grandmother Edith maintains her loathing, revealing it in the act of always favoring the “paler hybrid” Juliana and disregarding the other seven grandchildren, the “toffee” colored Lara included. Evaristo chooses to disregard them as well and portrays Lara, the in-between in color.

Born in 1962, the “toffee” colored child, Lara, suffers more than her parents for being both a hybrid and a girl in multicultural London. (54) since, time wise, Dominic Head points out that in the 1991 census, “the first to collect data on ‘ethnic’ identity”, just 5.5 per cent of Britain’s total population was recorded as belonging to non-white “ethnic groups” and that the racial tensions and hostilities that were manifest from the late 1960s onwards were built on unfair perceptions of race that were sometimes worsened by government policy (168). Hence, it may signify why Evaristo chooses to start each section with entitling it with the specific year, besides the motive for clarifying the years in Lara’s ancestry.

When very young, the spiritually gifted Lara believes to see some people watching her: “...young, old, so strange, / sitting motionless in a semi-circle among the tall grass,/lips unmoving but eyes alive with the singing of a song:/ ‘Lara kiss, Lara kiss, we love you always, Lara kiss.’ ” (48). Lara calls them “Daddy People”; they appear as “phantoms, perched in trees like owls, eyes smiling, singing”. Naming them as “Daddy People” Lara implies their being black and they appear very often signifying Lara’s longing for the relatives from her father’s side. Her mother, Ellen, tolerates this vision, but, on the contrary, it is Lara’s father who objects to her creating her paternal family in

her imagination. Taiwo never talks about his family, erases his past and acts severely on catching Lara talking to the “Daddy People” in the garden, when seven years old. He breaks her wand and beats her with it, forcing her to say farewell to the “Daddy People” (54). Breaking bonds with the past like he did himself, Taiwo cuts the Nigerian roots from Lara’s identity hoping that she would assimilate herself in the English culture. He does manage to achieve it until the identity crisis starts when Lara is a teenager and the “Daddy People” reappear calling her first to Nigeria then to Brazil.

When she is about ten, Lara does not notice her “discernible” colour, “camouflaged by her uniform in school”, and neither do her friends (61). Nonetheless, becoming self-conscious at adolescence, she starts realizing that her legs are not perfect and her hair is fizzy; not blonde like her best friend Susie’s (65). Eventually the inevitable conversation takes place:

‘Where’you from, La?’ Susie suddenly asked
 one lunch break on the playing fields.’ ‘Woolwich.’
 ‘No, silly, where are you from, y’know originally?’
 ‘If you really must know I was born in Eltham, actually.’
 ‘My dad says you must be from Jamaica,’ Susie insisted.
 ‘I’m not Jamaican! I’m English!’ ‘Then why are you
 coloured?’
 Lara’s heart shuddered, she felt so humiliated, so angry.
 ‘Look, my father’s Nigerian, my mother’s English, alright?’
 ‘So you’re half-caste!’ Lara tore at the grass in silence.
 ‘Where is Nigeria then, is it near Jamaica?’ ‘It’s in Africa.’
 ‘Where’s Africa exactly?’ ‘How should I know, I don’t
 bloody well live there, do I!’ ‘Is your dad from the jungle?’
 That was it! Lara sprang up, brushed the grass off her skirt,
 pulled up her socks, flung her satchel over her shoulder,

stormed off. Susie ran after her. ‘What’s the matter, Lara?’ ‘You’re bloody rude, that’s the matter!’ Tears were edging their way out, blurred, she strode on. ‘Well he could be from the jungle, couldn’t he?’ Susie looked perplexed, Lara felt so stupid blubbing in public. ‘Look, I didn’t mean to hurt you, honest. I’m really sorry. Anyway, as far as I’m concerned you’re nearly white, alright? And I adore your hair, it’s like a brillo pad. Truly!’ Lara stopped, smiled, sighed.... (65).

Lara gets reconciled with her best friend when young, but then, when they grow older it’s Susie’s boy friend who objects to Lara’s presence: “ ‘You never said she was a nig nog.’ ... Don’t bring her again. What’re you/ doing fraternising with them? ... It’s bloody embarrassing!” (67). Later on, at her first disco Lara sees Susie’s boyfriend “ape a monkey” at her and laugh with his mates (68). The event triggers her anger which leads her to quest for her true identity: “Living in my skin, I was, but which one?” (69). Not lucky enough like her parents, Lara cannot fortify herself against the society’s prejudices with the sense of solidarity that maternal bliss creates. Her oscillating behavior starts with her “toffee” colour; first she hates her looks “It was what you looked like that mattered/ and I was repulsive with dark skin and wiry hair” (71), then she starts dressing outrageously to get more attention, so her teacher advises her to “tone down” her sense of colour. It is Lara’s cousin Beatrice, also a hybrid by a Nigerian father and Irish mother, who confronts her seeming disinterestedness: “... What’s so funny about being black?” and when Lara says “I’m not black, I’m half-caste, actually.” Beatrice says: “They don’t care whether/ your mother’s white, green or orange with purple spots, / you’re a nigger to them lovey, or a nigra as I like to say” (74). Thus, Beatrice, who lives in Liverpool

reveals the truth to Lara about blacks who were beaten by “marauding whites” for whom being half-white would not be of slightest importance. Beatrice forces Lara to face the fact of being black and advises her to act accordingly and learn some African ways in which her parents are insufficient to teach, ignoring the situation (76). Hence, Beatrice’s confrontation forces Lara to act like a Nigerian rather than hiding behind the physical half-white color.

Defeated in the assertion of her lighter color, Lara starts inquiring about Nigeria and his father’s family. When she gets excited learning that her paternal great-grandfather was a Brazilian, though a slave, Taiwo comments: “You would rather be anything but African!” (81). Taiwo feels she irritates him as he does not want to go “tomb raiding” (81) and frustrates her by telling very little about his family. Thus, Lara’s fluctuating identity forces her to inquire about the English side of her family, but she cannot learn much about her maternal background, either. Edith keeps to herself the fact that leaving generations of poverty behind them in Ireland, her family moved to England ascending to middle-class and conform with “the Motherland” at all costs. Left ignorant of her past on both sides of the family, temporarily abating her anger, Lara “steps out of her personality” as if “ditching muddy boots” (83).

At nineteen Lara goes to Art School and becomes an artist, starts living with a Nigerian man, Josh, believing that she has solved her identity problem. Nonetheless, this does not last long, since Josh criticizes her for not acting like a Nigerian woman and on refusing to marry him she finds out that he starts deceiving her with a black girl. With that trauma, Lara decides to go out of England, for her own Odyssey; the quest for sensual experience with places. Rodaway in *Sensuous Geographies* points out that the

role of sense is very important in geographical understanding and that the senses form relationship to the world and in themselves are a kind of structuring of space and defining of place. Therefore, “sensuous geographies” are important in the introduction of ideas in recent postmodern writing. The senses, situated on the body and operating through the body, and the body itself as a sensuous dimension, gain new significance in social and geographical understanding since postmodernism is figural and sensory (4-7). Thus, in order to find her own personality Lara leaves England with her friend Trish and starts driving across Europe and by the Mediterranean reaching Turkey, where she becomes more British; “darker with the Turkish sun, yet less aware of race” (97). Nonetheless, this acceptance by another culture satisfies neither her anger, nor her quest.

Consequently, her restless soul produces a dream in which her dead grandmother wants her to bring Taiwo home, to Lagos. Thus, after 44 years of absence, Taiwo arrives in Lagos with Ellen and Lara: “She inhaled the spiced aromatic air of Nigeria, deeply, / drunk with its vitality, absorbed the prickly dry heat. / This is the land of my father, she mused/ I wonder if I could belong” (104). Yet, because of her hybridity, Lara is ironically alienated there as well; the children shout “Oyinbo!” (Whitey!) after her.

Nigeria brings about two different reactions from the English mother and the hybrid daughter. Ellen behaves like a typical colonizer: she “... frowns at the sun”, sips her tea, “grimaces at the condensed/ milk inside” ... “ ‘But they are so warm.’ / she adds, ‘We English really are such cold fish.’ ... ‘... Maybe I’ll finish my teaching career here.’ Lara replies “ ‘You’re a few decades late, Mummy. I think they want/ Black teachers now” (107). Yet, it immediately follows with Lara’s “ ‘What I’d give for a cappuccino and croissant right now.’ / Ellen rises, giggles, ‘You must adjust, dear, adjust.’” (107).

Nigeria consoles Lara, but “decades of frozen anger” (108) reveals itself in her dreams of “Daddy People” again, so in her thirties, Lara goes to Rio and Salvador where she hopes “the past will close in on” her (137). In fact her identity, her wholeness, lies secretly and symbolically in the meaning of her name materialized as the river Amazon: “We move on into loneliness, my thoughts become free/ of the chaos of the city, uncensored, the river calms me: / I become my parents, my ancestors, my gods...” (139).

In the Amazon, the dichotomy of her identity is reflected in the duality of Catholic religion and paganism: the water as a symbol hidden in her pagan name signifies the souls’ flow like water and baptism as well:

I am baptised, resolve to paint slavery out of me,
the Daddy People onto canvas with colour-rich strokes,
their songs will guide me in sweaty dreams at night.
I savour living in the world, planet of growth, of decay,
think of my island- the ‘Great’ Tippexed out of it –
tiny amid massive floating continents, the African one
an embryo within me. I will wing back to Nigeria again
and again, excitedly swoop over a zig-zag of amber lights
signaling the higgledy energy of Lagos.

It is time to leave.

Back to London, across international time zones,
I step out of Heathrow and into my future. (140)

Zygmunt Bauman notes that, in the early years of the modern era, as Foucault “reminded us, madmen were rounded up by the city authorities,” loaded into a ship and sent to sea; “madmen stood for ‘a dark disorder, a moving chaos... and the sea stood for water, which ‘carries off, but does more: it purifies’ ” (5). Water purifies Lara’s rage; symbolically baptizing her and she becomes reconciled with her past and her hybridity.

Ashcroft argues that the postcolonial culture is inevitably a hybridized phenomenon involving “a ‘grafted’ European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create and recreate an independent local identity” (220). This basic principle also reveals itself in the hybrids of multicultural societies. Moreover, Connerton also argues that the phenomenon of learning about the past is the crucial element in social memory: “all beginnings contain an element of recollection”, so it is impossible to make a new beginning without the past recollection because then the beginning has nothing to hold on to; in all modes of experience, we always base our particular experiences on a prior context in order to ensure that they are intelligible at all (6). However, on the standpoint of past recollection Shohat observes that the “anti-essentialist” emphasis in postcolonial discourse sometimes seems to define any attempt “to recover or inscribe a communal past as a form of idealization, despite its significance as a site of resistance and collective identity” (109). Thus, it is possible to infer that Evaristo in her fiction attempts to recover her communal past not from an ideal perspective but as a site of collective identity. Throughout the quest for her two disparate maternal and paternal families for many generations to find out who she really is, Lara discovers her own identity tracing her roots that were spread around the world from Ireland to Brazil and emerges stronger. The presence of Lara in these exact places that her great-grandparents had lived, breathing in and thus experiencing mentally the precise sights, sounds and smells, shapes her being. Prominently, what Lara lacks in her dual existence is the African half of her past and in order to reconstruct that other half to make it into a whole, she journeys literally and figuratively as far as her great-grandparent’s land, Brazil, so that she can make a new start based on her social memory made intact.

Lara's complex intercultural identity emerges stronger with what she has always felt like; she *is* English. To conclude, as Ashcroft asserts "alterity implies alteration" (33), hence Lara, altering herself, is wrought like iron, by fighting against society's racial prejudices as a woman and by learning about the "emperor's disowned sons" (*Lara* 6) and daughters; her past.

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