ARTIGO/DOSSIÊ

THE CARTOGRAPHY OF DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN BERNARDINE EVARISTO'S *LARA*

Paulo Henrique de Sá Júnior
Doutor em Letras e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, pela Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, em 2024.
É coordenador e professor da Deutsche Schule Rio de Janeiro.
Integrante do grupo de pesquisa "A voz e o olhar do outro: questões de gênero e/ou etnia nas literaturas de língua inglesa" (CNPq/UERJ).
Lattes: https://lattes.cnpq.br/0758186361439984.
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0490-9533.
E-mail: p_sajunior@yahoo.co.uk.

Abstract: This article examines the experimental narrative strategies employed in Bernardine Evaristo's debut novel *Lara* (2019 [1997]), with a particular focus on their engagement with contemporary developments in Black British literary studies. While the novel addresses overtly political themes and questions of representation, it simultaneously foregrounds poetic and aesthetic dimensions that are central to its narrative construction. Through the creation of a hybrid fictional space, Evaristo navigates and negotiates the intersection between Black cultural criticism and literary theory. This analysis draws on Mark Stein's (2004) conceptual framework regarding the performative functions of the Black British novel of transformation, particularly his notions of perpetuation

and refraction, which prove instrumental in articulating the novel's formal and thematic innovations.
Key-words: Bernardine Evaristo. African diaspora. Contemporary black British fiction. (Un)belonging. Black *bildungsroman*.

Resumo: Este artigo analisa as estratégias narrativas experimentais empregadas no primeiro romance de Bernardine Evaristo, *Lara* (2019 [1997]), com especial atenção à sua interlocução com os desenvolvimentos contemporâneos nos estudos da literatura negra britânica. Embora a obra aborde temas políticos e questões de representação de forma explícita, ela também destaca, de maneira significativa, preocupações poéticas e estéticas que permeiam sua construção narrativa. Ao criar um espaço ficcional híbrido, Evaristo transita e negocia entre a crítica cultural negra e a teoria literária. Essa análise apoia-se no referencial teórico de Mark Stein (2004), particularmente em seus conceitos sobre as funções performativas do romance negro britânico de transformação, bem como nas noções de perpetuação e refração, fundamentais para a compreensão das inovações formais e temáticas da obra.
Palavras-chave: Bernardine Evaristo. Diáspora africana. Ficção britânica negra contemporânea. (Des)pertencimento. Romance de formação negro.

Introduction

Figura 1 – Odo[1] *Nnyew Fie Kwan*

Fonte: OWUSU, 2019.

1 This is an Adinkra symbol which means "Love does not lose its way home". These symbols encapsulate the worldviews and keen observations of human behaviour and their interaction between nature and humanity. For more of Adinkra Symbols see: OWUSU, 2019.

Contemporary Black British literature in the twenty-first century has emerged as a dynamic field, marked by a rich interplay between formal innovation and inherited literary traditions. While several contemporary authors claim aesthetic experimentation, many writers continue to align themselves with the familiar structures of the British literary canon. In contrast, Bernardine Evaristo positions herself as a formally transgressive writer, challenging normative expectations regarding both content and form. Her debut work, *Lara* (2019 [1997]), exemplifies this disruption, as it consciously subverts conventional narrative structures and places itself in critical dialogue with the Western literary tradition.

Written in verse, *Lara* narrates the coming-of-age story of a mixed-race girl in 1970s Britain, while simultaneously mapping her genealogical journey across three continents, England, Nigeria, and Brazil, over the span of two centuries. Much like the author herself, Lara is the daughter of a white English mother and a Black Nigerian father, and grows up within a society that marginalizes her difference. Yet her hybridity is complex and deeply layered. Her maternal lineage traces back to nineteenth-century Irish and German roots, and her mother's interracial marriage represents a disruption to the family's long-standing pursuit of upward social mobility. Lara's paternal heritage is equally intricate: her father, Taiwo da Costa, is a descendant of Yoruba slaves who were freed in Brazil and later relocated to South Africa. Educated in elite British institutions, he embodies the paradox of cultural assimilation, appearing "more English than the English".

Lara's journey becomes a multidirectional exploration of ancestry and identity. As she retraces her father's and her own cultural roots, her voyage takes her not only across geographies but also into the

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

affective and historical dimensions of memory and belonging. This process of "charting roots" is neither linear nor guaranteed; it is fraught with the (im)possibility of return and the ambivalences of hybridity. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986 [1952]), offers a strikingly relevant framework when he writes:

> [t]he Negro, however sincere, is the slave of the past. None the less I am a man. […] In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognised Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. […] I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself […]. (Fanon, 1986 [1952], p. 225-231, emphasis added)

Fanon's reflections capture the tension between the burden of history and the assertion of autonomous subjectivity. He rejects essentialist notions of racial identity and insists on the human capacity for self-fashioning beyond historical determinism. In *Lara*, Evaristo dramatizes this dialectic through her protagonist's physical and psychic journeys. Lara's travels symbolically reverse the trajectory of colonial history. She moves from Britain to Africa and Brazil, revisiting and reimagining the paths her ancestors were once forced to traverse in the opposite direction.

In Brazil, Lara ventures deep into the rainforest, enacting a kind of inner archaeology as she probes the limits of her historical consciousness. Her journey resonates with Paul Gilroy's reworking of W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 1-2; Gilroy, 1993, p. 1). Lara, by reclaiming both personal and collective histories, transforms her fractured identity into an empowered, self-authored narrative. No longer immobilized by

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

memory, she affirms her autonomy and declares her artistic and existential independence:

> I am baptised, resolved to paint slavery out of me,
> The Daddy People onto canvas with colour-rich strokes.
> [...]
> I step out of Heathrow and into my future.
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 187-188)

This lyrical passage marks a crucial turning point. In alignment with Fanon's vision of a liberated subjectivity, Lara articulates the will to remember without remaining trapped by memory. Her acts of (dis) identification with her ancestral past enable her to both acknowledge and move beyond it. Moreover, Evaristo underscores the broader political gesture here: Britain is no longer positioned as the center of meaning or destiny. Lara's affirmation of selfhood culminates in her return to London, not as an outsider seeking validation, but as a subject poised to redefine her place in the world. Her journey reflects not only the impossibility of a singular return but also the productive potential of diasporic movement, which allows for belonging beyond fixed categories of origin.

Lara is, without doubt, an innovative literary text. Though often labeled a novel, it defies genre expectations through its use of blank verse and poetic structure, including an index of first lines more typical of poetry than prose. As Mark Stein observes, Evaristo "employed blank verse in her prose poem and the layout [...] is that of poetry" (Stein, 2004, p. 81). Leila Kamali similarly argues that Evaristo challenges "theoretical, narrative or aesthetic paradigms which situate a closedness of received or given structures, and specifically accentuates a desire to transcend the limits of them"

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

(Kamali, 2020, p. 219). The formal hybridity of the text mirrors the thematic hybridity of Lara's identity, constructing a space where hybrid subjectivities can be fully articulated.

Furthermore, the narrative rhythm, rooted in the ten-syllable line characteristic of English dramatic and epic poetry, evokes both continuity and rupture. This formal inheritance, adapted from Greek metrics, speaks to the very hybridity it enacts: the so-called purity of English verse is itself a product of cultural borrowing. As a former actress, Evaristo also draws from dramatic tradition, which Kamali claims "emphasiz[es] the speaking quality of the text" (Kamali, 2016, p. 219), underscoring the performative and polyphonic nature of the narrative.

The poetic form enhances Lara's evolving voice while accommodating multiple perspectives that inform and expand her story. Stuart Brown notes that the verse form "channels and disciplines" Evaristo's creative talent, producing a narrative whose rhythm matches the affective landscape of the protagonist's journeys (Brown, 1999, p. 84). Brown further praises *Lara* for "enriching the vocabulary of both form and utterance," arguing that it articulates a "multicultural British consciousness" through its hybrid aesthetic strategies (Brown, 1999, p. 84).

Told in a fragmented, nonlinear structure, *Lara* spans over 150 years and weaves together disparate temporalities and geographies, from Brazil to Nigeria to Britain. This complexity is not arbitrary; rather, the discontinuities reflect the very diasporic entanglements the novel seeks to represent. Each transition across chapters requires the reader to forge connections across time and space, mirroring the protagonist's own attempt to weave together her transnational and transcultural inheritance. The novel not only narrates these

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

intergenerational, intercultural links but also performs them formally, establishing *Lara* as a foundational text in the canon of Black British literature and diasporic writing.

Dialogism, discontinuity and memory

Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* further distinguishes itself through a dynamic dialogic structure that engages with both personal and cultural memory. The novel explores the discontinuities in Lara's self-understanding and sense of identity, which are shaped by historical amnesia and fractured cultural inheritances. Evaristo employs a fluid, voice-centered prose form that enables cross-cultural connections, fostering a relational understanding of identity that neither erases nor rigidly defines difference. This aesthetic and political project resonates with Édouard Glissant's concept of the "poetics of relation," wherein self-knowledge emerges through one's interaction with the other (Glissant, 1997, p. 142).

Throughout *Lara*, ancestral memory is not presented as a distant abstraction but as a tangible, if spectral, presence that inhabits everyday experience. The "Daddy People," ancestral spirits linked to Lara's African heritage, appear to her as a child in a moment of imaginative epiphany: "Lara kneels, face squashed against the steamy window of the playroom / Lara kiss, Lara kiss, we love you always, Lara kiss" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 103).

This encounter, though mystical, is represented as real to Lara. Her intuitive recognition of these figures, even without full historical understanding, suggests that ancestral memory operates on both conscious and unconscious levels. When Lara tells her mother, "Mummy, I saw Daddy People in the garden singing me" (Evaristo,

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

2019 [1997], p. 103), she articulates a moment of identity formation rooted in cultural memory. Though ephemeral, this moment testifies to the persistence of suppressed or marginalized histories that transcend personal speech or awareness.

Mae Henderson (2014, p. 262) emphasizes how Black women writers often weave "competing and complementary discourses" into their work, adjudicating between divergent histories and identities. Similarly, Evaristo stages such negotiations in *Lara* by creating dialogic links between characters who represent seemingly oppositional cultural and historical positions. One striking example appears in the prologue, where Peggy, Lara's English grandmother, recalls her experience of the London Blitz in language that subtly echoes Severina, Lara's Brazilian great-grandmother: "Thunderous explosions outside made Guy Fawkes Night / Sound like the Mad Hatter's Tea Party..." (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 55).

Peggy's metaphorical language recalls Severina's own words during her abduction, "I heard my bones jangle / like wooden sticks shaking in a bowl" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 17), creating a latent connection between these two women across time, space, and racial difference. Peggy's childhood memories, shaped by trauma and silence, resonate with the collective trauma of slavery embodied by Severina, suggesting that memory and identity are fluid and interconnected rather than bounded by ethnicity or geography.

Such moments in the novel serve to mediate and humanize difference. Even characters shown to be antagonistic, such as Peggy and Taiwo, Lara's father, are brought into complex relationships that dramatize cultural misunderstanding and prejudice. Their first encounter is depicted in a richly metaphorical and satirical passage:

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

"A pyramid of trimmed and quartered sandwiches / Separated Peggy's high-collar from Taiwo's blue-tied Adam's apple" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 74).

Here, food becomes a symbol of cultural distance, while the formal politeness of the encounter veils mutual hostility. Taiwo's discomfort is rendered viscerally, reflecting the subtle violence of cultural exclusion and racialized expectation. Both Taiwo and Peggy are marked by diasporic dislocation, he by African postcolonial migration, she by the legacies of Irish-English inequality, yet both cling to versions of British respectability that suppress their histories.

The novel thus positions the fragmentation of cultural memory as a shared postcolonial condition. Characters like Ellen and Taiwo, though from different backgrounds, both struggle with internalized colonial legacies. Ellen's mother explicitly forbids her to marry a Black man, invoking racial purity and familial sacrifice: "Do you think I'm going to let you ruin your life / by marrying a… darkie, a… nigger-man?" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 69). Similarly, Taiwo attempts to erase his African origins, adopting the English name "Bill" and confessing, "they are frightened or angry or cross the road. When we coloured laugh freely they scowl at us" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 21). His experience reflects the internal contradictions of Black British identity under white cultural dominance, a phenomenon Paul Gilroy (1993) identifies as double consciousness.

Lara inherits this fraught legacy, navigating an English society in which her existence is continuously questioned. Her mixed-race identity becomes a site of anxiety and alienation, particularly within the microcosm of her school. One illustrative episode highlights the ignorance and racism of her white classmates:

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

> ‘Where’s 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?’
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 119)

These interactions underscore the failure of British education and cultural discourse to recognize its colonial legacy. As Hebdige (1996, p. 121) notes, Thatcher-era Britain propagated myths of national purity and hardworking Englishness, which contributed to the erasure of Britain’s imperial past and the exclusion of racialized citizens from full belonging.

Racism, then, not only structures *Lara*’s external environment but becomes internalized. Her alienation culminates in a profound identity crisis, captured in the following lines:

> HOME
> I searched but could not find myself.
> Not on the screen, billboards, books, magazines
> and not in the mirror, my demon, my love…
> Living in my skin, I was, but which one?
> (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 123, author’s emphasis)

Here, the mirror becomes both a literal and metaphorical space where Lara confronts the fragmentation of her self-image. Her desire “to speak me, describe me, birth me whole” (Evaristo, 2019[1997], p. 123) reveals a yearning for narrative coherence in a society that offers no affirming reflection. The metaphor of skin becomes a symbol of multiplicity and instability, “a dwelling place, a room, a dress,” as Stein (2004, p. 84) argues, representing the plural and performative aspects of identity.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

Lara's eventual embrace of her hybrid identity is catalyzed by her desire to understand the complex histories of her parents. Growing up in a house named Atlantico near Woolwich Common, an evocative reference to *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy, 1993), she comes to see water as a central metaphor for her identity. From the narrative's epigraph, "However far the stream flows, / it never forgets its source", to her Yoruba name, Omolara (the family are like water), the theme of fluidity and transformation recurs throughout.

The novel stages this metaphor through ancestral journeys. One forebear, Baba, a freed Brazilian slave, returns to Africa, retracing in reverse the path of the Middle Passage. His lover, Joana, remains in Bahia, staking her claim to the New World. Lara, in contrast, has the privilege to move freely between continents, but never to settle into a singular identity. Her journey does not resolve her hybridity but instead affirms it as constitutive of her being. As Stein (2004, p. 88) writes, *Lara* rejects "notions of original belonging and undoubted origin," embracing instead a narrative of relational identity.

In this way, *Lara* articulates a poetics of transformation rooted in movement, multiplicity, and dialogism. Evaristo resists binary constructions of race, nationality, and gender, crafting instead a narrative that acknowledges the violence of history while imagining possibilities beyond it. Lara's journey is not toward a fixed identity but toward a space in which the complexity of her experience can be spoken, remembered, and ultimately lived.

History and (un)belonging

Derek Walcott, author of the poem "The Sea is History" (1986), was born in Saint Lucia, a former French and British colony in the Caribbean.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

Reflecting the island's colonial past, Walcott himself was of African, English, and Dutch descent. In "The Sea is History," he interrogates the notion that history is only legitimate when documented through canonical forms such as written records or monuments. Drawing on Biblical allusions, historical references, and natural imagery, the poem explores three interrelated themes: the Bible as a historical text, the analogy between the transatlantic slave trade and the biblical Exodus, and the contention that historical legitimacy depends on recognition and preservation.

The excerpt cited below exemplifies this perspective by positioning the sea as both a literal and metaphorical archive of submerged Caribbean history:

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
> Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
> in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
> has locked them up. The sea is History.
> (Walcott, 1986, p. 364)

Walcott's lines evoke the erasure of historical memory in the Caribbean, referencing the remains of those who perished during the Middle Passage and places like Jamaica's submerged Port Royal[2]. His metaphor finds resonance in Conceição Evaristo's observation during the 2013 *Festa Literária Internacional de Paraty*: "If there was a monument to the black memory, it must have been built in the depths of the sea..."[3] (Evaristo, 2013). Both authors present the sea as a repository for collective memory, highlighting the absence of tangible memorials and challenging traditional historiography.

2 [2] For more information about Jamaica's sunken Port Royal, see https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200921-jamaicas-port-royal-the-wickedest-city-on-earth.

3 [3] In Portuguese: "Se houvesse um monumento à memória negra, deveria ser construído no fundo do mar, em homenagem àqueles que se perderam na travessia". All translations, with the exceptions of those included in the bibliographical references, are mine.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

This conceptualization of the sea as archive becomes a crucial intertext in *Lara*, where the protagonist's transnational journeys echo a broader exploration of personal, ancestral, and cultural histories. As Astrid Erll notes in *Memory in Culture* (2011 [2005], p. 144-148), literature serves as a symbolic form of cultural memory through the mechanisms of condensation, narration, and genre. Narration, in particular, allows for the transformation of fragmented experiences into coherent autobiographical narratives, while genres like the *Bildungsroman* provide structural models for personal and intellectual development.

Lars Eckstein (2006) similarly emphasizes the need for an embodied subject who experiences real-life events to mediate the transition from historical fact to cultural memory. In postcolonial contexts, this dynamic becomes fraught, as mnemonic structures negotiate the tensions between subaltern memory and dominant historiographies. These tensions surface in *Lara*, especially as Lara experiences her alienation from London: "DAWN released London from anonymous night" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 104, author's emphasis). Her subjective perception reconfigures the city as both present and elusive, reinforcing her agency to engage with memory critically rather than passively.

Salman Rushdie's assertion that "History is interviews with winners" (1999) critiques the silencing of subaltern voices, a concern central to the *Subaltern Studies Group* led by Ranajit Guha. Guha defines the subaltern as those subjected to forms of structural subordination across axes such as class, caste, gender, and age (Guha; Spivak, 1988, p. 35). Evaristo's novel operates within this framework by juxtaposing dominant historical narratives with suppressed familial and diasporic memories.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

In *Lara*, two competing approaches to memory emerge: Taiwo, Lara's father, seeks to erase his painful past in Lagos, choosing amnesia as a means of self-preservation: "MY CHILDREN will not swim in a lake of lost dream" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 105, author's emphasis). His desire for a fresh beginning in London has lasting consequences for Lara, who feels the absence of inherited narratives and actively seeks to recover them through her journeys.

Her travels to Europe, Nigeria, and Brazil function as a mythopoetic quest to reclaim fragmented identities and histories. As Mark Stein (2004, p. 89) argues, this process of reengagement with history is not nostalgic but transformative, offering a forward-looking perspective rooted in historical understanding. In Salvador, Brazil, one of the primary ports of entry for enslaved Africans[4], Lara seeks familial connection: "'Any da Costa still around?' […] 'Of course. Hundreds. Thousands'" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 186). This moment highlights the persistence of history through lineage, even if its personal meanings have become obscured.

The novel's concluding movement up the Amazon evokes the literary tradition initiated by Sir Walter Raleigh's search for *El Dorado*[5]. Lara's river journey becomes an allegorical search for

4 It is *The Valongo Wharf* (Portuguese: *Cais do Valongo*), built in 1811, which was the largest port of landing and trading of enslaved Africans in the Americas until 1831. It is an old dock located in the port area of Rio de Janeiro, between the current *Coelho e Castro* and *Sacadura Cabral* Streets. During the twenty years of its operation, between 500 thousand and one million slaves landed at *Valongo*. Brazil received about 4.9 million slaves through the Atlantic trade. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valongo_Wharf. Accessed in: 15 nov. 2023.

5 In 1594, Sir Walter Raleigh heard of a *City of Gold* in South America and sailed to find it, publishing an exaggerated account of his experiences in a book that contributed to the legend of *El Dorado*. After Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, he was again imprisoned in the Tower of London, this time for being involved in the main plot against King James I, who was not favourably disposed towards him. In 1616, he was released to lead a second expedition in search of *El Dorado*. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Raleigh. Accessed in: 26 feb. 2023.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

origins, culminating in an epiphany where she synthesizes ancestry, spirituality, and identity:

> We move on into solitude. My thoughts become free of the chaos of the city, uncensored, the river calms me. I become my parents, my ancestors, my gods. We dock, a remote settlement. I stretch my pins, earthed, follow my singing ears, Catholic hymns hybridised by drums. A hilltop church, Indian congregation, holding palm fronds. It is Palm Sunday. I hum from the door, witness to one culture being orchestrated by another. The past is gone, the future means transformation. The boat's horn impatiently calls me. I panic away. (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 187)

Barbara Webb (1992, p. 7) refers to this kind of narrative as a reconstruction of history as *l'histoire à faire*, a history yet to be made. Lara's journey reveals that her transformation is not a return to purity but a reckoning with hybridity and multiplicity. Her arrival back in London, the city she initially tried to escape, is reconfigured as an embrace of futurity: "step[ping] out of Heathrow and into [the] future" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 188).

Fred D'Aguiar's (2000, p. 199) notion of "unbelonging" as a psychic and spatial dissonance resonates throughout *Lara*. The protagonist experiences exclusion within the cultural frameworks of 1970s and 1980s Britain, where racial markers define the boundaries of belonging. Her mixed-race identity provokes the familiar question "Where're you from?" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 119), signifying her perceived inauthenticity within national identity. As Sara Ahmed (1999, p. 9) notes, this racialized thinking assumes race as a fixed origin rather than a lived and shifting experience.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

Evaristo addresses the complexity of belonging for black British subjects, especially second-generation individuals like Lara, whose diasporic heritage is often met with erasure or skepticism. Her ambivalent claim, "I'm not black, I'm half-caste, actually" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 128), reflects both resistance to imposed categories and a search for self-definition. In doing so, the narrative traverses beyond individual identity toward a collective reckoning with history and loss.

As Ifewunigwe (1997, p. 204) and Mercer (1994, p. 7) assert, diasporic subjects embody both reminders and remainders of unresolved colonial histories. Lara's diasporic journey, situated within the *Bildungsroman* tradition, functions as both a personal quest and a cultural intervention. Her characterization as a melancholic traveller who resists forgetting affirms Glissant's claim that the writer must explore the haunting presence of the past (Glissant, 1989 [1981], p. 63-64).

Ultimately, Evaristo's *Lara* resists closure. While the protagonist achieves a degree of transformation, the novel emphasizes the ongoing nature of identity formation and historical recovery. By engaging with memory as an open-ended process, *Lara* critiques the erasures of dominant historiography and foregrounds the multiplicity of diasporic belonging. The narrative's oscillation between remembering and forgetting encapsulates its central project: to inscribe the stories left untold, and to refuse the finality of loss.

Afro-Christianity

Western Christianity plays an ambivalent role in both African American and Black British cultures. While it was historically used as a colonial tool of domination, many black writers have appropriated it as a source of resistance and spiritual empowerment. From early

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

black women writers like Phillis Wheatley to contemporary voices such as Bernardine Evaristo, we see an ongoing dialogue between African ancestral spirituality and Christian discourse. As Elizabeth West (2011, p. 43) affirms, this spiritual heritage "became more submerged in dominant Anglo Christian rhetoric, especially espoused in spiritual autobiographies."

Judylyn Ryan (2005, p. 23) argues that spirituality in Black women's literature is "recognizably African/Black… [and] its contours are shaped by the core ethical and philosophical values around which several traditions cohere within the African cultural domain." As African cosmologies crossed the Atlantic, they transformed under the pressures of colonization, giving rise to Afro-Christianity. However, as West (2011, p. 2) explains, early Christian rhetoric in Anglo-America racialized Christianity and framed Blackness as inherently inferior.

Mignolo and Walsh (2018, p. 155) connect this dynamic to the broader "rhetoric of modernity," which relies on binary oppositions such as Christian/pagan, white/nonwhite, and developed/underdeveloped, all rooted in colonial logic. Dwight Hopkins (2000, p. 15) elaborates that the Puritans who fled religious persecution in Britain brought with them a hegemonic Protestant worldview that demonized Black people as "evil, inferior, and sinful," embedding theological justifications for racial hierarchies.

Despite these constraints, African American writers reclaimed Christian narratives in the service of liberation. Phillis Wheatley's famous poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" presents a nuanced appropriation of biblical discourse, asserting the redemptive potential of Black people: "Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." (Wheatley, 2004 [1773], p.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

29). As West (2011, p. 4) notes, Wheatley's work subverts exclusionary interpretations of scripture and affirms Black spiritual humanity.

By the late 19th century, Christianity had become the dominant religious rhetoric in Black literary expression, particularly through the conversion narrative. As West (2011, p. 43) argues, Black British writers integrated this structure to assert moral worth and spiritual identity, even while grappling with a Christian discourse that often dehumanized them. For many Black women writers, this meant negotiating their African heritage through Christian frameworks that sought to erase it.

In *Lara*, Bernardine Evaristo explores Afro-Christian cosmologies through poetic and narrative techniques. The protagonist's spiritual visions, such as seeing the "Daddy People" singing to her from the garden (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 103), reflect traditional African beliefs in ancestral presence. The novel ends with Lara's symbolic baptism: "I am baptised, resolved to paint slavery out of me, / the Daddy People onto canvas with colour-rich strokes" (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 188), indicating a spiritual reconciliation with her past.

Sebnem Toplu (2011, p. 8) reads this scene as a moment of religious syncretism. Lara bathes under the *Tarumã* waterfall after witnessing a hybrid mass on Palm Sunday: "Catholic hymns hybridised by drums," she observes (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 187). This imagery underscores the spiritual hybridity at the heart of Afro-Christianity.

Lara's mother, Ellen, raised in a strict Irish Catholic environment, once aspired to marry Christ and "save Black babies" through missionary donations (Evaristo, 2019 [1997], p. 24). However, her encounter with Taiwo, a Nigerian man, redirects her religious devotion toward earthly love, marking a turning point in the intergenerational spiritual narrative.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

Elizabeth West (2011, p. 17) warns that when a people's foundational beliefs are redefined as deriving from their oppressors, they lose their cultural grounding. Édouard Glissant (1989 [1981], p. 61) calls this rupture the "dislocation of the continuum," wherein collective memory fails to integrate daily experience and historical consciousness. In *Lara*, Evaristo addresses this discontinuity by dramatizing her characters' efforts to reconnect with lost traditions and fractured identities.

This theme continues in *Blonde Roots* (Evaristo, 2020 [2008]), where a reversal of the transatlantic slave trade creates a satirical counter-history. The character Jane, a pregnant white slave girl, descends into madness: "Jane had travelled so deeply into fantasy she had lost her way back" (Evaristo 2020 [2008], p. 87). As Katharine Burkitt (2012, p. 413) notes, Evaristo uses such narrative fragmentation to question the coherence of Black historical identity and its representation.

In embracing both African and Christian traditions, Evaristo constructs a hybrid spiritual discourse. As she states in an interview, *Lara* is "semi-autobiographical, a fictionalized family history," and her protagonist ultimately "embraces all her selves, no longer divided but multiple" (Evaristo, 2003). The novel thus embodies the poetics of creolization articulated by Glissant (1997, p. 142), in which identity emerges through relation and multiplicity.

This aligns with Fernanda Miranda's (2019, p. 19) claim that Black literature builds discursive *quilombos* that challenge hegemonic narratives. Stewart Brown (1999, p. 84) likewise describes *Lara* as a "hybrid literary form" that crosses genres and destabilizes traditional structures. Evaristo's language, imagery, and polyphonic voice reconstruct African memory within a modern British context.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

Although she distances herself from overt academic theorization, Evaristo's rejection of terms like "hybridity cosmopolitanism cultural transformation" (Evaristo, 1999, p. 49) is itself a performative strategy. As Mirza (1997, p. 5) notes, Evaristo writes "from the sidelines," resisting dominant epistemologies while forging a new Black British feminist discourse. *Lara*, therefore, asserts a creolized Britishness that integrates Blackness at its core.

Final considerations

Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* occupies a significant place at the intersection of Cultural Studies and Black British Studies, offering a richly layered interrogation of identity, memory, and belonging in the context of postcolonial Britain. By weaving together personal and collective histories, the novel foregrounds the affective dimensions of diasporic subjectivity and the spectral presence of unresolved colonial legacies. Through its hybrid form, part *memoir*, part poetic narrative, *Lara* challenges the narrative conventions of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, transforming it into a diasporic text that confronts the psychic ruptures and sociopolitical dislocations endured by Black British individuals.

In Cultural Studies, *Lara* can be read as a critical text that problematizes hegemonic constructions of national identity, interrogating the ideological assumptions that underpin Britishness and its historical exclusions. Evaristo exposes the cultural amnesia surrounding empire and slavery, while simultaneously disrupting dominant narratives of assimilation and multiculturalism. Her work invites a re-evaluation of the processes through which racialized subjects are interpolated into, and frequently denied access to, the

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

symbolic and material spaces of belonging. The novel's transnational journeys, spanning Britain, Nigeria, and Brazil, embody what Paul Gilroy (1993) terms the "Black Atlantic," a counter-geography of cultural production where memory, identity, and history are dynamically reconfigured across space and time.

From a Black British Studies perspective, *Lara* is emblematic of the second-generation diasporic experience, characterized by a tension between inherited histories and contemporary cultural formations. Evaristo's engagement with racial melancholia, as theorized by David L. Eng and Shinhee Han (2000, p. 668), underscores how the psychic afterlives of slavery, migration, and loss continue to shape black British subjectivities. The novel articulates what Kobena Mercer (1994, p. 7) refers to as a "diaspora aesthetics," wherein fragmented narratives and hybrid identities become sites of creative resistance and self-making. Rather than seeking a fixed origin or coherent resolution, *Lara* embraces multiplicity and ambivalence, advancing an ethics of complexity in the articulation of black British identity.

Ultimately, *Lara* opens a space for critical mourning, not as an end in itself but as a generative process through which history is reckoned with and new imaginaries are made possible. Evaristo's narrative resists closure, offering instead a performative engagement with the past that calls for sustained attention to the entanglements of race, memory, and power in the post-imperial present. In doing so, she contributes to a broader cultural and intellectual project of re-inscribing black British voices into the national archive, not as marginal additions but as constitutive presences whose stories compel a rethinking of what it means to belong.

CADERNO SEMINAL E-ISSN 1806-9142
n54: Neonarrativas de escravidão: memória e representação nas literaturas contemporâneas

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

References

AHMED, Sara. Passing through hybridity. In: *Theory, Culture and Society*, n. 2, v. 16. London, p. 87-106, 1999.

BROWN, Stuart. *Lara*, Bernardine Evaristo. In: *Wasafiri*, n. 29. London, p. 83-84, 1999.

BURKITT, Kate. Blonde Roots, black history: history and the form of the slave narrative in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*. In: *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, n. 3, v. 47, p. 403-416, 2012.

D'AGUIAR, Fred. Home is always elsewhere: individual and communal regenerative capacities of loss. In*:* OWUSU, Kwesi (Org.). *Black British culture and society: a text-reader.* London: Routledge, p. 195-206, 2000.

DU BOIS, W. E. B. *The souls of Black folk*. New York: Penguin, 1903.

ECKSTEIN, Lars. *Remembering the Black Atlantic: on the poetics and politics of literary memory*. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2006.

ENG, David L.; HAN, Shinhee. A dialogue on racial melancholia. In: *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, n. 4, v. 10, p. 667-700, 2000.

ERLL, Astrid. *Memory in culture*. Translation by Sara B. Young. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

EVARISTO, Bernardine. *Lara*. Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2019 [1997].

EVARISTO, Bernardine. *Beyond Race and Gender*. In: *Wasafiri*, n. 28, v. 14, p. 49-52, 1999.

EVARISTO, Bernardine. *Interview*. In: *Valparaíso Poetry Review*, Karen McCarthy (Ed.), 2003.

EVARISTO, Bernardine. *Blonde Roots*. London: Penguin Books, 2020 [2008].

EVARISTO, Conceição. Vinda da favela, Conceição Evaristo se consolida como escritora e vai à Flip. In: *Folha de São Paulo*, São Paulo, 25 fev. 2013. Disponível em: https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2017/05/1880711-vinda-da-favela-conceicao-evaristo-se-consolida-como-escritora-e-vai-a-flip.shtml. Acesso em: 25 fev. 2023.

FANON, Frantz. *Black skin, white masks*. Translation by Charles Lam Markman. London: Pluto, 1986.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993.

GLISSANT, Édouard. *Caribbean discourse: selected essays*. Translation by J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989.

GLISSANT, Édouard. *Poetics of relation*. Translation by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

GUHA, Ranajit; SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Selected subaltern studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

HEBDIGE, Dick. Digging for Britain: an excavation in seven parts. In*:* BAKER JR.; Houston A. (Orgs.). *Black British cultural studies: a reader*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 116-156, 1996.

HENDERSON, Mae G. *Speaking in tongues & dancing diaspora: Black women writing and performing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

HOPKINS, Dwight N. *Down, up and over: slave religion and Black theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

IFEWUNIGWE, Jayne O. Diaspora's daughters, Africa's orphans?: on lineage, authenticity and 'mixed-raced' identity. In*:* MIRZA, Heidi Safia (Org.). *Black British feminism: a reader*. London; New York: Routledge, p. 127-152, 1997.

KAMALI, Leila. Awakening to the singing: Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*. In*:* KAMALI, Leila. *The cultural memory of Africa in African American and Black British fiction, 1970-2000*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 213-241, 2016.

MERCER, Kobena. *Welcome to the jungle: new positions in Black cultural studies*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

MIGNOLO, Walter D.; WALSH, Catherine E. *On decoloniality: concepts, analytics, praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

MIRANDA, Fernanda. *Silêncios prescritos: narrativas negras e subalternidades*. São Paulo: Malê, 2019.

MIRZA, Heidi Safia (Org.). *Black British feminism: a reader*. London: Routledge, 1997.

RUSHDIE, Salman. *London: post-colonial city*. 1 vídeo (1h. 11min. 42 seg.), 1999. In: *Youtube*. Disponível em: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpTjAddDnyY. Acesso em: 25 fev. 2023.

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354

RYAN, Jennifer. *Spirituality as ideology in Black women's film and literature*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005.

STEIN, Mark. *Black British literature: novels of transformation*. Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2004.

TOPLU, Sevda. Fiction unbound: Bernardine Evaristo. In*:* DÖRING, Tobias; ECKSTEIN, Lars (Ed.). *Blurring boundaries*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, p. 7-20, 2011.

WALCOTT, Derek. *Collected poems, 1948-1984*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986.

WEBB, Barbara J. *Myth and history in Caribbean fiction: Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris, Édouard Glissant*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.

WEST, Elizabeth. *African spirituality in Black women's fiction: threaded visions of memory, community, nature, and being*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011.

WHEATLEY, Phillis. *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004 [1773].

https://doi.org/10.12957/seminal.2025.93354