

*I ain't no homosexual, I am a
... Barrysexual!': Queering the
Bildungsroman in Bernardine
Evaristo's Mr Loverman*

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Introduction: "A Horizon Imbued with Potentiality"

Ever since the *Bildungsroman* came to prominence in the 18th and 19th centuries, the genre has influenced writers and literary scholars alike. Given its long-standing history, it is not surprising that the genre has undergone several changes, so it has been challenged and subverted time and again. As an originally western genre, the classical European *Bildungsroman* commonly features a young, white, male, heterosexual, middle-class pro-

tagonist who “goes through some kind of initiation, intellectually, morally and psychologically” (Sommerville-Thompson 2014, 30). The protagonist’s successful initiation and integration into society is the ultimate achievement that is completed at the end of the story. In 19th century European society, this type of representation not only functioned as literary entertainment but also fulfilled an ideological and formative function in educating the mainly bourgeois readership and helped to maintain strong feelings of superiority over ‘the Other.’ The *Bildungsroman* was thus established as a powerful and successful tool in colonial education and ‘civilising’ missions. As such, the “[g]enre is itself ideologically charged, extending beyond the text to include writers and readers alike in perpetuating specific values and worldviews” (Hoagland 2006, 3). The ideological charge of the genre, which is firmly grounded in Eurocentric ideals of linear progression and a strict goal-orientedness, has provoked critique and the genre has been adapted to changing cultural conditions.

Beginning with feminist interventions and the creation of the female *Bildungsroman*¹, in which the empowerment of the female protagonist in a patriarchal society is crucial, postcolonial authors have constantly re-negotiated and re-evaluated the *Bildungsroman*, moving beyond Eurocentric and western epistemologies to create new

1 For further information on the female *Bildungsroman*, see, e.g. Felski (1989), Fergusson (1983), or Gymnich (2007).

kinds of knowledge that are produced outside the ‘centre’ and are attuned to local particularities and situated knowledge (ibid., 6). Postcolonial novels such as Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Andrea Levy’s *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North* (2009), or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) are but some prominent examples of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* that infuse the ‘western’ genre with locally situated knowledge, frequently representing the difficulties for the postcolonial subject to integrate into a society that is still implicated in Eurocentric ideals and perpetuates ‘western’ values.

The negotiation of epistemic power structures becomes especially relevant in a diasporic context, such as Black British culture. As Maria Lima pointedly states:

Successful Bildung in Western terms requires the existence of a social context that facilitates development, that leads the young person from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and maturity. Growing up in a society of extreme diversity and fragmentation of both European and African cultures does not allow for any coherent sense of self (1993, 112).

It is necessary to imagine alternative forms of *Bildung* that are not grounded in white, male European values

and worldviews, expressed through smooth formation, but which pay particular attention to the opportunities and prospects of friction and fragmentation. In this process, literature inhabits a singular role. Birgit Neumann rightly claims: “Literature itself construes imaginative worlds and configures new worldly spaces, alternative geographies, contact zones and transitory spaces that, thriving on both transcultural entanglements and local difference, may offer readers new visions of the world” (2017, 9; see also Neumann 2018, 243). As an “act of imagining” (Martin 2017, 5), literatures “respond creatively to contemporary changes and an unfinished present” (Baumbach and Neumann 2020, 2). They thus model alternative world-imaginings which move beyond Eurocentricity and homogeneity – idea(l)s that have been perpetuated in the classical *Bildungsroman*.

Among postcolonial subversions engaging with the form of the *Bildungsroman*, Bernardine Evaristo’s *Mr Loverman* (2013) holds an exceptional position as it brings to the fore hitherto marginalised topics and queers the genre on diverse, intersectional levels. Her seventh novel follows the life of seventy-four-year-old Barrington (Barry) Walker, an Antiguan-Londoner, who leads a double life as husband and father of two daughters, as grandfather, and as long-time lover of his childhood friend Morris. Mr Loverman portrays a distinctively different form of the *Bildungsroman*, hence contrasting and subverting the normative implications of the genre. Barry’s process of

Bildung does not rely on him adapting to societal values and his ultimate integration into society but rather lies in his coming out as an “individual, specific, not generic” (Evaristo 2013b, 138) homosexual man. Bearing in mind that “[p]erhaps no genre is as ideologically implicated as the *Bildungsroman*, rooted in the Western bourgeois tradition, and further implicated in imperialist and patriarchal practice” (Hoagland 2006, 3), I analyse how Evaristo subverts the genre on the levels of content and form in numerous, experimental ways, challenging and disrupting both imperial and patriarchal practices. Evaristo queers the European *Bildungsroman* and its normative implications along diverse and intersectional axes such as race, age, and sexuality. Additionally, she employs several formal strategies such as multi-perspectivity, polyphony, non-linear temporalities, and intertextuality to destabilise dominant normative implications of the *Bildungsroman*, further queering the typically employed form of the genre, opening it up for cultural particularities and transcultural exchange.

‘Queering’ in the present use refers to a creative process which introduces fissures and frictions into a standardised context. As such, ‘queerness’ moves beyond its sexual connotation and embraces difference on diverse levels. In his famous study *Cruising Utopias*, José Muñoz proclaims that

[q]ueerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality.
Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never

touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. [...] Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. (2019, 1)

Queerness becomes a desirable ideal imbued with the creative potential to explore difference in the future and to produce a utopian outlook that is attuned to an optimistic perspective on the world. In a similar vein, E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen emphasise how queerness' hope lies in its deviation from norms and normativity (2011, 8). Defining queerness as this subversive potential, I follow scholars, such as Fatima El-Tayeb, who loosen the concept of queerness from sexual identities and assert "‘queer’ as a term that is not merely synonymous with ‘homosexual’ but references processes of constructing normative and nonnormative behaviors and populations" (El-Tayeb 2011, xxxv). In a similar vein, Muñoz refers to "forms of belonging-in-difference" (2019, 20), which allude to the subversive nature of queerness. As such, in this context, queerness is understood both literally in the sense of queer sexual orientation and metaphorically in the sense of potentiality. Introducing the idea of 'queerness' to assess the Bildungsroman as a genre in postcolonial literatures is not entirely new. In his study *Queer Narratives of the Caribbean Diaspora* (2013), Zoran Pecic pays particular attention to

the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and establishes how H. Nigel Thomas and Jamaica Kincaid “test[...] the conventions of the Western coming out story” (2013, 144). In Pecic’s understanding, Thomas and Kincaid queer the form of the *Bildungsroman* by presenting queer protagonists whose desire is positioned as an alternative to standardised heterosexuality (ibid., 150), thus attesting to the first, more literal meaning of ‘queerness’. Similarly, Evaristo represents queer desire opposed to homogenous heterosexuality. However, as the following analysis will show, I aim to move beyond that literal understanding of ‘queerness’ and examine how Evaristo’s narrative adds multiple layers to Barry’s coming-out story, both on the level of content and form.

“I feel myself coming out”: Intersecting Age, Race, and Sexuality in Mr Loverman

Evaristo’s protagonist, seventy-four-year old, black, homosexual Barrington (Barry) Walker, is not what readers expect when it comes to the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*. Tying together concepts such as old age, race, and queer sexuality, Evaristo is a pioneer on the British literary landscape as “[t]he theme of queer love at old age, i.e. treating queerness and ageing intersectionally, remains exceptionally rare” (Kogler 2020, 889) in mainstream literature. The very opening of the novel, portraying the main protagonist Barry and his lover Morris in a dance-club, first establishes their age right at the beginning of the story:

So there we was on the dancehall amid all of those sweaty, horny youngsters (relatively speaking) swivelling their hips effortlessly. And there was I trying to move my hips in a similar hula-hoop fashion, except that these days it feels more like opening a rusty tin of soup with an old-fashioned tin opener. I'm trying to bend my knees without showing any pain on my face and without accidentally goin' too far down, because I know I won't be able to get up again, while also tryin' to concentrate on what Morris is shouting in my ear. (Evaristo 2013a, 2)

Ironically referring to themselves as “two old geezers” (ibid.), Evaristo's characters challenge old age as a “problem-ridden and negatively connoted stage of life” (Karshay and Rostek 2016, 132). Instead, they are eagerly participating in night-life, countering any implicated norms of appropriateness. Whereas representations of old age in literature remain an exception and are usually referred to in a stereotypical manner (Gymnich 2021, 202), Evaristo moves beyond such established literary conventions. In Evaristo's novel, the protagonists' age is put centre stage time and again, functioning “as a reminder that agency, mobility, and independence should not be regarded as the privilege of younger generations” (ibid., 204). Additionally, age in *Mr Loverman* is always depicted with humour, leading critics to describe Evaristo's novel as “funny” (Thomson 2013), “comical” (Canning 2013), and “sometimes hilarious” (Colquhoun 2013). Yet, the humorous depiction does not override sincere

topics such as the difficulties of hiding one's sexuality, topics of depression,² marital crisis and the associated trauma that are intersectionally tied to the protagonists' process of ageing. As Maggie Gee writes in a review for *The Guardian*, Evaristo "has given her characters room to change, and her readers time to move from laughter to sympathy" (2013; see also Karshay and Rostek 2016, 126). Barry's and Morris' old age is thus taken seriously; Evaristo emphasises how age does not hinder a process of transformation as the characters finally find the courage to come out as gay.

The second axis on which Evaristo queers the *Bildungsroman* is the representation of race. Barry predominantly defines himself in terms of race: he is a black British man who came to England in the 1950s as part of the so-called Windrush Generation. Whereas several Windrush stories such as Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Caryl Phillips' *The Final Passage* (1985), or Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004) focus on the struggles and the racist environment that Windrush immigrants have had to face in the mother-country, Barry's story does not focus on his arrival in England but is set in 2010. He is portrayed as a middle-class, self-educated landlord who is firmly rooted in British culture and who regards Hackney as his home. Again, Evaristo explicitly works against

2 In the second chapter devoted to Carmel, the reader learns about a postnatal depression she goes through after the birth of her second daughter Maxine (Evaristo 2013a, 67).

hegemonic expectations and points out that Barry “is not impoverished. He is not a victim. And that’s what some people expect” (Evaristo qtd. in Gustar 2015, 444). Although Barry has been subject to racism in a predominantly white society in the 1950s, the novel deliberately focuses on his life in 2010, portraying him as a “[m]an of property. Man of style” (Evaristo 2013a, 134). Thus, Evaristo seeks to assess and write the lives of black Caribbean immigrants in London contrapuntally,³ meaning from the perspective of an insider who is seen as an outsider by the predominantly white society.

Third, Barry’s own perception of his role as a black man in a predominantly white society is shaped by a strong sense of masculinity and patriarchal beliefs. As Barry remarks about Morris (but could easily refer to himself), “he couldn’t be a West Indian and not start a family – *man haf fe do wba man haf fe do*. Truth is, both of us was desperate to be anything other than we was” (ibid., 32, emphasis in the original). Both Barry and Morris lead a married life with children in London. In order to uphold his image as a strong, masculine head of the family,

3 Edward Said coined the term “contrapuntal reading” in his 1993 work *Culture and Imperialism*. Examining how English literatures are grounded in imperial practices (1993, 51), Said introduces a way of resistance as a counterpoint to the dominant western discourse. “The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded” (ibid., 66-67).

Barry has to pay a high price: Being influenced by his imagination of what constitutes a Caribbean man, that is, a particular sense of masculinity, Barry does not dare to openly reveal his homosexuality and ongoing relationship to Morris (Karshay and Rostek 2016, 125). Barry is stuck in an unhappy marriage with Carmel, having neglected his “Morris-loving, sweet-loving, full-blooded, hot-blooded, pumping-rumping, throbbing organ of an uncontainable, unrestrainable, undetainable man-loving *heart*” (Evaristo 2013a, 17, emphasis in the original) for several decades. Yet, he still practises misogyny and homophobia, which function as markers of his performed heteronormativity (Karshay and Rostek 2016, 130). Barry’s references to fellow gays as “pooftahs” (Evaristo 2013a, 45, 137) and to his wife as “the wife” (*ibid.*, 6, 37, 129), “wifey” (*ibid.*, 11, 41), or “Lady-Wife” (*ibid.*, 15, 39) attest to the fact that “Barrington clearly practices queer sex, but glosses it in the language of heterosexuality to allow him to uphold the status quo” (Danaher 2018, 143). Barry’s identity and his view on homosexuality are significantly shaped by his beliefs about society’s norms and expectations about a Caribbean immigrant in London.

In light of his reliance on perceived social norms, it is extremely important to look at the society in which Barry finds himself. As Mark Stein remarks in his important study on *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004), “[t]he Black British novel of transformation [...]

is about the formation of its protagonist — but, importantly, it is also about the transformation of British society and cultural institutions” (2004, xiii, emphasis in the original). Barry’s development is closely tied to a change in society and as such becomes possible only at a later stage of his life. Being openly homosexual has for a long time been quite dangerous: Barry reports about other homosexual men who had been abused (Evaristo 2013a, 114, 138), and even recounts his own experience of homophobic violence, having at one point been beaten up in a cemetery (*ibid.*, 122). Yet, in the novel’s 21st-century setting, London has changed and being gay is no longer a taboo.

Barry’s development towards a more self-reflexive, openly homosexual man is initiated when he involuntarily comes out to his grandson Daniel and one of his friends, a Buju Banton fan,⁴ because Barry is drunk: ‘Yes, I am a cock-sucker,’ I reply, just as quietly, just as sinisterly, not quite knowing how these words exited my mouth” (*ibid.*, 196). Shocked about his statement, his words initiate a transformation. When Barry decides to come out to his daughter Maxine because the internal pressure of hiding his sexuality is too strong, she tells him how she already suspected a secret relationship with

4 The fact that Daniel’s friend is a Buju Banton fan is relevant in this context as it is only because the boys play his music in Barry’s house and he hears “something about killing a nasty batty boy” (Evaristo 2013a, 194) in Banton’s lyrics. Barry becomes so angry he reveals his homosexuality to his grandson.

Morris. It is Maxine who introduces Barry and Morris to the gay scene in London and to the queer community. The gay scene in London is a safer space in which Barry might openly show his feelings for Morris with which Barry, however, is still uncomfortable as he has to learn to process his feelings first.

For the first time in my life I got no doubt that everybody in the vicinity knows that me and Morris are ‘gentlemen of doubtful virtue’. Ain’t no fakery here. Lord, they *know* us. Oh my, I don’t even know where to put myself because some of these fellas make such *prolonged* eye contact with me they should apply for a resident’s parking permit. [...] [Morris] grabs my hand and squeezes it for a few seconds. It is our first public display of physical affection in sixty years. (ibid., 246-247, emphasis in the original)

It is this initiation that prepares Barry for a new phase in his life in which he does not have to hide his sexuality and feelings for Morris any longer. Within the safer space of London’s queer community, he is able to come out, “no *so-called* about it” (ibid., 274), and he realises that he becomes part of a group. As such, Barry goes through an initiation and is integrated into the LGBTQ* community of London which might be regarded as the ultimate achievement of his process of *Bildung*. However, he is still uncomfortable with his role in the community and only at the very end of the novel is confident enough to leave with Morris, “enjoy[ing] the vibes” (ibid., 307) without a strictly planned future in mind.

Queering Forms in Mr Loverman

Evaristo not only queers the *Bildungsroman* on the level of content but additionally reworks the classical formal characteristics of the genre. A striking formal feature that Evaristo uses to queer the classical form of the *Bildungsroman* is the split narrative between two characters. Whereas the classical form of the *Bildungsroman* centres around one homodiegetic narrator to follow his process of *Bildung*, the narrative of Mr Loverman oscillates between Barry and his wife Carmel, offering insights into the thoughts and feelings of both characters, portraying them both as victims of their marriage. As such, tied to Barry's development into a more self-reflexive man is also his realisation how his behaviour has hurt Carmel. After she returns from a trip to Antigua, where she buried her father and spoke to Morris' former wife, who tells her about their husbands' relationship, Barry apologises to her: "I felt the consequences of my actions. [...] And I sorry. Carmel, I sorry" (Evaristo 2013a, 305). As to the inclusion of Carmel's voice, Evaristo reflects about her writing process:

In presenting gendered power relations, and at times an arguably tongue-in-cheek misogynistic viewpoint, I needed to counter it with an oppositional, female (feminist) perspective. [...] Her position remains subaltern and disadvantageous within the marriage, but we see how she has garnered strength and support in spite of it. (Evaristo 2013b, 354-355)

Whereas the chapters about Barry show the timespan of approximately one year, the chapters devoted to Carmel cover decades that reveal retrospections, which are told in a poetically and rhythmically constructed stream-of-consciousness technique with a speaker addressing Carmel, asking about her unhappiness in her marriage with Barry. Indeed, Evaristo has consciously devoted that narrative space to Carmel in order to highlight her emotional and social predicament. “The use of poetic compression, textual fragmentation and rhythmic patterning,” Evaristo explains, “created a visual-emotional symbiosis that enabled me to plunge into the heart of Carmel’s inner life, capturing huge swathes of time, intense feelings and transformational experiences” (ibid., 355). Although Carmel’s chapters are much shorter in length and fewer in number than those narrated by Barry, her chapters are particularly powerful. The fragmented style, which Evaristo addresses, for instance, formally mirrors Carmel’s inner state of disruption and her feelings of being lost. To give but one example, the third chapter devoted to Carmel, “Song of Prayer”, begins *in medias res*, introducing the reader to Carmel’s loneliness: “... on your own again, isn’t it, Carmel? Let this night, praying up against your bed, waiting for him to come home, knowing he might not come home at all, but you can’t help yourself, can you, acting like a right mugⁱ, as the English people say” (Evaristo 2013a, 142). The European form of the *Bildungsroman* has had significant implications for conveying concrete social norms

and communicating different ideas within the narrative frame: The linear, homodiegetic narration with which readers could identify has been the perfectly fitting form to make the readers learn from the protagonist's integration into society. With respect to *Mr Loverman*, the split narrative that gives voice to several, at times conflicting perspectives illustrates that there is not only one side of the coin. Additionally, this formal choice indicates and emphasises relationality in the sense that Barry's actions have an impact on his surroundings and that he cannot integrate into society without affecting his surroundings. Multi-perspectivity and polyphony are, however, not the only formal choices that Evaristo employs to challenge the ideologically charged genre of the *Bildungsroman*. As Evaristo herself asserts:

The final novel is an adventure into form. It mixes things up – temporally, spatially, stylistically – zipping between narrative modes, chronologies and geographies. It eschews the linearity of more traditional Western fiction and resists other novelistic conventions such as a story told in three acts or a single narrative mode. (2013b, 356)

With such an experimental formal composition, Evaristo openly queers the classical *Bildungsroman* and evokes frictions to include cultural markers and invite transcultural exchange.

Besides stylistic adventures into forms of multi-perspectivity and polyphony, Evaristo queers the *Bildungsroman* with her composition of non-linear temporalities. She introduces queer temporalities that challenge the linear development of the protagonist which is especially characteristic of the western *Bildungsroman*. *Mr Loverman* constructs Barry's development as a non-linear process with ups and downs and illustrates the difficulty of a sequential, progressive development. Evaristo not only intertwines the past and the present but also illustrates how the past is always constitutive of the present. In this regard, as McCallum and Tuhkanen suggest, "the contingencies of the queer might be closer to the time of *kairos*, the moment of opportunity [rather than *chronos*, i.e. linear time]" (2011, 8-9). Evaristo's non-linear narrative structure produces frictions and enables the possibility of queer intervention and change.

One of the most prominent techniques Evaristo employs to queer the *Bildungsroman*, however, is her use of intertextual and intermedial references. Although there are many,⁵ I focus on the novel's eponymous reference:

⁵ The intertextual references include, e.g., Shakespeare, James Baldwin, Derek Walcott, William Butler Yeats, Enoch Powell, Greek mythology, and Shabba Ranks. The diversity well-illustrates the heterogenous, transcultural connections that Evaristo establishes in her narrative. Additionally, Evaristo evokes queer relations within her intertextual references. Quoting James Baldwin in the epigraph of her novel, she introduces a queer space in which there is the possibility for change.

Shabba Ranks' song "Mr Loverman." Shabba Ranks, a Jamaican dancehall artist, is known for his strong sense of heteronormative masculinity, which he also boasts in his song "Mr Loverman⁶." A short extract from his lyrics read:

A woman take a trip, she's coming from England
To satisfy her soul you know that she wants a man.
But...
It's Shabba Ranks, she's buck upon
A going make you explode just like a bomb
Every hour, every minute man, every second
Them call me Mr Loverman, they call me Mr lover
I'm not gonna take it easy, you won't get away tonight
[...]
(Shabba Ranks 1993)

Ranks' song is a typical representative of the genre of Jamaican Dancehall, which is deeply rooted in assertions of strong masculinity that are not seldom based on misogynist, violent, and homophobic language and attitudes (e.g., Cooper 1994; Farquharson 2005; Helber 2015). Partaking in this performance of racialised heteronormative masculinity, Shabba Ranks downgrades women in his lyrics and expresses homophobic attitudes in a TV interview, supporting his friend and fellow-artist

⁶ Shabba Ranks' song was quite popular in Great Britain reaching the third place in the British single charts in 1993 (Official Charts Company). As such, Ranks could spread his homophobic ideas among a large audience.

Buju Banton, who had been attacked for the explicitly homophobic lyrics of his song “Boom Bye Bye”⁷. As Ranks states in the interview:

Well right definitely right now [...] from you forfeit the law of God Almighty, you deserve, cru-ci-fiction, most definitely [...] the bible, I live by the concept of the bible, which is the righteousness of every human being and the bible stated that man should mul..ti..ply [...] the multiplication is done by a male and a female” (qtd. in Hajimichael 2015, 118).

Justifying his homophobic attitudes with religious beliefs, Ranks perpetuates an explicitly hostile environment for non-heteronormative subjects in the Caribbean. In view of this, it is especially interesting to look at the inter-medial reference established in Evaristo’s novel. When Barry and Morris make love, Barry plays Ranks’ song:

While he [i.e., Morris] lies in a state of deliciously explicit and excited expectation of the delights I got in store, I close the curtains and put Shabba Ranks’s ‘Mr Loverman’ into the tape-player on the bedside

⁷ Joseph Farquharson remarks that “[a]lthough homophobia has been a feature of Jamaican culture for a long time now, the phenomenon really gained international attention in 1992 with the release of reggae/dancehall Faiya-bon artist, Buju Banton’s ‘Boom Bye Bye’. The song caused a major stir in the United States of America and Britain where homosexual lobby groups called for the song to be banned owing to its violent anti-homosexual content” (2005, 102-103).

cabinet. Oh yes, Ranks might spout homophobic doggerel along with that batty-baiter Banton, but this one song is our perfect wine an grine theme tune. (Evaristo 2013a, 243, emphasis in the original)

In *Mr Loverman*, the inclusion of Shabba Ranks' song introduces a creative space for the representation of queer love (and sex) and thus explicitly subverts the ideology presented by Ranks himself. Jodie Taylor, in her study titled *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making* (2012), asserts how "[t]hrough music, queers have made and remade worlds" (2012, 49). In the words of Taylor, "musicalized articulations of queer approaches to gender and sexuality reflect both the global mobility of cultural forms and local structures of feeling" (ibid., 54). In light of these observations, the European *Bildungsroman* is not only queered on the content-level by referencing and subverting heteronormative, homophobic lyrics but additionally by evoking extra-textual layers that produce new, fluid contexts in which queerness is entertained.

Queering the typical European *Bildungsroman* is lastly achieved by means of language politics and language subversion. Evaristo queers and creolises the dominant English language, infusing it with vernacular wording and grammar. At one point in the novel, Barry explains to his grandson Daniel how he has to learn to separate his Caribbean language from his English, as Daniel's

mother “got really pissed off when [Daniel] used to come back from here [i.e. Barry’s place] sounding like [Barry]” (Evaristo 2013a, 172). Barry teaches his grandson that

‘[s]peaking one tongue don’t preclude excellence in another. But you got to treat patois as a separate language that you slip into when it’s socially acceptable to do so. I can speak the Queen’s when I feel like it. But most of the time I just do me own thing. Fear thee not, though, I know my syntax from my semiotics, my homographs from my homophones, and don’t even get me started on my dangling participles.’ (ibid., 173)

With her witty take on language, and standardised English in particular, Evaristo partakes in a tradition of postcolonial writing that is especially attuned to acknowledge English as a colonial language and to manipulate its implied hierarchies. As Birgit Neumann pointedly puts it,

[a] focus on the vernacular as an engine for Anglophone world literature takes us to the 1950s, when a number of Anglo-Caribbean, -African and -Indian writers, many of them temporarily or permanently located in London, started experimenting with language as a means of intervening in established regimes of representation. (2018, 246)

As Neumann states, vernacular languages in literary texts attest to processes of cultural decolonisation and question the role of English as an imperial language which had been enforced upon local populations (ibid., 246). Evaristo inscribes her narrative in this practice, challenging the normativity and hegemonic status of the English language, which is deeply rooted in imperial dominance. *Mr Loverman* is positioned within a literary tradition that questions “language prestige” (Mühleisen 2002, 8) and stirs up alternative, local forms of knowledge circulation. Exposing that the notion of ‘one language’ is closely tied to the idea of the nation state of the 18th and 19th century, Susanne Mühleisen asserts how “the contemporary nation is characterised by a polyphony of voices and their echos” (2001, 257). As such *Mr Loverman* is clearly positioned against 18th- and 19th-century ideologies with which also the European *Bildungsroman* has been imbued. By “revitaliz[ing] suppressed local knowledges” (Neumann 2018, 246), Evaristo challenges and queers the traditional form, opening it up for transcultural exchange without the imposition of artificial hierarchies.

Conclusion

Bernardine Evaristo’s seventh novel *Mr Loverman*, as this study has shown, is a unique example of the potential of postcolonial subversion of a Eurocentric genre such as the classical *Bildungsroman*. To better understand the

queer potential of Evaristo's novel, it is vital to acknowledge the traditional form of the *Bildungsroman* as an inherently Eurocentric and imperial practice. *Mr Loverman* queers and perforates the genre on several levels, introducing fissures and frictions, opening the genre up for transcultural exchange and "tacitly decompos[ing] the authority of the metropolitan form" (Young 1996, 5). Evaristo's fundamental goal "to write back to the 'post-colonial' margins by taking a blatantly gay man from the periphery of the periphery and placing him downstage centre" and writing him as "*the othered other*; a minority within a minority" (Evaristo 2013b, 359, emphasis in the original) is most definitely achieved. Given the multiple and experimental axes on which Evaristo queers the genre, she questions the imposition of western values and worldviews onto a marginalised postcolonial subject.

Evaristo re-writes, experiments with, and successfully queers the genre of the *Bildungsroman* on both the levels of content and form. Barry Walker, seventy-four, black, and gay, is not the emblematic protagonist of the classical *Bildungsroman*. Queering expectations on the intersecting axes of age, race, and sexuality, Evaristo gives voice to a formerly marginalised subject, representative of those who have been excluded from representation, and inscribes those hitherto often lost stories into contemporary literary configurations of Great Britain. Challenging Britain's homogenous imagined communi-

ties (*sensu* Anderson 2006), “Evaristo forges a vision of polycultural interrelation which breaks beyond dichotomous distinctions between the local and the global, or between black history and white oppression, and so forth” (McLeod 2011, 171). *Mr Loverman* produces new forms of belonging, attesting to a pluralised and heterogeneous society that has been shaped by entangled histories between Europe, the Caribbean, and beyond.

Queering the normatively implicated form of the classical *Bildungsroman*, Evaristo further uses multi-perspectivity, non-linear temporalities, and spatial disruptions to establish a wider network of forms that move beyond imperialist and Eurocentric constraints. Whereas the European *Bildungsroman* used to manifest a national genre, which in its formal composition maintained strict cultural boundaries, educating its readership about what it meant to be a subject of a certain community, Evaristo, in *Mr Loverman* “pursues the pathways of Afro-European history as a way of involving all her readers in a rethinking of Britain’s polycultural relationship with Africa, the Americas and Europe” (*ibid.*, 170). As such *Mr Loverman* entangles worldly histories whose centre is not always and not only Europe.

Such a “spatial synchronicity,” as McLeod (*ibid.*, 172), calls it is, according to him, characteristic of all of Evaristo’s fiction. Imbued with the potential to create worlds, literary texts creatively respond to ongoing changes,

help its readers to navigate their environments and at the same time foster change by opening up new worlds and temporalities (Baumbach and Neumann 2020, 1-2; Neumann 2018, 242). *Mr Loverman* in particular renegociates and disrupts the (imagined) world of homogenous London and introduces old, black, and queer individuals as an integral and formative part of society. Regarding Evaristo's clear positioning on a larger scale, she portrays postcolonial London as a cosmopolitan city that is inherently translocal and connected to multiple interwoven histories set outside the imperial centre.

Note:

i. It is interesting to observe that the chapters told by Barry are titled 'The Art of ...' while Carmel's chapters all begin with 'Song of ...'. As Danaher states, "[t]o master an art requires an approach that is well-informed, calculated and measured. By comparison, the melody and rhythm of song reflects a more instinctive expression of emotion" (2018, 133). Surely such associations need to be negotiated critically, as they threaten to enforce existing stereotypes about gender, i.e., the rational male versus the emotional female. Additionally, especially Carmel's chapters reveal a development in her person. The chapters are titled 'The Song of Sweetness,' 'Song of Despair,' 'Song of Prayer,' 'Song of Desire,' 'Song of Power,' and 'Song of Freeness,' and they represent her

development from a young woman in love, to a woman desperately lonely and longing for her husband's love, to a woman who has an affair with a colleague, to a woman who regains her strength and finally is able to live her life, freed from the shackles of marriage that both Barry and Carmel feel. In contrast to that, Barry's chapters are situated in the moment of the story, apparently regarding more trivial events, such as 'The Art of Being Normal' or 'The Art of Sunday Lunch.' Yet, also Barry's narrative and his development are mirrored in the chapter titles: 'The Art of Metamorphosis' or 'The Art of Being So Called' illustrate a change of his focus.

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