

*Ntozake Shange's for colored girls who have
considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf
and Bernardine Evaristo's Lara:
Genre Contamination and the Tradition
of Black Women's writing*

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Ntozake Shange's for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf and Bernardine Evaristo's Lara: Genre Contamination and the Tradition of Black Women's Writing

The essay will unveil the multiple intersections in terms of style and content between two works written by two Black women writers across the Atlantic: Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) and Bernardine Evaristo's first verse-novel, *Lara* (1997), published nearly twenty years later. Firstly, in both works, *for colored girls* and *Lara*, it is possible to draw a parallelism between the indeterminacy of their generic classification, on the one hand, and their complex polyvocality, on the other. In the two literary texts, poetry proves to be the common component allowing for the hybridization of genres, which, in my view, reinforces their oppositional nature with respect to the fixity of the Western literary canon. As for the thematic component of Shange's and Evaristo's work, it should be noted that it underlines the physicality of the Black female body in terms which prove to be oppositional with respect to dominant discourses. Indeed, be it debased, humiliated or, on the contrary, exalted, the Black female body is simultaneously liberated from the constraints of the hegemonic practices of discursive pathologization and animalization affecting the representation of Black people and Black women in particular.

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When it was published, in 1976, Ellen Moers's pioneering theoretical work *Literary Women* marked a real cultural watershed in the field of literary criticism.¹ Indeed, despite its comparatively contradictory

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¹ It is worth to be noted here that second-wave feminist literary criticism had been

positions,² it delineated a tradition of white Western female authors, thus representing the inception of that area of literary interpretative analysis that Elaine Showalter would soon afterwards call ‘Gynocriticism’. The term, whose use has gradually faded away, encompasses works such as Showalter’s *A Literature of their Own* (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979), which would profoundly mark that creative decade. Less than twenty years later, in 1993, as a result of the development of a Black feminist scholarship, Gina Wisker edited *Black Women’s Writing*, a collection of critical essays analysing Black women’s writing across the Atlantic. Eventually in 2004 Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey published *Black British Writing* which, together with 2006 *A Black British Canon?*, edited by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, can be considered a benchmark of Black British literary criticism.³ The above volumes – each in its own analytic field and on the basis of its own interpretative focus – helped theorise the existence and the gradual development of specific female literary traditions. More importantly, they demonstrate that at the time of their respective publications it was possible to trace a commonality of styles and thematic motifs between and among authors belonging to groups generally excluded from Western mainstream literary circuits and from the key preoccupations of critical circles, that is, on the one hand, women writers living between the 17th and 20th centuries and, on the other, Black authors – both male and female – born, for the most part, in the British Isles or naturalized as British citizens since the late 18th century. In turn, this enabled to legitimate the use of the term “canon” as disentangled from traditional power positions.

inaugurated at the onset of the 1970s by Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970). However, what constituted the object of Millett’s analysis was not the tracing of a female literary tradition as so much as the construction and reproduction of female images in the context of a culture that proved to be substantially patriarchal. Thus, *Sexual Politics* and *Literary Women*, albeit similar as for their feminist perspective, present two different and partly complementary theoretical conceptions and developments.

² However undeniably groundbreaking, in fact Moers’s work has been criticized for what appears to be an alleged separateness between female and male inspiration, which leads its author not to take into account or fully acknowledge the potential influence of male authors on female ones.

³ The study area of Black British criticism is now a well-established one. The latest critical achievement is represented by the collected volume edited by Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein (2020). Recently British academia has also witnessed the institutionalization of this study field. Indeed, Goldsmiths College in London now offers two post-graduate study programmes focusing on Black British culture: the MA on Black British History and the MA on Black British Writing.

It is well known that, at the time of her death, Ellen Moers was working on her fourth book, which would have been centred on the influences between American and British women writers. In line with her critical perspective, in this essay I shall follow a similar “transatlantic” interpretative path, necessarily including the analytic category of “race”. Indeed, my aim is to unveil the multiple influences in terms of style and content between two works written by two Black women writers across the Atlantic: *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), a choreopoem authored by African-American writer Ntozake Shange (1948-2018), and Anglo-Nigerian Bernardine Evaristo’s first verse-novel, the semi-autobiographical *Lara* (1997), published nearly twenty years later.

That Shange’s work influenced Evaristo’s early plays is common knowledge. Evaristo herself revealed this detail when talking about her adolescence as a mixed-race girl living without Black role models in Islington and about her career as a young playwright in the context of the BBC Radio 3 programme “The Essay”, broadcast on 16th March 2011 as part of “The Book that Changed Me” series.⁴ Here, the two-fold literary impact – both formal and thematic – that *for colored girls* had on *Lara* is hinted at on multiple occasions and in particular when Evaristo states that Shange’s «exploration of form and content carried through to [her] later published writing career», thus deliberately tracing a female – almost matrilineal – literary tradition. In the light of Evaristo’s statement, my intention here is to illustrate the extent to which Shange’s influence also affected Evaristo’s early production as a novelist, thus casting light on its multiple levels in an interpretative analysis in which the formal aspect and the thematic dimension are viewed as interdependent.⁵

⁴ Episode n. 3 of the series – in which Evaristo illustrates the innovative formal and thematic features of *for colored girls* – is currently unavailable on BBC Radio 3 website, but it can be listened to in its almost integral version on YouTube at the following URL: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-K61Ux8KUU>>; last accessed 10th May 2020. Evaristo has acknowledged her literary indebtedness to Shange’s output on more than one occasion. More recently, she has alluded to it during the Q&A session following the online *New Statesman* / *Goldsmiths Prize lecture* – titled *The Longform Patriarchs* – she delivered on 30th September 2020 and whose complete script can be read at the following URL: <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2020/10/bernardine-evaristo-goldsmiths-lecture-longform-patriarchs>>; last accessed 1st October 2020.

⁵ I have analysed the ways in which this productive interconnection affects Evaristo’s fiction prior to her Booker-winning *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) in my *Identità*

Firstly, in both works, *for colored girls* and *Lara*, it is possible to draw a parallelism between the indeterminacy of their generic classification, on the one hand, and their complex polyvocality, on the other. *For colored girls* is indeed a choreopoem – that is, in Neal A. Lester’s words, a «theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music» (Lester 1995: 3) – in which eight different women, each identified by a different colour of the rainbow except for the Lady in Brown, relate and share their life experiences and secrets. *Lara*, in turn, is a verse-novel in which the voices of its eponymous protagonist’s ancestors – for the most part women living in distant as well as contemporary epochs – are interwoven along the narrative development of the textual fabric and end up coalescing in the complex process of the protagonist’s identity formation.

As for the term ‘choreopoem’, it was coined by Shange herself in 1975, as emerges from the writer’s phone interview to Jill Cox-Cordova (2019). This detail is particularly noteworthy as it reveals Shange’s deliberate intention to undermine the traditional conventions of generic labellings. Thus, the significance of the formal level of the work cannot be overestimated and, more importantly, it also helps to reinforce the innovative nature of its representational formulas. Indeed, *for colored girls* is clearly the result of a synchronic and a never-ending diachronic hybridisation of literary genres. Originally conceived of as a collection of poems – each corresponding to a black woman’s monologue to be delivered by Shange herself in her performance poetry sessions – it was first performed in a women’s bar in San Francisco in 1974. The following year, under Oz Scott’s direction, it was completely revisited to evolve into the theatrical script of a play in which poetry, dance, music and songs would combine. In its new robust multi-layered generic formula, it ended up at Newport Jazz Festival in Lower Manhattan and soon afterwards in Broadway. Since then *for colored girls* has been staged hundreds of times with thematic emphasis being cast not necessarily on “race” but also, for instance, on class. Shange herself relates that: «[a] white theatre company in Lexington, Kentucky, presented an all-white Appalachian version, doing a great job, basing the drama on class instead of race» (Shange 2010a: 13). On the contrary, «[i]n the first London production, the white director sat back and let the black women in the company tell him what needed to happen». The generic

nere e cultura europea. La narrativa di Bernardine Evaristo (2014). The latter is the second monograph entirely devoted to Evaristo’s narrative, the first one being Şebnem Toplu’s *Fiction Unbound: Bernardine Evaristo* (2011).

nature of the work has kept on evolving considerably up until 2010 when the work was adapted into a television movie directed by Tyler Perry and starring, among other actresses, Whoopi Goldberg, Janet Jackson and Phylicia Rashad.⁶

Going back to the poetical fabric of Shange's work, one of its strengths undoubtedly resides in its agrammatical spellings which imitate every-day conversations, thus reinforcing the constitutive orality of the text. This is evident from the very title of the work, the second part of which reads «when the rainbow is *enuf* (my emphasis)». Further instances can be found, among others, in the following lines:

little sally walker, *sittin* in a saucer
rise, sally, rise, wipe your *weepin* eyes
an put your hands on your hips
an let your backbone slip
o, shake it to the east,
o, shake it to the west
shake it to the one
that you like best (Shange 2010b: 20, my emphasis).

In the session titled “graduation nite”, in which the Lady in Yellow tells about her first sexual intercourse, the rendering of orality is even more evident:

We danced *doin* nasty old tricks [...] *doin* nasty old tricks i'd been thinking since may
cuz graduation *nite* had to be hot
& i *waz* the only virgin
so i *hadda* make like my hips *waz* into some business
that way everybody *thot* whoever was gettin it
was a older man *cdnt* run the streets wit youngsters
martin slipped his leg round my thigh
the dells bumped “stay”
up & down – up & down the new carver homes
WE WAZ GROWN / WE WAZ FINALLY GROWN (Shange 2010b: 23, my emphasis).

This specific emphasis on everyday language testifies to Shange's poetry being sensitive to Black women's lived experience. Shange herself, in an interview by Claudia Tate, reveals that this is a deliberately sought-

⁶ Interestingly enough the 2010 paperback edition of *for colored girls* includes pictures taken from the different adaptations of the choreopoem, which further testifies to the continuing evolution of the work's literary genre.

after effect when she says: «The spellings result from the way I talk or the characters talk, or the way I heard something said. Basically the spelling reflects the language as I hear it. I don't write because words come out of my brain. I write this because I hear the words» (Tate 1983: 163). Dalia El-Shayal has eloquently underlined the connection between Shange's powerful use of language and its being instrumental to an authentic representation of Afro-American women: «Among her techniques, Shange provides the densest illustration of the power of the word. Her profane rhetoric is provocative, creative and tantalizing; her use of African-American vernacular and symbols focus attention on themes of women's experience and also express forceful messages» (El-Shayal 2003-2004: 363).⁷

When *for colored girls* is performed, the materiality of Black women's life is enhanced by the intermingling dance, recurrently alluded to in the stage directions. This technique has a two-fold effect as, on the one hand, it reveals the multiple forms of cross-cultural contamination of the work and, on the other, it also contributes to underlining the physicality of the Black female body in terms which prove to be oppositional with respect to dominant discourses. Drawing on the theoretical positions of literary theorist Cheryl Wall and her elaboration of 'Africa Reconnection', Jean Young (2002) argues that Shange's specific recourse to dance, in particular, is to be viewed as part of a comparatively recent literary tradition interconnecting women writers who share an African cultural background and links to the Diaspora.⁸ As the character of

⁷ In her article, structured into a comparative analysis, El-Shayal also casts light on the transformative function of nonverbal communicative elements – including kinesic ones – in Shange's play, such as «the use of color, lighting, music, dance and "freezing" the action temporarily» (El-Shayal 2003-2004: 364), which contribute to emphasizing the expression of the characters' emotional sphere. More importantly, El-Shayal also provides a sound interpretation of the reasons why the Ladies in the play are all unnamed. In her words, «[b]y not giving them names or defining their characteristics, other than color, each character becomes representative of any and all women, thus emphasizing the universality of women's experience» (ivi, p. 365).

⁸ It should be noted that Young's interpretative positions as far as the gender power relations informing the choreopoem are concerned are not always convincing. In fact, she does not acknowledge the thematic motifs related to the Man/Woman binary couple as crucial and, accordingly, she seems to privilege, in her analysis, the processes of female awareness rising, irrespective of the forms of gender discrimination they may reverse. In my view, the emphasis on gender relations is, on the contrary, a pivotal thematic nucleus in Shange's work as the unveiling of the subordination of women within the Black community allows *for colored girls* to eschew pacificatory or

the Lady in Green helps to reveal with her evocative performance of Sechita,

[s]piritual traditions of the New World such as Santería and Voudou derive from Yoruba-based spiritual practices that incorporate the dynamic interplay of music and movement. These two elements are particularly powerful forces because of their ability to amplify, contradict, or emphasize the spoken word. Acting as forces or channels, music, movement, and word together assist the storyteller in providing the imagery that projects the participants into a full range of emotional experiences (Young 2002: 299-300).

Music plays an important symbolic role in *Lara* too. Indeed, ecumenical songs will frame the final stage of its protagonist's self-recovery which takes place along the Amazon River when the young woman witnesses a religious rite performed in the forest on Palm Sunday.

Furthermore, the body reveals itself as one of the major thematic preoccupations in both works. Be it debased, humiliated or, on the contrary, exalted, the Black female body is simultaneously liberated from the constraints of the hegemonic practices of discursive pathologization and animalization affecting the traditional representation of Black people and Black women in particular. That this kind of overtly racist representational strategies were – and still are – highly pervasive in contemporary Western culture is demonstrated, among others, by Stuart Hall, notably one of the founding fathers of British Cultural Studies, in his essay “The Spectacle of the Other”. Here, drawing on at least three different debates about the construction of difference, that is the linguistic, the anthropological and the psychoanalytic one, his thorough analysis of the ways in which the Black athletes – both American and British – who participated in the 1988 and 1992 Olympic games were represented in the British press of the time allows him to explain the symbolic processes whereby, since the colonial era, the Black body has been racialized and the Culture/Nature distinction fixed in naturalized terms. In his words,

[t]ypical of [any] racialized regime of representation was the practice of reducing the cultures of black people to Nature, or naturalizing ‘difference’.

self-celebratory tones. Shange, then, provides a depiction of Black men which is far from being simplistic. As Lamia Khalil Hammad explains, they are both victims of a racialized social system and villains in the context of their heterosexual relationships: «While rightfully acknowledging the black male's victimization by a system of racial, social, economic, and political inequality, one cannot fail to make the men responsible for their own abusive behavior» (Hammad 2011: 261-262).

The logic behind naturalization is simple. If the differences between black and white people are ‘cultural’, then they are open to modification and change. But if they are ‘natural’ – as the slave-holders believed – then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. ‘Naturalization’ is therefore a representational strategy designed *to fix* ‘difference’ and thus *secure it forever*. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable ‘slide’ of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological ‘closure’ (Hall 2013: 234, emphasis in the original).

Going back to the present interpretative analysis, references to the materiality of the Black female body also pervade the poetic prose of Evaristo’s *Lara* since its very beginning. Here the narrating voice of the opening lines belongs to Tolulope, the protagonist’s paternal great-grandmother, who, interestingly enough, in the second, expanded 2009 edition of the novel will be renamed as Severina.⁹ The slave woman, who dies in a Brazilian plantation, relates the unspeakable violence she suffered during her whole life, the tragic circumstances of her death, which follows her being brutally raped by the owner of the plantation, and her subsequent symbolic rebirth through water:

Severina

– the scarred one. They took me while my boys slept,
my bones had shivered all day, I could barely think. [...]

His chamber,
sunk in the cellars of that great house, kept for us
women only. There he pierced me with a bayonet
as I lay on a marble slab, bound. My screams
ricocheted the walls, he ejaculated on my ruptured
body but by then I had become the fire of a naked torch,
until he put me out. Then [...] I was carried over
the ocean, burst into life (Evaristo 2009: 17).

In Evaristo’s work the theme of running water and fluidity – which notably a long feminist critical tradition has symbolically associated with the female sphere (see Irigaray 1977) – proves to be a robust motif. On the formal level, it is underpinned by the extensive recourse to the poetical device of the couplet. Indeed, what David Gunning observes in his analysis of Evaristo’s lines in *The Emperor’s Babe* – and, more specifically, that the couplet «quickens the pace» allowing

⁹ The Latin derivation of the woman’s name helps to cast light on the customary habit of renaming slaves on the part of their Western owners both in African and American colonies, thus obscuring their previous life experience and, on the American plantations in particular, their African descent as well as their micro-histories of free people.

Evaristo to eschew the «constraints of prose» (Gunning 2005: 173) – can also be applied to *Lara*. In the section where the protagonist's conception and birth are related, the fast-paced rhythm, to which run-on lines contribute, emphasises the theme of water and humidity as the cradle of life in their symbolic association with the physicality of the Black male body. The latter, now portrayed in the act of giving birth in the context of an interethnic marriage, is thus depathologized and disentangled from the inferiorizing discursive constructions of miscegenation:

I shot into creation as sperm from my father's penis,
Slept in my mother's womb for eight months and ten days
then slid out her dilated hole as if on a muddy slide.
My entry to this island was messy, impatient and dramatic.
I was born May twenty-eight, the year Nineteen Sixty-two,
when England was fast asleep and the moon rose,
a luminescent sickle in a sky of heaving indigo waves;
when a gloved hand smacked my wrinkled bum I bawled
air into activated lungs, grieving the sea I'd left behind.
They named me Omolara 'the family are like water' (Evaristo 2009: 98).

In Shange's work a similar stylistic effect expressing vitality is obtained through word contractions and the predominant use of short lines linked through rhyme as well as internal assonance and alliteration:

Sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin/struggle/hard times
sing her song of life
she's been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty (Shange 2010b: 18).

In both texts, poetry proves to be the common component allowing for the hybridization of genres, which, in my view, reinforces their oppositional nature with respect to the fixity of the Western literary canon. Thus, generic permeability becomes their defining feature as their formal fabric is the result of the interweaving of poetry and

prose – be it novelistic or theatrical. To this add multiple processes of transcodification: from the oral code to the written one in the case of *Lara* and from orality to narrative prose and again to theatrical orality in *for colored girls*. This inevitably determines a cross-fertilization of genres and, together with it, a re-definition of traditional hierarchies between “high” and “low” genres typical of the Western canon.

Moreover, both Shange’s and Evaristo’s poetry is highly symbolic. If the rainbow in *for colored girls* indicates the eight Black women’s rebirth through union and interpersonal emotional connections, in *Lara* the above-mentioned religious rite epitomizes the completion of a complex process of personal formation leading the protagonist to a robust socio-cultural self-assertion as a young mixed-race woman living in England. In both works what triggers female self-awareness is women’s capability of creating interconnections and forms of personal narrative sharing. In this sense, *for colored girls* and *Lara* can be said to be composed of what we may call “journey poems”, through which processes of identity formation are accomplished.

However, the delineation of a renewed image of Black women is not to be interpreted as an acritical celebration of the Black group. In both works forms of gender subordination internal to the Black communities are openly foregrounded and stigmatized. Thus, the protagonist of *Lara* condemns her father’s physical violence as well as her young Nigerian boyfriend’s sexist and ethnocentric attitudes. Josh’s patriarchal positions, as opposed to Lara’s independence, are self-evident in the following excerpt:

“You’ll not marry a Nigerian if you can’t obey me.”
I shook my head slowly. “You are such a wanker.”

“Ditto, Lara, ditto.” I flung my head back. “Marriage?
I love the F-word too much, you know... freedom.”

“Just as well, because you don’t even know what
Jollof rice is, let alone how to cook it. You’re strictly

a fish fingers and mash girl. You’ll make a sorry wife” (Evaristo 2009: 143).

Undoubtedly men’s failure to encourage their women’s personal sense of self is a robust thematic motif which further indicates the imaginative indebtedness of Evaristo’s work to Shange’s *for colored girls*. Here Black men are mostly portrayed as violent patriarchs who are incapable of establishing authentic egalitarian bonds with their partners. Furthermore, in extreme situations, they even end up killing

their own children. That the representational dynamics in *for colored girls* were breaking new ground as far as the portrayal of the Afro-American community is concerned is indicated by the fact that the issue of the gender relations within the work created disquiet when the choreopoem started being performed. Shange herself confirms this controversial reaction when she reports:

Not everybody found solace in my work. [...] The uproar about how I portrayed black men was insidious and venal. I was said to hate men, especially black men. Apparently my choreopoem hit several nerves. [...] Methinks the gentlemen didst protest too much. [...] The show was literally for colored girls, which to me meant women-centered. Still nothing prepared me for the hateful response from African-American English-speaking males (Shange 2010a: 10).

In conclusion, as I have attempted to demonstrate, in both works the thematic motifs are sustained by coherent formal strategies. This leads me to argue that the formal level programmatically contributes to enhancing the liberating force of the eight female characters portrayed in *for colored girls* as well as that of Lara's progressive self-awareness. In the foreword to the second edition of *for colored girls*, Shange herself seems to confirm the porosity between the formal and the thematic level: «My girls in varied colors in all of my works, from Betsey Brown to Liliane, live in the journey of this work, were born in the journey of this work, *for colored girls*. From solo voice to theatre, from poetry to play, from random order to the rainbow, *for colored girls* has always encompassed them all» (ivi, p. 1).

Finally, in Shange's and Evaristo's works the generic "undecidability" and the multiplicity of the narrating personae inevitably intersect. This is not to be interpreted, in my view, as a post-modern pastiche or a dilution of forms and a dispersal of meanings. On the contrary, in both works polyvocality and formal multi-layeredness call for the readers' response in terms of meaning production. Indeed, readers, having to face the lack of reassuring interpretative parameters, are urged to actively relate to both the formal features and the thematic motifs of the textual space in order to create their own signification amid countless possibilities.

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