

Challenging the Overrepresentation of Man

Relational Ontology in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

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ABSTRACT

This paper intervenes in Black Lives Matter discourse on the dehumanization of the Black subject. I explore the novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo, and read it in dialogue with Sylvia Wynter's theory on ontological hierarchy. I also consider the novel through a relational ontological lens with the work of Adriana Cavarero. The theories of Cavarero and Wynter are brought together to show their common suspicion of the concept of Man as he has been forged by Western philosophy. Through analyzing the formal qualities of the novel through this double theoretical lens, I contend that *Girl, Woman, Other* provides a literary model of relational ontology and depicts an alternative model of the human subject, who evades archaic forms of ontological framing. I thus argue that *Girl, Woman, Other* engages with and offers a response to the Black Lives Matter imperative for a new genre of the human.

KEYWORDS

Black Lives Matter, ontological hierarchy, Man, relational ontology, contemporary fiction, intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

This 'space of Otherness' line of nonhomogeneity had then functioned to validate the socio-ontological line now drawn between rational, political Man (Prospero, the settler of European descent) and its irrational Human Others (the categories of Caliban [i.e., subordinated Indians and the enslaved Negroes]). (Wynter 2003)

Thus, all universalizing ethics (or politics) that are founded on Man, and those that champion the modern individual, end up being refuted. (Cavarero 2000)

It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form. (Foucault 2002)

At the heart of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is an opposition to the dehumanization of the Black subject.¹ The BLM protests were sparked by the murder of Black Americans such as George Floyd, Michael Brown, and Breonna Taylor, whose deaths at the hands of police are reflective of a socio-political ontological hierarchy that frames Black lives as non-human and dispensable. As a renowned cultural theorist, who has written extensively on the dehumanization of the Black subject, Sylvia Wynter's work has been noted by scholars as being particularly instructive in the wake of the BLM movement.² In her 2003 article 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,' Wynter takes a historical and sociological approach to understanding the origin of why Black subjects are viewed as non-human. Rooting her argument in the work of Michel Foucault, Anibal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and Franz Fanon, she writes an insightful account of the Western conception of Man. Wynter explains that secularization and imperial expansion following the Renaissance resulted in 'peoples of Black African descent' filling the slot of 'Otherness'.³ The designation of this new 'Other', reinforced a white, Western, bourgeois ethnoclass of Man which became the referent for what is human (Wynter 2003, 266–292). It still exists to this day: Black lives are dehumanized because 'Man is still *overrepresented* as if it were the human itself' (Wynter 2003, 260; italics added).

According to Wynter, this 'overrepresentation' is the source of what Quijano (2000) has defined as the 'coloniality of power': the contemporary legacy of colonialism in the form of social discrimination. To unsettle the coloniality of power, Wynter argues that we need a 'redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its overrepresentation' (2003, 268). In other words, she calls for a radical rethinking of what it means to be human. Although Wynter was writing in 2003, there are clear parallels between her consideration of racial ontological hierarchy and contemporary BLM discourse. Black Lives Matter demands a recognition of Black lives mattering. It too insists on the ushering in of a genre of human that is not just Man, but rather common to all. As Nathan Snaza and Jennifer Sandlin summarize, '#BlackLivesMatter demands a reckoning with racist histories of dehumanization . . . it spurs us toward a creative re-configuration of that particular [Western-humanist] vision of the human' (2017, 110). BLM calls for a reconstruction of the human outside of the white bourgeois ethnoclass of Man, just as Wynter proposed nearly twenty years ago.

¹ See Snaza & Sandlin (2017) for a thorough discussion of mass-media coverage of the dehumanization of the Black subject.

² See Weheliye (2014) Snaza & Sandlin (2017) and Snaza (2019).

³ There is not sufficient space in this paper to explore the nuances of Wynter's thesis, but see (2003) for a thorough explanation of how the 'creation of this secular slot of Otherness as a replacement for the theocentric slot of Otherness' (292) can be seen to be the root of racial inequality.

In what ways can we rethink the human? What methods can be used to reformulate the Black subject outside the framework of Man vs. Other? How do we unsettle the coloniality of power? One can approach these questions in a variety of ways; for instance, Snaza and Sandlin (2017) consider how to reformulate pedagogies to critique Man, whereas in *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye posits the concept of ‘flesh’ as a means of evading the ‘genocidal shackles of Man’ (2014, 4). However, in this paper I will take an interdisciplinary approach and turn to a work of fiction that was implicated in the 2020 BLM movement: the Booker Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* by Black British writer Bernardine Evaristo. The novel is a formally innovative polyphonic prose-poetry text which presents the interconnected stories of twelve Black British characters, most of whom are women.⁴ During the 2020 BLM protests, it rocketed up the charts to become the Sunday Times No.1 best-selling paperback book in the UK.⁵ Aside from its widespread popularity as BLM entered the mainstream cultural circuit, *Girl, Woman, Other* also intervenes as a cultural object in the issue of the genre of human. As Wynter rightly argues, the very reason humans create descriptive statements of Man is because we ‘have been pre-adapted...to be a symbolic and, therefore, a self-representing species’ (2003, 326). It is therefore paramount to consider how the human is depicted in fiction, and how this medium can either reinforce, or provide resistance to, the ethnoclass of Man.⁶

In this paper, I read *Girl, Woman, Other* in dialogue with Wynter’s theory and also through the work of eminent Black Studies scholars, Snaza, Sandlin and Weheliye.⁷ In tandem, this paper also engages with relational ontology, i.e., the idea that what distinguishes beings from each other is mutual relation, rather than individual substance. In particular, I focus on the renowned feminist theorist, Adriana Cavarero, and her work on how relational ontology functions in narrative. Cavarero argues that doctrines which are founded on Man, as seen in Aristotle or Hobbes, concentrate on the idea of the essence of the human to the detriment of considering how relations to others form subjecthood; ‘they ignore the *who* and focus instead on the *what*’ (2000, 88). Cavarero does not consider the ontological hierarchy involved in the colonial

⁴ In Evaristo’s interview with Waterstones (2019b) she explains why she uses the term ‘womxn’ as an alternative spelling to women when discussing her book, as she sees it to be more inclusive to trans and nonbinary women, and it thus encompasses the character Morgan. Due to more recent contestation surrounding whether use of ‘womxn’ is exclusive to non-gender confirming people, this paper has decided to not employ the term.

⁵ The sudden rise in sales of *Girl, Woman, Other* reflects the increased interest in writing on race during the BLM movement: Reni Eddo-Lodge’s incisive *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2017) also hit No.1 in the UK paperback non-fiction list.

⁶ It is telling to note that the rise of the Renaissance bourgeois, imperialist Man, parallels the development of the novel as a literary form. One could argue that the novel helped to establish the ethnoclass of Man through white, male, middle-class protagonists.

⁷ There is a deviation here in my methodology and content, as *Girl, Woman, Other* explores the Black British experience, while the majority of my theory concentrates on race relations in the United States. However, I think this is a productive tension. These American scholars, in comparison to their British counterparts, explore more specifically the dehumanization of the Black subject which is unfortunately a reality that underpins both sets of experiences across the Atlantic. Analyzing *Girl, Woman, Other* through American scholarship provides greater insights into how it speaks to contemporary BLM discourse.

encounter and in this sense, her interrogation of Man does not go as far as Wynter's. However, both theorists are suspicious of the concept of Man and the Western philosophy that made him: Cavarero questions the 'mysterious interiority' of Man (2000, 89), while Wynter takes issue with the overrepresentation of the white bourgeois Man as human (2003, 330). Through reading *Girl, Woman, Other* through a double Wynter-Cavarero lens, I argue that the novel provides a literary model of relational ontology and thus offers a depiction of the human that evades archaic forms of ontological framing—both standing in opposition to interior human essence *and* rejecting the hegemony of Man vs. Other—in one and the same ontological re-positioning. The novel therefore rethinks the human, and so works towards challenging the overrepresentation of Man and unsettling the coloniality of power.

In the first section of the paper, I consider the formal innovation of *Girl, Woman, Other* and demonstrate how its fusion-fiction form manifests a type of literary relational ontology. I argue that the novel challenges Man—both as the individualistic subject and as the white bourgeois ethnoclass—by presenting an alternative type of human and offering a new literary imagining of the Black subject. In the second section of this paper, I further this consideration of how the novel challenges the binary of Man vs. Other through its presentation of a heterogenous cast of Black characters. There is not enough space in this paper to delve into the complicated question of gender within *Girl, Woman, Other*; but it is touched upon in this section. I explore how the novel depicts intersectionality and presents the characters' relations to each other through 'critical prisms' (Donnell 2019c) to better elucidate the intersection of competing oppressions. I conclude the paper arguing for the importance of analyzing fictional representation of Black subjects for BLM discourse and its cause of furthering racial equality.

A NOVEL FORM: FUSION-FICTION AND RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY

Girl, Woman, Other employs what Evaristo has described as a 'fusion-fiction' form due to its innovative structure and poetic prose style which enables both the characters and their stories to fuse together (2019b). The novel presents the stories of twelve characters—mostly women, mostly Black—who are variously connected to each other as friends, colleagues, acquaintances and family. Each chapter is dedicated to a different person and can be read like a short story. However, through the relationships between the characters, the stories come together to create a wider narrative. The twelve are divided up into four groups of three, arranged together under umbrella chapters. These triptych structures emphasize the multiplicity of connections between the characters as in each triptych they interact with each other in various ways. The fusion between characters is further heightened by Evaristo's poetic-patterning prose style which

eschews punctuation and so emphasizes the characters' connected voices and thoughts. The plot takes place over one day: it starts following Amma, a playwright, on her way to the National Theatre in London to prepare for the opening night of her play *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*. It concludes back at the theatre after the performance, where many of the characters bump into each other again, completing the interconnected narrative web. Please consult Figure 1 below, as it illustrates the complexity of the relations between characters and provides an important overview for ensuing discussions of plot.

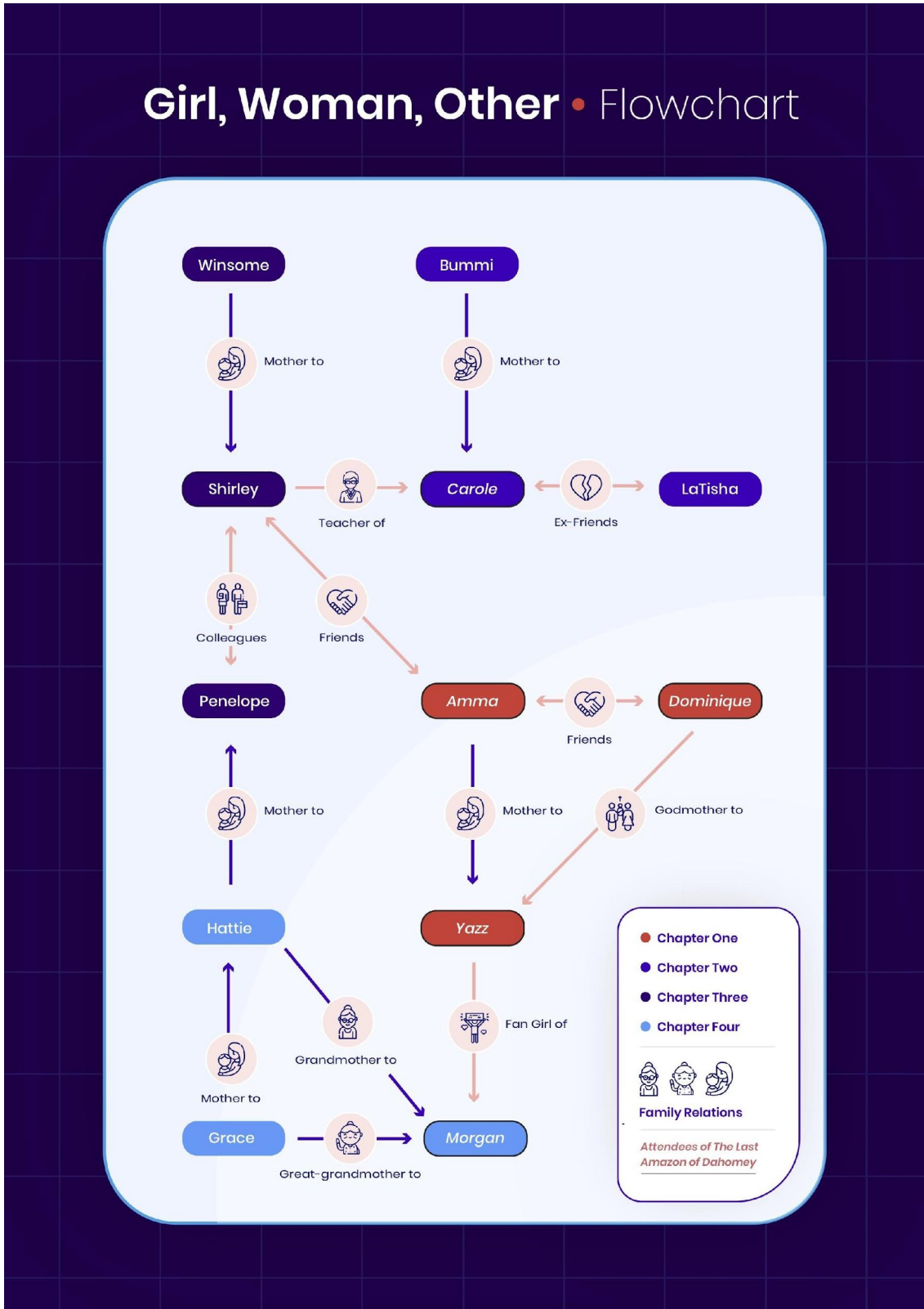


Figure 1: A flowchart representing the various relations between the characters of *Girl, Woman, Other*.

In *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero concentrates on the implications of relational ontology for narratology in life-writing. She explores how the human subject develops in relation to others, and consequently why our life stories irrevocably retain the traces of others' narratives. She argues that we are not interior or solipsistic, but rather 'belong to a world-scene where interaction with other existents is . . . potentially infinite' (2000, 87). The narrative style that best reflects this is, according to her, both 'polyphonic' and 'fragmented' (2000, 12–14). Cavarero cites *The Arabian Nights* as a 'masterpiece of its genre' because it provides stories ad-infinitum which intersect with each other (2000, 123). Due to its fusion-fiction form, *Girl, Woman, Other* can be understood to be enacting a type of literary relational ontology. The novel is highly polyphonic and fragmented: replete with conversations between characters that are framed without speech marks to create an impression of many free-floating voices. *Girl, Woman, Other* emulates *The Arabian Nights* through its complex narrative web which presents interwoven connections between the characters, and hints at the endless sprawling links between them. As one reviewer put it, the novel feels like a 'densely populated village where everyone leans on one another in order to scrape by' (Garner, 2019). Evaristo indeed does offer an ode to Black female friendships in this novel: Amma travels to America to save her friend Dominique from an abusive relationship, Shirley spends hours coaching Carole to get into the University of Oxford and there are numerous mother-daughter relationships that evidence deep care and love. *Girl, Woman, Other* proposes a world of collaboration, where community is not necessarily a threat that endangers the unicity of each participant. The novel illustrates 'the necessary aspect of an identity which, from beginning to end, is intertwined with other lives' (Cavarero 2000, 88). Through this manifestation of relational ontology in literary form, *Girl, Woman, Other* engages in rethinking the human. It offers an alternative model that crucially differs from the individualistic, self-sufficient conception of Man.

Not only does *Girl, Woman, Other* challenge Man through its fusion-fiction form, it also innovatively engages with temporality to emphasize intergenerational connections. The one-day plot is presented within the context of over a hundred years and covers many family genealogies. The distinctive poetic patterning of the text emphasizes this intergenerational chronology as the unconventional verse-like layout, taking the form of continuous prose stripped of capitalization and punctuation, offers a flexible stream-of-consciousness style. This enables the reader to access the internal monologue of the characters, as they look back in time. Evaristo can therefore segue from past to present with ease. The passage below is positioned at the very start of the chapter dedicated to Grace, a half-Abyssinian mixed-race woman from Newcastle, who we discover to be the mother of Hattie, and grandmother of Morgan in the final denouement of the novel. This passage introduces Grace to readers for the first time:

Grace

came into this world courtesy of a seaman from Abyssinia called
Wolde, a young fireman

who stoked coal into the boilers in the holds of merchant ships
the hardest, filthiest, sweatiest job on board

Wolde

who sailed into South Shields in 1895 and left a few days later leav-
ing behind the beginnings of Grace hidden inside her Ma

who'd just turned sixteen

who didn't know she was with child until Grace was almost ready
to pop out, as Daisy told her little girl when she was old enough to
grasp how babies were made. (Evaristo 2019, 372)

Instead of focusing on *what* Grace is or her 'essence', Evaristo concentrates on *who* made her and how these relations formed the person she came to be. This finds support from Cavarero's focus on 'the ontological status of a *who*...for whom the other is necessary' instead of the essentialist 'what' (2000, 88). The poetic patterning of this extract further emphasizes such relationality by emphatic line breaks on 'who' and 'who'd' four times in this short section. The shifting of subject from Grace, to Wolde, to Daisy enacts a tracing of relations—within an expansive temporal frame—rather than a focus on one individual.

In her seminal text on moral philosophy, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Judith Butler draws on Cavarero's work, taking up the question of ethics and narrative in the telling of one's story. Butler explains, paraphrasing Cavarero, that our understanding of ourselves is always 'partial' because our 'early and primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge' (2005, 20). This means that we are unable to fully know ourselves without the input of others. Consequently, Butler concludes that when narrating the self, we must 'begin *in media res*' (Butler 2005, 39). If we turn back to *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo does precisely this when presenting her characters. Grace, for example, is not followed from her birth to death as is typical in Realist Bildungsromanen. Instead, the reader is drawn back to stories that Grace was not present for, including her conception, to see how they shape who she is today. The framing of the characters in *Girl, Woman, Other* displays how 'opacity seems built into our formation' because we are inherently formed from our dependency on others (Butler 2005, 20). This is yet another way in which the novel rethinks the human and challenges Man.

During her interview with Evaristo, Alison Donnell persuasively argues that the triptych structure of the novel destabilizes orthodox notions of binary differences and ‘helps to insist on more complicated vectors of understanding and of human encounter’ (Evaristo, 2019c, 101–102). Evaristo agrees and explains that her aim in this novel was to explore ‘how people respond to each other, and limit, change, enrich and expand each other’ (2019c, 101). This is clearly shown through the interlocking connections forged between her characters. When considered through a Wynterian lens however, we can also argue that the triptych structures unsettle the binarism found in the hegemonic conception of Man vs. Other. There is no ‘they’ vs. ‘us’ in this novel: instead, we are presented with an endless web of relationships between Black characters. By offering a literary model of relational ontology, Evaristo presents us with a human subject who challenges racial ontological hierarchies. The novel rejects Man, both as the ‘self-centered and titanic subject of romanticism’ (Cavarero 2000, 89), and as the Western, white, bourgeois ethnoclass. Evaristo’s new literary imagining of the Black subject is thus not Othered, nor individualistically isolated, but rather formed by connections to other people. In this way *Girl, Woman, Other* works towards unsettling the coloniality of power by challenging, decolonizing and reconfiguring the human—actions that are at the heart of both Wynter’s theory and the BLM movement. In the next section, I will consider how the novel engages with intersectionality and I will turn again to relational ontology theory. According to Weheliye relationality is a ‘productive model for critical inquiry... [because it] reveals the global and systemic dimensions of racialized, sexualized, and gendered subjugation’ (2014, 13). I will also explore how *Girl, Woman, Other* nuances its presentation of Blackness and further refutes the binary of Man vs. Other.

RELATIONAL HETEROGENEITY: INTERSECTIONALITY AND CRITICAL PRISMS

Relational ontology, as discussed, is inherently opposed to the idea of the modern individualistic subject. However, this does not mean that it refutes uniqueness; Cavarero specifically sees the ‘who’ as ‘a unique existent that no categorization or collective identity can fully contain’ (2000, 90). Just because we are inherently ‘relational’ and connected to others, does not mean that we should be considered the same.⁸ Relational ontology is concerned with the social conditions of subject formation, but not prone to either an individualistic, or collective ethos which functions by exclusion. Within the Man vs. Other ontological hierarchy, Black subjects are viewed as one undifferentiated ‘othered’ group. This is one of the primary reasons why Evaristo takes a similar

⁸ ‘No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognize myself in you and, even less, in the collective we’ (Cavarero 2000, 91).

stance to Cavarero and challenges reductive taxonomical rigidity. In an interview with de Léon, she explained that she chose to portray a wide range of different Black British characters in *Girl, Woman, Other* as a 'way of addressing our invisibility and also exploring our heterogeneity' (2019d).

While all the characters can identify as Black, the novel highlights the differences between them. It is a very diverse cast: they come from a range of class backgrounds and geographical areas, have different sexualities (Amma and Dominique are lesbian, Bummi is bisexual), and also gender identities, Morgan '[self-identifies] as gender-free' (Evaristo, 328). Furthermore, although the novel concentrates on Black Britishness, ethnic differences within this category are also explored. The characters have roots in countries ranging from Ethiopia and Nigeria to the Caribbean and many characters are multi-racial: Morgan is 'part Ethiopian, part African-American, part Malawian, and part English' (Evaristo 2019, 113), while Penelope takes a DNA test to discover that she is made up of eighteen different ethnicities. John McLeod has previously written on Evaristo's work, arguing that she 'rethink[s] Britain's polycultural relationship with Africa, the Americas and Europe' and 'opens up important ancestral connections which go beyond the discrete terrain of nation-states' (2011, 170-180). He distinguishes Evaristo's oeuvre from other Black British literary work which, he suggests, is more preoccupied with nation and belonging. This reading of Evaristo is particularly apposite for *Girl, Woman, Other*, which takes a particularly plural perspective on Blackness.

Evaristo has persuasively argued that the diversity of characters in *Girl, Woman, Other* makes it 'a truly intersectional novel', because it 'explores gender, race, class and sexuality in myriad configurations through the protagonists and their orbits' (2019c, 100). Earlier, I discussed the support and love that characterizes many of the relationships in the novel. However, the characters do not always see eye to eye: Shirley is homophobic to her friend Amma, LaTisha begrudges the success of her ex-friend Carole, and Carole's mother takes a long time to come around to the fact that her daughter married a white man. No single viewpoint is privileged and we thus see the intersection of competing oppressions. Evaristo articulates the 'confusion of feelings which exist between sisters' (Lorde 1984, 170) and stays with the mess of these tensions. The plot remains entangled in unfinished conflicts, entertaining these pressures as a compelling point to write from, instead of a crisis to overcome.

The fusion-fiction form of the text provides the reader with a more holistic view of these conflicts. Often, we are presented with a self-serving version of one character's life in their own chapter, only to have it undermined in the next section as we hear another person's side of the

story. Each chapter thus becomes what Donnell has described as a ‘critical prism’, refracting the storylines as we previously encountered them (Evaristo, 2019c, 101). In Carole’s section we immediately empathize with her frustration at Shirley for taking Carole’s academic success as her own. However, when we learn of the difficulties in Shirley’s own life, our opinion softens and we can see her point of view. In the final chapter, Carole and Shirley bump into each other at the opening night of Amma’s play. Carole behaves rudely to Shirley and only later realizes her mistake: ‘it dawns on Carole that she’s always thought of Mrs King through a haze of teenage rage, yet the woman was probably only trying her best, and she just didn’t go about it in the right way’ (Evaristo 2019, 122). We see how characters can be blind to the way in which class, race, and other pressures intersect and affect others’ lives. These diffracting critical prisms displace any singular opinion and complicate relations between the characters. Evaristo’s characters are thus more akin to what Cavarero would describe as the ‘reality of the self’, which ‘far from possessing an interior, is totally *external*’ and dependent on the ‘gaze of the others’ (2000, 82-3). Through her diverse cast, Evaristo portrays a variety of Black experiences and identities. She challenges both modern individualism and exclusionary racial taxonomy through this relational ontological frame, eschewing any singular ideas about the Black subject. The Black subject is thus displaced from the Western ontological projection of the “‘space of Otherness’” (Wynter 2000, 316) which flattens differences between ‘othered’ subjects. In this way, the novel again intervenes in BLM discourse by challenging the binary of Man vs. Other, and offering modalities of the human which diverge from the ‘master-subject’ of Man.

CONCLUSION

Sylvia Wynter’s pioneering scholarship on ontological hierarchy and the overrepresentation of Man is vital for understanding contemporary BLM discourse. As Snaza and Sandlin argue, at the heart of BLM is a critique of the dehumanization of the Black subject, and a struggle towards the abolition of the ethnoclass of Man (2017, 110). Various theorists have proposed ‘potential exit strategies from the world of Man’ (Weheliye 2014, 28). In this paper I considered how *Girl, Woman, Other* illuminates another ‘way out’ by rethinking the human through a literary relational form. Viewing Cavarero’s work on relational ontology and Wynter’s theory on unsettling the coloniality of power side by side, uncovers a common enemy: that of Man. When we then carry these insights over to *Girl, Woman, Other*, and read it through this double lens, the novel can be understood as a challenge to two archaic ontological frameworks: both refuting the singular ‘essence’ individual and, at the same time, rejecting the hegemony of Man vs. Other and its attendant white bourgeois ethnoclass.

In the first section of the paper, I demonstrated how *Girl, Woman, Other* offered a literary model of relational ontology through its fusion-fiction form and intergenerational plot. This, I contended, presented an alternative human subject, and a new literary imagining of the Black subject, who was neither Othered nor isolated, but rather inherently linked to others. In the second section, I considered the nature of the relationships between the novel's diverse cast and argued that *Girl, Woman Other* is an intersectional work because it explores the competing oppressions—of class, gender, race—between different characters. This more nuanced depiction displaces the Black subject from a 'space of Otherness' (Wynter 2003, 316).

Cavarero's relational ontology considers each subject's story as unique: 'your story is never my story' because life-stories are always 'new, insubstitutable, and unexpected' (2000, 92, 2). In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo emphasizes the singularity of each of her characters' stories, presenting a diverse, intersectional cast. She also highlights the characters' inherent relationality, showing how they are formed by their connections to others and how their singularity can only be appreciated in relation to the concept of a community as a whole. The subject presented is thus relational, and so differentiates herself from the individualistic Man. She is also unique in relation to other characters, moving out of the Man vs. Other binary which flattens differences between those who are 'othered'. *Girl, Woman Other* therefore offers a new perspective for contemporary BLM discourse, challenging the overrepresentation of Man and unsettling the coloniality of power by providing a new representation of the Black subject. The increased sales of *Girl, Woman, Other* in the wake of the BLM movement highlights how novels can have a very real impact in disrupting racist hierarchies and thinking. Other contemporary works of fiction in this vein further attest to this point, including *Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams (2019) or *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid (2019). As Wynter notes, 'our "stories" are as much a part of what makes us human[...] as are our bipedalism and the use of our hands' (2015, 217). *Girl, Woman, Other* demonstrates how it is paramount to consider the ways in which literature and culture comment on and mediate the ontological status of Black subjects.

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