

## Original Paper

# Space and Memory in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

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### Abstract

*Bernardine Evaristo's novel Girl, Woman, Other uses the places "the Greenfield Farm" and "National Theatre" as places imprinted cultural memories. The former symbolizes the equally important roles of reformers and radicals in inspiring intellectual progress and constructing social memory, while the latter signifies the breaking of conventions and the empowerment of those pushed to the margins by patriarchal and white supremacist Britain, both of which complement each other in constructing a historical space dominated by the collective authority of black women in Britain. Combined with Assmann's theory of cultural memory, collective memory and individual memory, especially the latter, have had a significant impact on the construction of individual and social memory.*

### Keywords

*Girl, Woman, Other, Bernardine Evaristo, cultural memory, space*

## 1. Introduction

In October 2019, the Booker Prize exceptionally split its prize in two, awarding it to two authors, Canadian literary sensation Margaret Atwood for her novel *The Testaments* (2019) and Nigerian-British author Bernardine Evaristo (1959-) for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019). In June 2020, Bernardine won the Author of the Year award at the British Book Awards, becoming the first black author to receive this award in history. Bernardine Evaristo's work essentially showcases her interest in the African diaspora community, which may have something to do with her complex family lineage. She was born and raised in England, to an English mother and a Nigerian father. She received her PhD in Creative Writing from the University of London in 2013. Her writing often focuses on the identification of marginalized groups, black history and the African diaspora. Her peculiar writing style of multi-voiced narratives, shifting narrative perspectives, and mixing time and space constitute her creativity and innovation. As a black woman writer, she also emphasizes the internal conflicts and external social relationships of her female characters.

The plot of *Girl, Woman, Other* is clear and true, beginning backstage at the National Theater premiere

of *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, directed by the central character of this novel, Amma, and concluding with an after-party to celebrate the show's success. It is a powerful portrait of a diverse and vibrant group of black women in the UK—from edgy, pioneering playwrights, to serious, conservative schoolteachers, to non-binary social networkers. Their voices are straightforward bursting with brilliance, but often ignored by society. This book chronicles all of this in a maverick, creative style. A strong realistic style, combined with free-verse language, evocatively outlines the existential dilemmas faced by women over the last hundred years, and their breathtaking courage and strength. The text consists of five chapters and an afterword, with the first four chapters consisting of three vignettes each, each named after a character, that tell the happiness and struggles of twelve black British women. The text moves freely between different time zones: Barbados in the 18th century, Newcastle in the 19th century, Oxford in the 20th century, and London today, as consciousness alternates between the past and the present, and the flexible switching of registers gives readers a panoramic view of black people in contemporary Britain.

In all the literary studies on Evaristo, it is not difficult to find two research characteristics. First, most scholars analyze her works from a macro-historical and humanistic perspective, exploring her historical connections between the past and the present, her interest in the themes of the African diaspora and the black community's identification with Britain, and her attempts to cross cultural, gender, and racial boundaries. Secondly, some scholars focus on the narrative techniques of the work and analyze the unconventional innovativeness of the work in terms of artistic features and creative characteristics.

In short, the above studies are broad in scope, mostly based on the novel as a whole, with few in-depth studies combining the specific texts of Bright Hall. Starting from the theory of place in spatial narrative, we analyze the places “the Greenfield Farm” and “National Theatre” in the novel, explore the historical space of collective and individual memories, and analyze the historical space of the new generation British black women in the white-dominated historical space by combining with the theory of cultural memory. In the white-dominated historical space, the group is dealing with the absorption and reconstruction of the memory of the struggle of the previous generation, and under the guidance of rational judgment and the spirit of individual innovation, the group is able to abandon its marginalized identity and search for the memory of a new collective identity. These in-depth studies of historical spaces and memories of different eras are of cultural significance in the three-dimensional presentation of the psychological changes and identity dilemmas of the black female community in 21st-century Britain, as well as in the expansion of the perspective of Bernardine Evaristo's novels.

## 2. The Carriers of Cultural Memory

*Girl, Woman, Other*, from the point of view of the public places where the stories take place, revolve around the “farm” and the “theater” respectively, and through the narration of these two places, the oppressive historical space dominated by the mainstream collective authority is further shaped.

Professor Long defines place in “Spatial Narratology” as “a special place in which various events take

place; but by derivation, a place can refer to a framed container in which discourses or ideas on a certain type of subject are housed.” (Long, p. 338) In the novel, although “farm” and “theater” are two different places, in fact, they are both under the domination of the so-called mainstream collective authority, which is the leader of the popular memory and suppresses and judges a few marginal individuals. They are in fact special historical containers for the leadership of popular memory and the suppression and judgment of a few marginalized individuals under the dominance of the so-called mainstream collective authority. Especially the “theater”, which is the unifying thread of the novel, is the narrative origin of the novel from the perspective of narratology, and the starting point of the unfolding of the novel’s historical space and the memories of the ethnic minorities.

### *2.1 The Greenfields Farmhouse: The Symbol of Land and Legacy*

Hattie grew up in the Greenfield farmhouse, which is a powerful source of power, identity, and legacy for Hattie. Her life and identity are deeply rooted in the Greenfield, a legacy that she is proud of and wants to pass on. Even in her later years, it kept her young, strong and independent, and the privilege of land ownership in the present and the collective family memory of history provided Hattie with both material and spiritual strength. The village in which her farmhouse is located is predominantly white, and she establishes her power as a black woman through her farm in this white, patriarchal English society.

Hattie’s husband Slim, an African American from Georgia, emphasizes the importance of land ownership in his account of his family’s experiences as tenant farmers, and co-ownership of the farm is an important and exciting moment for him. When Hattie and Slim eventually discover that the farm was built with the hard-earned money of her ancestors’ involvement in the slave trade, they are angry, but at the same time they see their co-ownership of the farm as a roundabout way of making amends. Their anger is an outlet for historical memories of the struggles and hardships of previous generations, and Hattie loves the farm and all it represents, and she is proud of her ethnic and cultural identity. She is therefore bent on carrying on the memory and will of her ancestors and keeping the farm in the family, which is why she chooses Morgan as her heir.

after Joseph died, Slim broke open an old library cabinet when he couldn’t find the keys, said that as the man of the house he needed to know what was in it

he found old ledgers that recorded the captain’s lucrative

business as a slave runner, exchanging slaves from Africa for sugar in the West Indies

came charging like a lunatic into the kitchen where she was

cooking and had a go at her for keeping such a wicked family secret from him

she didn’t know, she told him, was as upset as he was, the

cabinet had been locked her entire life, her father told her

important documents were inside and never go near it

she calmed Slim down, they talked it through

It’s not meormy Pa who’s personally responsible, Slim, she said, trying to mollify her husband, no you

co-own the spoils with me  
she wrapped her long arms around his waist from behind  
It's come full circle, hasn't it? (Evaristo, p. 368)

The truth of Greenfield's founding reveals how historical atrocities live in the present and complicate understandings of home, family, and personal identity. Slim is horrified to discover that the land on which he and Hattie live and work was built with hard-earned money from the slave trade that devastated his family. The honor, heritage, and responsibility that the space of the "farm" represents are in sharp contradiction to the traumatic memories of an individual's history formed under the persecution of the dominant collective ideology. Hattie and her father are not personally responsible for the actions of their ancestors, but they derive benefits and privileges from them, namely the land and the memory, which are important sources and foundations of wealth and stability. In Hattie's view, owning a farm was a long-awaited justice. In a sense, it is a long overdue compensation for the respect that African-American ancestors never received under the oppression of the dominant collective authority. Hattie is the product of contradictions, and there is no clear or easy way to resolve these contradictions that coexist within her.

The new generation inherits the previous generation's sense of defection, while feeling the changing times and building up their strength to finally escape from the oppressive historical space of yesteryear. So by leaving the farm to Morgan and their partner Bibi, Hattie not only keeps the farm in black hands, but also symbolically allows Hattie to pass on the power of land ownership to black descendants, inheriting the memories of the suffering and glory of their African-American ancestors, and also disrupting the gendered and patriarchal transfers inherent in the land. More importantly, Hattie's suggestion that Morgan and Bibi turn the farm into a sanctuary for the transgender community means that the land will continue to be a place of empowerment for those pushed to the margins by patriarchal and white supremacist Britain. The future fate of the farm symbolizes the hope and change that race, gender, and class will no longer limit who owns the land and who has access to the power that comes with it.

## 2.2 *The National Theatre: The Spectrum of Radical versus Reform*

The premiere of Amma's play at the National Theatre in the United Kingdom marked the moment when she finally stepped into the mainstream cultural scene. The National Theater represents the historically white supremacist, patriarchal foundation and culture of British society. For years, women like Amma and Dominique have been excluded from this world. When they were first introduced to the arts, the mainstream theater world portrayed them in demeaning and stereotypical roles, and these injustices forced them to the margins. Amma's new play breaks the historical memory of women of color not being able to make it to the National Theatre's esteemed stage, revealing that the National Theatre is slowly beginning to diversify its beginnings. In her new relationship with the National Theater, Amma navigates the middle ground. Premiering her own play at the National made Amma a legitimate reformer, while bringing subversive ideas to the National allowed her to continue her role as

a radical.

Backstage at the theater, Amma reflects on the rough and tumble of her journey. As a young woman with fiercely radical feminist political views, Amma had ruthlessly criticized her mother and father for their lack of a feminist perspective, only to come to understand how the generation gap and their unresolved traumas affected their social and political views. Amma is now at the other end of the generation gap. Her daughter, Yazz, criticizes her in the same way she once criticized her own parents. When she first entered the theater industry, ostracized by mainstream society because of her skin color and gender, Amma decided to start her own theater company with her friend Dominique in an abandoned factory building. Together, they worked with culturally marginalized groups, such as environmentalists, feminists, and anarchists, to create their own niche art, and their search for individuality was also a search for community and a sense of belonging. At that time, the British African-American women represented by Amma were subjected to the collective memory of the traditional white society, and the place of “theater” was given the significance of mainstream authority and sense of belonging, at the same time, rejecting the non-mainstream ideas of ethnic minorities, and suppressing the value of existence of the individual full of characteristics.

Amma, who is recognized by the mainstream society through her own efforts, represents to a large extent the approach of the traditional black feminist genre. Traditional black feminism emphasizes the capabilities of black women, including the empowerment and value of the individual and the ability to fight against men or white women. Amma came into the public eye from the non-mainstream subculture community with her theatrical talent, and Evaristo presented the real life experience, life thinking and existential crisis of black women in Britain through her writing, encouraging black women in Britain to transcend the “other” label of skin color and gender, and to overthrow the traditional white value of theatre, which is “the other”. It encourages black British women to transcend the label of otherness in terms of skin color and gender, to overthrow the concept of theatre as a constructed and highly homogenized cultural place shaped by traditional white values, and to break the delicate balance between the spirit of equality in the narrower sense of the word and a sense of belonging to the collective. The successful performances of Amma’s works have become a figurative redemptive force, providing a place for ethnic minorities and marginalized individuals to hold, redeem, and exchange their spirits, as well as to exhale the past and incorporate the new, in an attempt to transform the heavy history of the mainstream white society and the hasty mentality of the marginalized individuals into an impetus to move forward and upward.

Each of the main characters in the novel constructs his or her own cultural memory between radicalization and reform. The National Theatre serves as a bridge between these disparate characters and their different approaches to creating systemic change, and as such, it symbolizes the equally important roles that reformers and radicals play in inspiring change and seeking social justice. The buzz generated by the work that Amma and Dominique created outside of the mainstream theater community established a place for women of color in British culture and society, which made possible the

landmark moment of change that was Amma's premiere at the National Theatre. With a sense of crisis among the marginalized, Amma is constantly reminded of the need to maintain the cultural qualities and identity memories that characterize black feminists, but this more inclusive, traditional black feminism has been met with resistance from radical feminism, such as her friend Sylvester's accusation that she has sold out to the black female community and sold out to the black female community. Her friend Sylvester, for example, accused her of selling out and pandering to the black female community. It is out of this disagreement that Amma parts ways with her former close friend Dominique, who joins a more radical and insane authoritarian organization. The construction of the plot largely highlights the writer's reflection on extreme black feminism and separatism. Nowadays, with the dominance of social media, the extreme tactics of marginalized groups, such as street marches and segregation, are no longer meaningful, and the dichotomy of race and gender is no longer applicable to 21st-century Britain. Therefore, the writer takes the identity label of the black woman's otherness as the axis, and weaves in and out of historical memory and current cultural memory, presenting the black women of Britain in a new way, and the black women of Britain in a new way. Therefore, the writer takes the identity label of black women as the axis of "otherness", shuttles between historical memory and current cultural memory, and presents the evolution of British black feminist means of fighting against the label of marginalization from extremity to neutrality, and from the margins to the mainstream, and depicts infinite potential of women to realize the possibilities of "otherness". In this way, history and the present are juxtaposed, creating an infinite space for identity evolution and memory reconstruction.

### **3. Confusion and Disorder: Mixed Collective Memory in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Collective memory is embedded in the space of social history, and its emergence is influenced by the space of collective history; in the 21st century Britain, with the influx of ideas and the richness of the media, different people are constructing their own cultural memories, and collective memory is in a state of hybridization. The current memory is constantly reconstructed on the collective memory of the past, which not only contains the inertia of relying on the collective memory of the past, but also is full of anxiety, uncertainty, disobedience and disorder due to the drastic changes in the society.

Assmann's theory of cultural memory refines Habwachs's theory of collective memory. He divides the latter's collective memory into communicative and cultural memory, emphasizing the complex relationship between individual and collective memory. On the level of communicative memory, the pooling of individual memories contributes to collective memory, but on the level of cultural memory, collective memory is not a superposition of individual memories. Only that which is relevant to the identity and destiny of the collective as a whole constitutes the object of that collective cultural memory. (Assmann, p. 15). With the help of cultural memory, members of a collective establish and cultivate a common identity and sense of belonging.

Since black feminism has been hidden in the background of historical justice for the African diaspora, many African American groups have been embedded in a safe place in society like screws and parts

and have been put into a huge social machine in operation, and it is natural that in such a social space there is a relatively closed collective memory that emphasizes the obedience and orderliness of the individual to the whole. However, in the twenty-first century, this has changed due to the intervention of various factors such as social diversity, which has resulted in an intermediate state of “hybridization”.

The collective space formed since the Afro-descendant community was treated with basic social justice has neglected the individual, and the collective memory has favored the presentation of a sense of conformity, belonging, and order. The collective memory of the 21st century, which is in a state of hybridization, is reconstructed on the basis of the collective memory of the past, which not only contains the inertia of relying on the collective memory of the past, but also is full of the sense of disorganization and the hidden worry about the uncertain future due to the drastic changes in the social environment.

In the context of the novel, this collective memory, full of anxiety and disorder, is directly manifested in the internal contradictions between the reformers and the radicals in the defense of their personal interests, as the moderate reformers begin to explore new paths of spiritual support, and the radical revolutionaries begin to reconstruct the idealized collective family. Some of the radicals chose to balance this sense of disparity and disorder brought about by the times by establishing a new form of faith. However, utopia is in fact a place of self-destruction of madness. After the dream of religious salvation is shattered, people still need to face the discrepancy and confusion brought about by the lagging thought of people after the change of the times. The sense of discrepancy and confusion brought about by the collective cultural memory has already been a struggle for the older social groups, and the atmosphere of this inherited cultural memory has not only had an important impact on the individual growth of the younger generation, but also on the reshaping of the new collective cultural memory and sense of identity.

#### **4. Explore and Construction: Marginalized Collective Memory**

From the perspective of cultural memory, recalling and reviewing history is not simply recreating the past, but remodeling it for the present. In other words, in cultural memory, the past is not represented as a chronological sequence of one event followed by another. Cultural memory is the process by which the people involved give new meaning to the past based on the needs of the present. *Woman, Girl, Other* presents twelve Afro-British women who each tell their own, brilliant new historical memories. Evaristo presents a glorious new historical memory for Britain: a new historical and cultural memory that is ever vibrant, ever evolving, and irresistible. Places are the pillars on which the new historical memory rests, the collective memory of a community. Around places such as the theater and the farm, Afro-descendant collective memory continues to extend and develop, shifting from collective order to individual confusion, and then from individual resonance to collective construction. Amma's play is a point of intersection because it is about black women, and the characters in the play are brought

together by their differences, but these differences intersect and connect here, and out of the differences sprouts the hope of commonality. The party in the theater is a space where all truths exist at once, foreshadowing the future, where people come together to fight against all oppression, where individual memories intertwine in history and innovation to become collective memories. Faced with the collective memory of a brutal, oppressed history, the white mainstream community chooses to run away from the memory and whitewash it with a seemingly beautiful reality. Marginalized groups, including the African-American community and sexual minorities, choose to face their memories head-on and fight back, while building a new cultural memory. They do not allow their individual memories and feelings to be emasculated, and the memories of their own communities to exist in a compressed way in the collective memory. The twelve black women in the novel represent a new generation of under-appreciated groups that extend the content of memory in an evolving historical space. The ultimate goal of cultural memory is not to form an objective understanding of past people or events, but to construct the past into a consensus that can sustain the present and point the way to the future. (Assmann, p. 353-354) The cultural memory of the new generation stems from the foundation of cultural memory in history, starting from the search and writing of self-memory and never-ending. The journey of the marginalized groups of the new generation in search of the self and collective sense of belonging does not stop, and the memories and emotions generated in the process are still under constant construction.

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