
Literary Communication and Literary Community in the Post-postmodern Era: Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

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Abstract

"Any real theory of communication is a theory of community", Raymond Williams asserts in *Culture and Society*. The close relationship between communication and community has been an object of study and debate in cultural studies since the appearance of Williams' pioneering work. More recently, it has also been the focus of attention in literary studies, especially in the context of the emergence of a new "politics of recognition" (Charles Taylor) in the latter decades of the twentieth century in multicultural urban societies in Western countries, where groupings that had hitherto been marginalized began to organize and find their voice. Literary works have performed important "cultural work" (Jane Tompkins) in this respect, so true is it that literary communication is not just, or even primarily, about conveying a message, but about "community-making" (Roger Sell). The politics of identity on the left, and the cultural practices associated with it, have thus been instrumental in making audible and visible discriminated groupings, thereby contributing to making some societies far more inclusive than they used to be. Yet for all its considerable achievements, the postmodern politics of recognition may also have contributed to bringing about a fragmented "public sphere" (Habermas), made up of discourse communities between which little genuine communication takes place. This is a problem which also concerns authors and audiences of literary works produced and received from within marginalized groups. Authors of such works may initially gain recognition for and from their communities through powerful expressions of group distinctiveness but may need to adapt their communicational and literary strategies to 'enrol' readers from a wider audience. This is especially a challenge for writers who wish, not so much to join the 'mainstream' as to participate in modifying it by making it more genuinely inclusive.

This problematic is, I contend, at the heart of Bernardine Evaristo's most recently published novel, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), a work which explores with brio the postmodern politics of recognition through the interlocking stories of twelve 'black' British womxn (to employ the trans-inclusive term used by the author), in contemporary Great Britain. Of particular interest for my talk is the character of Amma, a feminist, lesbian playwright, and theatre director who, after co-founding her own community theatre company in the 1970s, spends forty years on the fringes of cultural life in the UK until she is invited to direct one of her own plays for the National Theatre in London. The narrative of Amma's artistic career and that of the staging and reception of her play at the National allow Evaristo both to provide a retrospective appraisal of intersectional cultural politics in the UK over the past 40 years and to explore the situation of the 'minority' artist in negotiating the transition from postmodern to post postmodern conditions. As such, Amma's story and her play have

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important metatextual implications.

To what extent do they mirror or refract Evaristo's own narrative practice and authorial strategies in this work? And to what extent might this practice and these strategies be designed to bring about a community of readers that is indefinitely heterogenous, and hence lend themselves to what Roger Sell calls, in a different context, "a post-postmodern community-making that is broadly inclusive without becoming hegemonic"?

Maurice Cronin is professeur agrégé in English at the Université Paris Dauphine, where he teaches a course called "Literature and Politics", on which Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* is one of the prescribed texts. Cronin received a doctorate in Anglophone studies from the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3 (supervisor: Professor Christine Savinel) in 2018. His current research focuses on the pragmatics and ethics of literary communication, and he recently contributed a chapter to a volume of essays edited by Sandrine Sorlin and Virginie Iché, *The Rhetoric of Literary Communication from Classical English Novels to Contemporary Digital Fiction*, Routledge 2022 (p.127-146). More recently still, Cronin was the co-organiser with a colleague in Dauphine of a one-day international conference that took place in Dauphine University on November 10th, 2022 "Stories : La place du récit dans l'entreprise, les médias et la vie politique." He and his colleague are currently working on a project to publish a volume of essays based mainly on the contributions to this conference.