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## Crossing Borders: Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*

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## CROSSING BORDERS

### Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*

by Justine McConnell

I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here.  
—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

At the turn of the third century CE, Rome was ruled by the emperor Septimius Severus; as a consequence, so too was a large part of Britain. Of Libyan origin, Severus's African accent was cause for remark in antiquity, but his African roots were no impediment to him rising right to the pinnacle of the imperial ranks (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae* 19.9; Evaristo 144). In the modern era, it can surprise us that ancient Rome was unhindered by racial prejudice, though it should not.<sup>1</sup> Many have argued—the acclaimed Howard University Professor of Classics, Frank M. Snowden, Jr. most conclusively—that responses to “race” configured differently in the ancient world. What Snowden demonstrates, first in *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* and then in *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*, is that while the ancient Greeks and Romans noticed skin color and differing physical features, they did not attach prejudicial attitudes to them.<sup>2</sup> Nor was it only darker-skinned peoples that excited their attention: the pale skin and red hair of the Gauls garner just as much comment as the dark skin of peoples from the area that they referred to as Ethiopia (but which covered a far larger and less-defined area than modern Ethiopia). This is notwithstanding the fact that the ancient Greeks and Romans did associate darkness with death and the underworld, and sometimes with ominous portents; nevertheless, there is no evidence that this black-white binary crossed over into people's thinking about skin color.

This article will explore Bernardine Evaristo's 2001 verse-novel, *The Emperor's Babe*, set in London at the time of Severus's reign. Examining the work's transnational themes, I will suggest that these sit alongside a transhistorical dimension that merges antiquity with modernity in order to reflect not only on British society under the Roman empire, but also on British society in the twenty-first century. Evaristo's novel crosses borders of three types: temporal, spatial, and generic. She is not alone in this maneuver: other contemporary literary figures such as Derek Walcott and Kate Tempest perform a similar kind of border-crossing, and as with Evaristo, each has done so by engaging with the myths, literature, and history of ancient Greece and Rome, as I will discuss. Such a mode of creativity and intertextual engagement brings ideas of the transhistorical to the fore: Evaristo's novel is, outwardly, set in the third century CE, but the Londinium she depicts has clear twenty-first-century features, seen most prominently in the use of language by the novel's protagonist, Zuleika,

as well as in the way the poem reflects on contemporary Britain. Alongside this crossing of temporal boundaries is a crossing of spatial ones. Embodied not only in the Libyan-born Roman emperor, Severus, but in the central character Zuleika, the “emperor’s babe” of the title, who is the daughter of Sudanese immigrants to ancient Londinium. Depicting an experience of the African diaspora in which London is the place of settlement, Evaristo’s story of diaspora is focused on Britain. However, continental Europe has an important place in this tale too, not merely as a result of the Roman occupation of Britain, but also in literary terms: as I will argue, the most revealing predecessors to Evaristo’s work can be found in the Homeric and Virgilian epics of classical antiquity.

Of Nigerian and English parentage, Evaristo is frequently categorized as a “black British” or a “postcolonial” writer, despite her own hesitation about such designations (Niven 18–19; Hooper 13–14). John McLeod, in his short article “Some Problems with ‘British’ in a ‘Black British Canon,’” is surely right to identify that “the concept of transnationality is useful precisely because it emphasises the continuity of national formations while bearing witness to the crossing of their borders” (58). This is very much in evidence in *The Emperor’s Babe*, which is as concerned with the experience of migration as it is with nationality. Moreover, a central theme of the novel is the intricate exploration of identities that are formed as a result of the combination of the two: the transnational character depicted in a figure like Zuleika, for example, which resonates with so many in twenty-first century London.<sup>3</sup> As Stuart Hall once remarked, “I can’t go back to any one origin—I’d have to go back to five; when I ask people where they’re from, I expect nowadays to be told an extremely long story” (*Stuart Hall Project*). Very few prominent characters in the novel have not experienced a dislocation from their ancestral homeland, whether that be Zuleika’s Roman husband now residing in Londinium, her Sudanese parents who have migrated there, her Scottish slaves, or the emperor Severus himself. Zuleika, born in Londinium, could seem the exception, but that her parents’ story and her own Roman identification inextricably intertwine with her Britishness.

Evaristo conceived of the idea for *The Emperor’s Babe* while working as poet-in-residence at the Museum of London. Several years earlier, she had read Peter Fryer’s *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, which begins with the African soldiers of the Roman army that ruled Britain for more than three hundred years. From Libya, and of Phoenician (rather than African) origins, Severus had become emperor of Rome in 193 CE; in 208, he travelled to Britain with the intention of compelling even more of the country to submit to Roman rule. Fryer cites the tale of an ominous portent that Severus encountered shortly before his death at York: while inspecting part of Hadrian’s Wall near what is now known as Carlisle (then called Luguwallum), Severus met an Ethiopian soldier carrying a garland of cypress-boughs. Both the color of the man’s skin and the foreboding associations of the cypress tree with the Underworld unsettled the emperor, whose fear was compounded when the animal victims he had requested to offer in propitiatory sacrifice were also black (Fryer 1–2; *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* 22). The passage makes clear that the Romans associated the color black with foreboding, but is also evidence of black African soldiers among the Roman troops from at least early in the third century CE. Despite Severus’s reaction, Snowden (who also references this anecdote) has argued that any association of foreboding with dark skin color had, since the second century BCE, been designated as a childish fear which was put aside in adulthood (*Blacks in Antiquity* 177).<sup>4</sup>

Evaristo includes this plot detail of the encounter with the Ethiopian soldier in Severus's self-narrated tale of his time in Britain, making it clear that the emperor's attitude towards it was indeed one of foreboding associated with superstition. If he is afraid, Evaristo has prefaced his tale with a "melodramatic" exclamation intended to make the reader smile, as so much of this tragicomic work does. Relating brutal details of his military campaigns to Zuleika while lying in bed with her, he proclaims,

If I should die, think only this of me, Zuleika,  
there's a corner somewhere deep  
in Caledonia that is forever Libya.

(Evaristo 148–49)

This is very much in keeping with the tone and style of *The Emperor's Babe* as a whole, which constantly combines prominent motifs from varying traditions in startling and revealing juxtapositions, exemplifying the nature of a multicultural city such as Londinium or Rome.<sup>5</sup> This quote, adapting Rupert Brooke's famous lines, exemplifies much of the approach to national identities taken by Evaristo's novels: there is nothing innate within them that prevents them being interchangeable. Her demonstration that this is so argues both for the recognition of similarity (not difference) between varying nationalities, and for the acceptance of transnational and transcultural identities as a natural outcome of the migration of peoples.

Enacting a wholehearted inversion of the usual preoccupations of classical epic, Evaristo's epic-length verse novel is wholly disinterested in the elite, instead focusing on the slaves and the ordinary people who work for a living. The few pages preceding Severus's lament just mentioned are among only a handful which give voice to the elite. Likewise, Evaristo's focus on a female protagonist unsettles the expectations of classical epic. And yet it is to epic that *The Emperor's Babe* should be compared, with such an analysis yielding interesting illuminations both of Evaristo's work and of the Graeco-Roman epics of antiquity.

The connection is, in a sense, natural: a book-length poem is most familiar to us in the form of an epic. When these choose to explicitly engage with classical antiquity in some way—as both Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* and Derek Walcott's *Omeros* do, for example—it would be remiss not to examine the strands of that engagement.<sup>6</sup> That works such as Walcott's and Evaristo's can aptly be categorized under the umbrella of "postcolonial" literature makes their appropriation of an epic form all the more interesting. Simultaneously, this commonality between these two modern works heralds the case for seeing Evaristo's project within a larger tradition of Anglophone writers, particularly those of ultimately African descent, who have composed their works in dialogue with the genre of classical epic.<sup>7</sup>

This is particularly fascinating because, notwithstanding the dissenting voice that may be detected in a work like Virgil's *Aeneid*, epic's connection with empire is undeniable. David Quint has convincingly made the case for the *Aeneid* as the epic *par excellence* of the victor, an epic of conquest and empire, which positioned itself centrally within the contemporary political framework and offered itself as a charter for the nation. Walcott's poem too, though in different terms, sets itself up as an epic for the Caribbean: the imperialism of classical epic has been stripped away (with only a trace remaining in the figure of

Major Plunkett and his attempts to “contain” the island within the history he is writing), but the sense of a poem as testament to a nation’s identity remains. To view Evaristo’s poem in a similar light, as a kind of epic for modern Britain, lays bare the ways in which *The Emperor’s Babe* can be read as a testament to the nature and history of the British isles.

Evaristo’s appropriation of the epic form is bold and playful. Her approach to classical literature is reflected in her protagonist, who is compelled by her tutor to read the *Iliad* (“which I found bloody tedious, quite frankly”), to learn the classical canon off by heart, and who is told by him that,

I’d never write good poetry because what did  
I know about war, death, the gods  
and the founding of countries?  
But you see, Dad, what I really want to read  
and hear is stuff about us, about now,  
about Nubians in Londinium

(Evaristo 85)

This self-reflexivity is manifest once again when Zuleika’s friend responds to her tale of her incipient love affair with Severus by retorting, “Don’t create an epic poem about it, Zee” (119). Which is, of course, exactly what Evaristo has done.

Zuleika may not be from Britain, but like the lineage that Virgil’s Aeneas will found in Italy, she has made it her home. The reasons for her parents’ emigration from the Sudanese city of Meroë change with each retelling by her father—“A famine, plague, or flood / (the story always changed)” (25)—but always recall Aeneas’s duty to found a new homeland for his people after they escape the smoking ruins of Troy. As the *Aeneid* relates, that home is Italy and the city of Rome, and the current emperor Augustus traces his own ancestry back to Aeneas. This is the moment at which Evaristo’s novel also flags up a problem in the history of Britain, for unlike Aeneas and his Trojans in Rome, the presence of black people in Britain has almost been written out of the historical record. Nevertheless, Evaristo adds her own episode to the sequence of power inversions that Homer’s and Virgil’s epics have depicted: from Homer’s tale of the destruction of Troy by the Greeks, to those remaining Trojans conquering and settling in Italy, to—in Evaristo—the Roman conquest of Londinium, which sits alongside the new homeland that, Aeneas-like, Zuleika’s parents have found for them in Londinium. On top of this, of course, is one of the most immediate equivalences of the novel: that here Rome and its empire functions in Londinium as Britain and its empire did throughout so much of the world’s more recent history. This inversion of sorts—the British now oppressed rather than oppressor—historical though it is, is related to an imaginative trope that Evaristo will employ once again in her novel, *Blonde Roots* (2008), in which black people enslave white, and discriminate against them purely on the grounds of their skin color.

I am not the first to have made a connection between *The Emperor’s Babe* and classical epic. Katharine Burkitt examines Evaristo’s verse novel in her recent study, *Literary Form as Postcolonial Critique*, and applies the designation “post-epic” to it, along with other works by Les Murray (*Fredy Neptune*) and Anne Carson (*Autobiography of Red*). Although I would question the term “post-epic” on the grounds that many of the features which Burkitt lists

as constituting the category are in fact important to some classical epics, nevertheless her analysis is richly rewarding. She offers the following definition of “post-epic” with reference to Walcott’s *Omeros*:

It operates with a transformative intention to draw attention to its own literary nature and to explore the consequences of genre. It is a form which is aware of its genealogy and sets itself in relation to it; however it also operates as a dialectical critique to epic ideology. (Burkitt 12)

All this, even the final clause, could profitably be applied to Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which can be seen to offer a covert critique of imperial ideology, even while it lauds it.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Burkitt’s analysis and comparisons of her chosen texts illuminate the importance of literary form in postcolonial writing and the rich repercussions of appropriating a genre that has been so inextricably connected with imperialism, all while offering insightful readings of the four works examined. Lars Ole Sauerberg has also connected verse novels with epic, including Evaristo’s earlier work, *Lara*, alongside Walcott’s *Omeros* and verse novels by Vikram Seth, Craig Raine, and Anthony Burgess.

Evaristo’s poem differs from the more nationalist themes of many epics, for it voices only one subjectivity (Zuleika’s) and thereby stakes a claim as a personal, rather than national, poem. Burkitt is surely right to observe that “Evaristo’s Londinium becomes a temporally and culturally ambivalent space that is a critique of the British Empire and contemporary neo-colonialism,” but this is forever focalized through the eyes of only one character (75). *Omeros*, on the other hand, is peopled with characters inside whose minds we are allowed to glimpse: thus Achille, Helen, Plunkett, Maud, the narrator, and Philoctete are all given voice in the poem. This polyphony, in the Bakhtinian sense, defies what Bakhtin saw as epic’s monologic nature, but is entirely in keeping with a twentieth-century sensibility. Furthermore, polyphony has been recognized as a constituent feature of much postcolonial writing, with such literature being observed to be an “amplification of the dialogic quality” which Bakhtin first theorized (Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 197). Even Evaristo’s text, while dominated by Zuleika’s perspective, is not monologic, but instead deploys Bakhtinian heteroglossia to great effect, as will be clear in discussion of its use of language.

Indeed, in its engagement with other texts, *The Emperor’s Babe* is—to adopt Bakhtin’s terminology once again—entirely dialogic. Its interaction with multiple other discourses catalyzes a two-way process of impact, whereby both the older and the more modern works are affected. This perspective is particularly appropriate to a discussion of the classical in Evaristo’s novel because Bakhtin’s “dialogic imagination” is as closely related to the field of classical reception theory as is T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). Which is to say that all three observe that the engagement of a work of literature with another is not merely a one-way process of “influence,” but rather, it enacts a change on the earlier work too:

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves,

which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new)  
work of art among them. (Eliot 37)<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Bakhtin's discussion of epic and the novel is revealing in this context not only because *The Emperor's Babe* is a blending of the two: the generic name that has been adopted is that of the "verse novel," although Evaristo's work could be seen as a subset of this: the novelized epic.<sup>10</sup> The importance of retaining the idea of epic within Evaristo's work is not only a result of its content (as I will argue), or its form (as I have suggested), but also because of the ways in which it plays with Bakhtin's three "constitutive features" of epic: a national epic past; a national tradition; and an epic distance separating it from the contemporary world (Bakhtin 13). I would argue that *The Emperor's Babe* does not fulfill any of these characteristics, but that it knowingly flirts with each, and that its deliberate refusal to conform to any of them is a result both of the "novelizing" that is Evaristo's style, and the modern era in which national epics no longer have contemporary potency. The twenty-first century demands that a new kind of epic, a transnational one, be developed, and *The Emperor's Babe* is one foray into this new genre.<sup>11</sup>

Transnational epic in the modern era may also incorporate two more dimensions, which have been frequently eclipsed or omitted from canonical epic. Evaristo gives voice to these two often-neglected perspectives in her work. A female and a black voice demand to be heard in a context from which they have previously been entirely silenced: the history of Roman Britain. What Bernard Knox provocatively termed "the oldest dead white European males" referring to the ancient Greeks, scarcely need undergo a radical change to any of those descriptors other than the first, if it is to be applied to much scholarship on ancient Rome prior to the closing decades of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> As Knox rightly demonstrates, the phrase is a wholehearted misunderstanding of antiquity—but it is a misunderstanding that was exacerbated by scholarship which disseminated just such an idea of classical Greece and Rome, particularly during the Victorian era when slavery and the ancient Greek subjugation of women were almost written out of the record (Knox 47).

Evaristo has discussed the lack of research that has been done into the presence of people of African descent in Britain before *Windrush* in 1948, and remarked on her pleasure at the Museum of London's introduction of a black Roman character as a direct result of the publication of *The Emperor's Babe* (Niven 15; Hooper 6). But she is the first to admit that her verse novel is not intended to be a historical retelling: "The London I've evoked is based on my research into the Roman Empire and the very multicultural city of Rome at that time, coupled with my imagination. . . . so I thought why not make London something of the multi-racial melting pot that was Rome?" (Hooper 6).<sup>13</sup> It is all the more appealing as a result, for while Evaristo melds features of ancient Rome and Londinium, she simultaneously merges elements from antiquity and from the twenty-first century. *The Emperor's Babe*, then, succeeds in being both transnational and transhistorical.

The Londinium Evaristo depicts has spaces from which these previously-silenced voices can emerge for the very reason that it is not holding on to an idea of a homogenous, contained nationhood. This is reminiscent of Wilson Harris, particularly in his own engagement with classical epic, *The Mask of the Beggar* (2003). The mask in this novel is both Odysseus's and that of a modern beggar; it features as a personification of the cross-cultural bridges that Harris advocates, with its cracks and crevices allowing space for other voices



to emerge. Thus of Odysseus, who has so dominated his own ancient epic, Harris writes, "He arrived at long last disguised as a beggar. His crew, who had been lost or drowned, were alien and invisible then. But did they not lurk in the holes and crevices of his mask?" (4). In just the same way, Evaristo's Londinium turns attention on those who have been neglected and occluded from the "grand narratives" that have so often composed the canon. This, as the title suggests, will be Zuleika's story, not the emperor's, no matter how much traditional societal structures may recognize her only in connection with him: the emperor's babe, rather than Zuleika.

Much of the modernity of *The Emperor's Babe* is most apparent in Zuleika's language, and her very colloquial use of slang; she herself is described as a "scallywag" (Evaristo 27) from the start. As Evaristo has described it, "The language that Zuleika uses is very now, very hip. The novel is peppered with Latin, Italian, Cockney-rhyming slang, patois, American slang, pidgin Scots-Latin, and in the case of Severus, broken English" (McCarthy). This accentuates the "parallels . . . between Londinium and contemporary Britain/London" (McCarthy).<sup>14</sup> Which is to say that, with the European, American, British, and patois elements, the language of *The Emperor's Babe* encompasses and exemplifies its transhistorical and transnational dimensions.

This use of multiple, often-modern, language forms not only marks Zuleika's twenty-first-century identity, but is simultaneously refracted through a contemporary perception of the study of classics. She introduces her tale in the prologue by explaining that she was married off to a wealthy Roman senator three times her age when she was just eleven; he spends much of his time back in Rome with his mistress, leaving her alone in a plush villa cut off from the world she used to know; as she comically laments, "Solitudoh, solitude, solitudargh!" (Evaristo 5). The homophonic declining of the English word "solitude" (from the Latin noun *solitudo*, but here declined like an adjective to express Zuleika's loneliness), rounded off with a scream, both amuses and locates us within a world in which Latin was still spoken. Indeed, Zuleika has already introduced this idea in a context reminiscent of postcolonial debates over language as she explains what was required of her when she became the senator's wife:

Then I was sent off to a snooty Roman bitch  
 called Clarissa for decorum classes,  
 learnt how to talk, eat and fart,  
 how to get my amo amas amat right, and ditch  
 my second-generation plebby creole.

(Evaristo 4)

The imperialistic Romans impose their language, their culture, and their notions of class on the nation they are occupying, just as so many later colonizers would do. By interweaving Latin throughout Zuleika's dialogue, the ancient language and the modern British slang sit side-by-side in positions of equality, and reflect the same intermingling that Zuleika feels with regard to her own identity. Having confessed that "I was born in this town, but I've never been outside," that her parents "made it to Londinium on a donkey, / with only a thin purse and a fat dream," she also proclaims, "Yet I was Roman too. / Civis Romana sum. It was all I had" (Evaristo 154, 3, 54).

As well as locating her in the twenty-first century, Zuleika's slang, her efforts at poetry, and the phonetic transliteration of her mother's defiantly accented English, all point to another important factor of *The Emperor's Babe* that links it once again to classical epic. Not this time via the connection of epic to imperialism, but rather by its mode of composition: for just as the Homeric epics were originally composed orally around the eighth century BCE (as most scholars now agree), and Odysseus himself is portrayed as a master-storyteller, so too the colloquial language of Evaristo's verse novel evokes an oral medium. It is not only Zuleika's narration of the entire work, but also the poems she composes within it, that point to this duality of protagonist and bard in one figure. The colloquialism might seem in stark contrast to the structural formality that we associate with an epic-length poem in the modern day, but it is worth bearing in mind a turn that epic in performance has taken in the contemporary era as a result of research done nearly one hundred years ago. The groundbreaking work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord in Yugoslavia in the 1930s demonstrated not only that the Homeric epics could have been composed orally, but that this theory helped to explain the striking use of repeated epic formulae throughout the poems. This, in turn, emphasized the performative nature of the poems, and the improvisatory elements of the epics have caught the imagination of more experimental performance artists. One of the foremost of these is Kate Tempest, whose *Brand New Ancients* won her the Ted Hughes Prize for Innovation in Poetry in 2013, and whose latest collection, *Hold Your Own* (2014) is structured around the mythical figure of Tiresias. While Evaristo does not go as far as Tempest, the latter designating her epic poem as a "spoken story" (and Tempest has enjoyed phenomenal success as a "performance poet"), the oral element is still crucial to her work.<sup>15</sup> Identifying this, Sauerberg has observed that verse novels such as Evaristo's may not strike many readers as unusual, given their absolute familiarity with verse in various forms of music; it is, in other words, the scholars who are most surprised by the combination (Sauerberg 462). As I am suggesting, the scholars should not be startled either, given the genealogy that can be traced right back to the oral epics of ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, and India. Not that there is any question that Evaristo ever intended *The Emperor's Babe* to be a primarily performative piece; indeed, the pun seen in the word "solitudargh" can only be appreciated if read on the page, and Evaristo herself "would hate to be lumped together with performance poets" (Niven 17). Nonetheless, she does acknowledge her writing to have "an oral dramatic quality" which no doubt contributed to the decision to dramatize it on BBC Radio 4 in 2013.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, performance poetry is woven into the story itself: Zuleika dreams of being a successful poet and hosts a symposium in order to have a chance to perform her verses in the hope that her lover Severus will hear of her talent (Evaristo 191). This, again, is not so far from the *Odyssey*: famously, it is Odysseus himself who narrates the fantastical section of the epic, books 9–12, which contain the stories of the Cyclops, Circe, the Underworld, Scylla and Charybdis, and the cattle of the Sun-god. In telling these tales, he adds to his own *kleos* (fame), not only by ensuring that his heroic adventures are widely-known, but also that his own bardic skills are appreciated. *Kleos*, after all, lies at the very heart of what it means to be an ancient Greek hero; faced with a choice between everlasting *kleos* or a long-life, Achilles chooses fame, and seals his own fate (*Iliad* 9.410–16). Zuleika does not intentionally make quite the same choice, but her desire for her lover to hear rumors of

her talent motivates her scarcely less than the dream of a good reputation motivates the Homeric heroes, and ultimately her love affair with Severus leads to her death.

Evaristo has spoken of her surprise that, on hearing about *The Emperor's Babe*, many people assume that Zuleika is a slave (Niven 16). In fact, Zuleika is not only *not* a slave, but she herself owns slaves, and her unsympathetic treatment of them contributes to her downfall when two of them betray the secret of her affair with Severus to her husband (Evaristo 240). These two girls, from an Amazonian-like tribe in which the women led the army, were captured in a military raid in Scotland and sold into slavery. Their presence in the narrative embodies that which Evaristo (and Snowden) have asserted: that there was no equation of black skin color with slavery in antiquity. Their appearance is remarked upon ("Two ginger girls arrived, captured / up north, the freckled sort (typical / of Caledonians)") just as Zuleika is often nicknamed on account of her skin color (as *Illa Bella Negreeta*), but in neither instance is racial difference suggested as a motive for enslavement or discrimination (Evaristo 55). Nonetheless, Zuleika's attitude towards them is scarcely less dehumanizing than that of other historical slave owners, referring to them as "pets" and "savages" and re-naming them with no regard for their own pre-enslavement identities (55–56). This element of the novel looks ahead once more to Evaristo's later work, *Blonde Roots* (2008), in which, as mentioned earlier, racial discrimination will have acquired the form that we are historically familiar with from the transatlantic slave trade, but which Evaristo will reverse, with Africans enslaving Europeans.

While Evaristo explores the ancient presence of African people in Britain by setting her novel in antiquity, another recent work takes a similar subject but situates the story firmly in the contemporary era. Elleke Boehmer's *Nile Baby* (2008) likewise foregrounds the presence of black people within the Roman army in ancient Britain, and asserts a lineage so extensive that it makes a mockery of any notion that Britain was ever a racially homogeneous nation. As Boehmer observes, both she and Evaristo in their respective novels discussed here, "labour to extend the networks of African diasporic history back into British history" (Masterson 254). A twenty-first-century archaeological dig in *Nile Baby* uncovers the remains of what was most likely an African soldier within the Roman army; the eponymous "Nile Baby," a formalin-soaked fetus discovered in the storeroom of their school laboratory by two young friends, instantly strikes one of them—Alice Brass Khan, herself half-Sudanese, half-English—as having "her own high African cheekbones" (Boehmer, *Nile Baby* 1). The tale that ensues culminates in the children, Alice and Arnie, seeking a suitable resting place for the Nile baby, away from the prying eyes of a museum to which their teacher has decided to sell it. Mistakenly, Arnie envisions this home as Africa, but ultimately the novel asserts both that Britain may be its homeland, and that the body does not, in and of itself, signify one's identity. On the streets of London, the fetus—who has been gradually disintegrating since the children first removed it from its specimen jar—disappears completely, slipping away without a trace when their backs are turned. As Mike Marais has observed, "Ultimately, the signifiers of race come to signify merely their failure to conceptualize the body" (48). Indeed, the precocious Alice had understood this far earlier in the novel, and her own sense of identity foreshadows Nile Baby's. As she explains to her sister, who struggles with the absence of their father, Farouq, in Sudan,

I see how our colour makes us African, but you could just as well say that it makes us local. It depends how you look at things. Didn't Jilly once show us a map of where Farouq lives? Didn't she herself say that Europe has always been on Africa's border? Think of the guy you dug up, that tall, old Nubian skellie. Haven't these places talked to each other for thousands of years? (Boehmer, *Nile Baby* 133)<sup>17</sup>

Thus in *Nile Baby* readers listen in once again—just as they did in *The Emperor's Babe*—to the conversation that has been going on “for thousands of years” between Europe and Africa. Britain, in both these novels, becomes a focal point from which to consider diaspora and transnationalism; in so doing, both assert Britain as a home for their protagonists while demonstrating that Africa and Europe are “rhizomically connected” (Masterson 260). *Nile Baby*—as an “uncanny” (*unheimlich*) figure—is recognized by each character as embodying something which is integral to themselves. This recognition overcomes its opposite in the novel, but it is an opposite which has, historically, so often led to exclusion and marginalization; *Nile Baby's* embodied silence, inhumane containment, and utter objectification as a “specimen” refuses to let the reader ever forget this historical dimension.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, *The Emperor's Babe* imaginatively reinscribes history in a different way, just as its epigraph taken from Oscar Wilde has suggested that it will: “The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.” Set in Britain, and focused on a figure of the ancient African diaspora, Evaristo's verse novel puts Londinium at the center of a creative story that compels the reader to consider its analogies with modern Britain. The contemporary slang, the place names familiar from twenty-first century London, and the colloquial tone of the novel all demand that it be recognized as a reflection of modernity as well as antiquity. The clear implication is that the history of black people in Britain must be recognized as having an extensive and important genealogy in British life. At the same time, while there is much that is unenviable in the London life portrayed in the novel, the lack of racial discrimination on the grounds of skin color emphasizes that racial tensions are not inevitable. This is at the heart of the novel's political intent, and has repercussions even for the category into which Evaristo's writing is placed, as her wariness regarding the designation “black British” literature indicates (Niven 18–19). The multiple strands of her work, narratively, thematically, and in terms of its literary engagements, all demand that it be recognized as a transnational text with no delimited audience. Likewise, in its artistic purpose *The Emperor's Babe* specifically turns to Europe via its engagement with classical literature and a historical period of importance within the story of the Roman Empire, while simultaneously demonstrating the truth that writers since at least Aimé Césaire have eloquently shown: that the literature of ancient Greece and Rome may be geographically from Europe, but belong to everyone and with help from writers such as Evaristo are shaking off the colonial accretions imposed on them when they were co-opted by the European colonial powers.

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NOTES

1. The opposition on racial grounds to the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008 foregrounded contemporary racial prejudice with regard to those in power. Mary Beard drew analogies between Severus and Obama in her *TLS* blog (18 Nov. 2008). However, her contention that "This was the Roman imperial machine turning a man of colour into an emperor more or less indistinguishable from all his predecessors. The machine was making sure that race did not show" rather overlooks the very concession she has made earlier: that we do not know whether Severus was black. As she remarks, "That is itself significant." I agree, but would suggest that its significance lies not in a possible camouflaging of his racial origins by artists at the time, but rather in the fact that these were of less significance in the second century CE than we may be inclined to consider them now. On the whole, Severus is believed to have been of Phoenician origin, and thus it is no surprise that the majority of statues do not portray him with African features. Indeed, the few that do may well have done so not through knowledge of his appearance, but rather to denote his Libyan roots.
2. See also Thompson; McCoskey. Evaristo has echoed the theses of Snowden and Thompson in an interview: "The Romans did not practice anti-black racism" (Niven 18).
3. See Donnell on the way that transnationalism and cosmopolitanism engaged black writers and intellectuals in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and again from the 1990s, but had fallen out of favor with the emergence of a black British tradition in the 1970s.
4. Snowden cites Agatharchides, *De Mari Erythraeo* 16.
5. See Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 256–57.
6. It is worth noting that Evaristo has spoken of studying Latin for five years, and reading the Homeric and Virgilian epics (Niven 16).
7. On this tradition, see Rankine; Greenwood; and M'Connell, *Black Odysseys*.
8. See Kallendorf on the way that, since the fifteenth century, some writers have perceived in Virgil's *Aeneid* a contentious undercurrent which is less supportive of the values it seems to espouse, and which inspired their own "pessimistic" readings and responses.
9. Cf. Martindale 7 for this idea in the particular realm of classical reception theory.
10. See McLeod, *Postcolonial London* 177 on the way Evaristo's writing defies easy generic categorization.
11. Morley identifies a closely related, but divergent form of "transnational epic": in her analysis, the "transnational" element of the American literature she examines is derived from their engagement with European literary traditions. While this means that she too is interested in the transhistorical as well as the transnational, her focus is on each of these as modes of reading; I, on the other hand, am defining "transnational epic" as an epic text that not only engages with literature from other places, but that consciously sets itself up as a work that celebrates transnationalism and diasporic identities, just as many of its epic predecessors celebrated the national.
12. Knox, adapting the "Dead White European Males" label that had gained currency during the Culture Wars of the 1980s.
13. Cf. V. S. Naipaul in *The Enigma of Arrival* (130) on twentieth-century-migrations causing cities to become "modern-day Romes."
14. Tracey Walters spoke illuminatingly on these themes at University of Michigan's Classicisms in the Black Atlantic conference, March 2014.
15. On Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* and its relation to classical epic, see M'Connell, "We Are Still Mythical."
16. BBC Radio 4 (23 May 2013, 2:15pm), adapted for radio by Jonathan Holloway; directed by Mary Ward-Lowery, and starring Michelle Asante and Paul Chahidi. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01sjjy3>>.
17. The theme of absent fathers pervades the novel, and in light of the earlier discussion of Evaristo's engagement with classical epic, it is interesting to observe that while *Nile Baby* is not indebted in form or content to ancient Greek verse in the same way, the search for an absent father is memorably and influentially depicted in the first four books of Homer's *Odyssey*, as Telemachus seeks news of his father Odysseus.
18. See Szczurek for Boehmer's multiple purposes in characterizing Nile Baby as "uncanny."

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