

# **A Life Can Be a Manifesto: Connecting Bernadine Evaristo to a History of Feminist Manifestos**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter contextualises Bernadine Evaristo's 2019 novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, and her 2021 autobiography, *Manifesto*, within a lineage of feminist manifesto writing. Although works of literary fiction and life-writing, these notably feminist-engaged companion texts overlap in their exploration of protest, trouble making, heritage, and community. They foreground Evaristo's concern – longstanding, but increasingly urgent – with a history of women's lives, women's writing and women's protest, and together, they function to frame a literary manifesto for feminism today. Taking from Sara Ahmed the principle that the purpose of a feminist manifesto is to 'cause a disturbance' (2017: 251), this chapter centres Evaristo's work in a discussion that seeks to trouble the definition of a feminist manifesto in a manner that is entirely congruent with the troublesome nature of both feminism and manifestos. When we read Evaristo's recent work as a cumulative manifesto, we discern her central tenets for living a feminist life. Drawing on the same utopian impulse and instinct to make visible the marginalised experience, Evaristo's writing, I suggest, is best and most instructively read alongside the feminist manifesto tradition, each body of work illuminating the praxis, purpose and potential of the other.

Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) commences with Amma, the dominant recurring character in the miscellaneous cast of Evaristo's choral novel, standing on the South Bank of the Thames, drinking coffee, anticipating that evening's opening performance of her play, *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, at the National Theatre. Once "a renegade lobbing hand grenades at the establishment" and a believer in "protest that was public, disruptive and downright annoying", eventually, "the mainstream began to absorb what was once radical and she found herself hopeful of joining it" (Evaristo 2019a: 2). A complex, polyphonic "fusion fiction" of twelve intertwined narratives from women and one non-binary character of different ages and backgrounds, Evaristo's novel strives, in her own words, to "put presence into absence" (Sethi 2019: n.pag.), addressing what she diagnoses as the invisibility of black British women in literature with a profusion of overlapping narratives. As she explains to one interviewer, "I wanted to create as many black British female protagonists as I could get away with" (Tepper 2019: n.pag.). This multi-perspectival novel of divergent voices opens quite purposefully, however, with Amma's story – that is to say, that of a black woman writer from London, of about Evaristo's age – reflecting on history and lineage, art and community, marginalisation and protest. These themes persist through a narrative that draws substantially at times on Evaristo's own past, resulting in a text that merges in its depiction of the radical 1980s London theatre scene with the personal history recounted in her 2021 autobiography, *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*. Taken together, these two recent works foreground Evaristo's concern – longstanding, but increasingly urgent – with a history of women's lives, women's writing and women's protest; together, they function to frame a literary manifesto for feminism today.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed writes: "In the labor of making manifest we make a manifesto" (2017: 252). For Ahmed, the construction of a feminist manifesto commences and

proceeds from the foundational act of recognising and describing the reality of women's lives. This same principle also underpins Evaristo's work in which she strives to manifest the unwritten lives of black women, and does so with political and activist intent. As notably feminist-engaged literary projects, both *Girl, Woman, Other* and *Manifesto* mediate the margins of the manifesto tradition – “a complex, ideologically inflected genre” (Lyon 1999: 2) that “operates on unsteady ground” (Fahs 2020: 4). They speak loudly to the feminist politics and demands of both the recent past and the present moment. Although works of literary fiction and life-writing, these companion texts overlap in their exploration of protest, of trouble making, of generations, history, and community, and in their testing of the boundaries of genre and form – and they do so in a manner that recalls a lineage of feminist manifestos, a form that is notably resurgent in recent years. In this chapter, I contextualise Evaristo's recent works within a historical legacy of feminist manifesto writing; by exploring the author's connections to earlier women writers of these documents of protest, we gain a new perspective on Evaristo's writerly intentions. Taking from Ahmed the principle that the purpose of a feminist manifesto is to “render a new order of ideas perceptible” and to “cause a disturbance” (Ahmed 2017: 251), this chapter places Evaristo's work at the heart of a discussion that seeks to trouble the definition of a feminist manifesto in a manner that is, I suggest, entirely congruent with the troublesome nature of both feminism and manifestos.

### **The Evaristo Manifesto**

Amma's experience of finally, unexpectedly, finding herself an insider at one of Britain's great cultural institutions, rather than a perennial outsider inhabiting the margins of experimental activist theatre, echoes Evaristo's own trajectory. Developing her craft in the same “1980s black feminist countercultural community in London” – co-founding Theatre of Black Women “essentially because there was no work available” for black women writers

and actors (Tepper 2019: n.pag.) – Evaristo’s reputation slowly developed over the course of six experimental-poetic novels, eventually accruing a Professorship and various literary-cultural indicators of prestige and influence, including appointment as President of The Royal Society of Literature, until she became, as a recent profile in *The New Yorker* describes her, “a diplomatic, modernizing force at the top of the British literary establishment from which she was long excluded” (Russell 2022: n.pag.). Just as Amma achieves a notable marker of success when her play “opens at the National” (Evaristo 2019a: 1), so Evaristo experienced her own novelist’s version of highly visible attainment when *Girl, Woman, Other* – her seventh novel – won the 2019 Booker Prize, making her the first black woman and the first black British author to do so. How long did it take? she muses in an interview: “It took Amma 40 years. It took me 40 years, quite frankly” (Tepper 2019: n. pag.).

The prize, when it eventually came, famously attracted controversy for being jointly awarded to Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, for *The Testaments* (her much anticipated sequel to the 1985 now-classic dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*), contravening the Booker rules in what the judges termed “a rebellious gesture but [...] a generous one” (Flood 2019a, n. pag.). While many condemned what Sunny Singh describes as the refusal “to reward a prodigious black woman writer a win of her own” (Singh 2019: n. pag.; for discussion of the controversy, see Flood 2019b), Evaristo, however, showed only good grace, acknowledging the Booker’s extraordinary capacity to introduce to a wide readership “a ‘queer’ book, about black British women, quite radical in terms of its stories and structure” (Tepper 2019; n.pag.) and to propel her own career “into another stratosphere” (Liu 2019: n.pag.). Like Amma, Evaristo finds herself, late in mid-life, on the inside, suddenly feted for work she has been doing for many years. As she says in *Manifesto*, after forty years of writing, she became an “overnight success” (Evaristo 2021: 1). She may no longer be the disgruntled outsider who

“throws stones” at the “impenetrable fortress” of the establishment (Evaristo 2021: 183), but crucially, her vision of the writer’s work remains unchanged: “I’m still an uncompromising person and writer”, she declares, “I work within the systems to change them” (Sethi 2019: n. pag.).

This instinct for change and activism is manifest in Evaristo’s championing of black British writing. She was instrumental, for example, in the founding of the Black Writers’ Guild in 2020, which began with a letter, signed by over 100 black British writers, calling on UK publishing companies to tackle the “systemic inequalities” and chronic underrepresentation of black authors and publishers in the industry. The letter was written in the wake of the May 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA. Amidst the subsequent resurgent influence and increasing internationalisation of the Black Lives Matter movement, institutions across the world sought to ride a wave of repugnance at racial injustice and moved quickly to “release statements of support for the black communities who have been campaigning for equality for decades.” Suspicious of performative allyship and a readiness to condemn American racism without interrogating systemic racial inequalities in British institutions and industries, writers like Benjamin Zephaniah, Candice Carty-Williams, David Olusoga, Diana Evans and Malorie Blackman, alongside Evaristo, founded the Black Writers’ Guild, with a declared intention to “to create a sustainable, profitable, fair and equal eco-system for Black literary talent in British publishing” ([theBlackwritersguild.com](http://theBlackwritersguild.com)).

Evaristo uses the fame the Booker Prize brings to power her activism, challenging the system – in this instance, the publishing industry – to convert soul-searching into sustainable practice. This same call to action runs through her writing. With *Girl, Woman, Other*, as with *Manifesto*, we see her make manifest both the inequitable nature of ‘the systems’ in which she works, and the changes she deems them to urgently require.

As Evaristo was writing in the early 2020s, manifestos were clearly on her mind. When she came to write her autobiography, prompted in large part by the phenomenal response to *Girl, Woman, Other* and the consequent profusion of interview questions about her past, work and politics, she chose to call it ‘*Manifiesto*’. Struggling with the idea of writing “traditional memoir” – more interested in “how [my life has] been shaped by my creativity and how creativity has been shaped by my life” (Constant 2022: n.pag.) – she conceived of a book that builds up to a concluding document, “The Evaristo Manifiesto” (Evaristo 2021: 187): “the result of the life I’ve led” (Constant 2022: n.pag.). The genre subversion of the text – at once memoir, creative practice manual, and manifesto – is typical of Evaristo’s style. Her previous works have included two verse novels, *Lara* (1997) and *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001), and an experimental novel, *Soul Tourists* (2010), which combines prose, poetry, and dramatic dialogue. She ties this experimental practice to both her formative training in radical theatre and a broader politics: “[t]here’s a part of me that is always oppositional to convention”, she explains, “not only counter-cultural and disruptive of people’s expectations of me, but also of form” (Sethi 2022: n.pag.). For Evaristo, to resist formal expectations in her writing is intimately bound up with the lived experience of resistance. Indeed, this conjunction of art and politics is arguably what draws her to the manifesto as a form. As Janet Lyon, discussing the expansive and often discordant history of the genre, observes: “To call a text a manifesto [...] does not distinguish among uses of the form that are utopian, political, or artistic” (1999: 12). For Evaristo, indeed, who declares in one of the nine tenets that make up her manifesto: “Creativity [...] must not be bound by rules or censorship, yet we must not ignore its socio-political contexts” (2021: 189), her document strives to combine the utopian, the political and the artistic into a unified vision of the artist’s function.

Evaristo is evidently concerned with the material politics of writing, especially as mediated in terms of gender and race. Before writing *Manifesto* with its concluding “Evaristo Manifesto”, and around the same time she was working on *Girl, Woman, Other*, she published an essay examining the recent resurgence in new feminist writing, particularly by young black women. As she observes, a slew of “urgent, essential” (Evaristo 2019b: 92) feminist works have been published to acclaim in recent years, including Otegha Uwagba’s *The Little Black Book: A Toolkit for Working Women* (2016), Yomi Agegeke and Elizabeth Uviebinené’s *Slay in Your Lane: The Black Girl Bible* (2018), and Chelsea Kwakye and Ore Ogunbiyi’s *Taking Up Space: The Black Girl’s Manifesto for Change* (2019). She commences her discussion, however, with Chidera Eggerue’s hugely successful self-help motivational book, *What a Time to Be Alone: The Slumflower’s Guide to Why You Are Already Enough* (2018), which arose out of Eggerue’s work as a blogger and popular Twitter campaigner (championing body positivity with the hashtag #saggyboobsmatter). Titling her own essay “What a Time to be a (Black) (British) (Womxn) Writer”, Evaristo foregrounds the same concern with intersectional identities she brings to her novels, but also, in adapting Eggerue’s title, signals a call to connection and community that moves beyond Eggerue’s message of self-reliance. For Evaristo, acknowledging the lineage of black women’s feminist writing and activism is at the heart of her own evolving manifesto – as it can be traced in “What a Time to be a (Black) (British) (Womxn) Writer”, in *Girl, Woman, Other* and in *Manifesto*. Recalling the pathbreaking work of “brave, brilliant” women such as Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe (authors of *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, 1985), Heidi Safia Mirza (author of *Young, Female and Black*, 1992), and Patricia Hilaire and Paulette Randall (Evaristo’s 1980s co-founders of Theatre of Black Women), Evaristo writes: “It’s disheartening to see such trailblazers made invisible yet again, this time by the new generation of writers, their younger sisters, too many of whom are not prepared to dig

beneath the top layer of the Internet to discover their own history”. The solution for Evaristo lies, in part, in acknowledging the “living history” of older feminist writers and activists – a group within which she now places herself – who are prepared, when invited in, to share their knowledge with a younger generation of activists who are called to recognise that “they are part of a continuum: a tradition of black feminist literary history in this country” (Evaristo 2019: 90).

From this 2019 essay, we see themes begin to emerge that are crucial for understanding Evaristo’s work – specifically, her concerns with lineage, history, and community. These themes underpin *Girl, Woman, Other*, in which Amma’s opening narrative slides into that of Yazz, her daughter, then Dominique, her best friend, and then on into the stories of other women: Carole, Bummi, LaTisha, Shirley, Winsome, and more. Evaristo’s practice of eschewing quotation marks and full stops aids the sense that each woman’s story bleeds inexorably into the next, overflowing its boundaries until it is not always clear when one voice ends, and another begins. Running through “What a Time to be a (Black) (British) (Womxn) Writer” is a sense of frustration at a younger generation too ready to neglect the work already done. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, this disregard is rendered humorously when Amma – a proudly radical polyamorous lesbian and “veteran battle-axe” (2019a: 5) is dismissed by her daughter as old-fashioned and conservative:

I reckon we’re all going to be non-binary in the future, neither male nor female, which are gendered performances anyway, which means your *women’s* politics, Mumsy, will become redundant, and by the way, I’m humanitarian, which is on a much higher plane than feminism

do you even know what that is? (2019a: 39)

Amma's lament – querulously meeting Yazz's renunciation of a feminist politics she accuses her daughter of not even understanding – becomes that of the Second Wave feminist faced with a new 'post-gender' generation all too ready to interrogate and condemn the assumptions of her hard-won feminism. Amma's lived experience, however, as a black woman, of “what it meant to be a feminist when white feminist organizations made them unwelcome” (2019a: 13) makes hers more than an older woman's despair at the complacency of a younger generation; she understands – as Evaristo understands – that the inclusion of black women within the broader feminist movement has always been contingent, resisted and precarious.

This legacy of marginalisation is explicated in “What a Time to be a (Black) (British) (Womxn) Writer”, in which Evaristo describes how, commonly excluded from both white feminist endeavours and black male arts production, creative black women, of necessity, formed their own groups and arts projects, only to be condemned by the establishment as “divisive troublemakers, drawing unnecessary attention to our ‘race’ or gender and thus problematizing ourselves” (2019b: 99). Today, she cautions, when feminism is suddenly fashionable and publishers are keen to promote books by fierce and fearless young black women, without a solid understanding of this history of exclusion and the volatility of publishing and media trends, young writers are left isolated and vulnerable, lacking the resilience afforded by feminist networks. Her anxiety is that, without solid foundations, this new home for black feminist writing will prove only another temporary structure, easily blown away by intemperate winds. Evaristo points, for example, to the mid-to-late 1990s as a period in which “there were more young black men and women publishing fiction than ever before”, but notes that, by the 2000s, most of these writers had disappeared, “and we were

back to square one” (Evaristo 2019b: 103). (This history – as it relates to both men and women writers – also informs the perceived need for the Black Writers’ Guild.) With her careful understanding that “[o]bscurity has been the fate of too many black women writers” (2019b: 104), Evaristo urges the new generation of young writers to build a “spirit of entrepreneurship, community and arts activism” (2019b: 105) that might sustain them in years when they find themselves out of fashion and unsupported by publishing and cultural institutions once again.

Community, for Evaristo, is both established in the present (in the networks that one builds around one) and extended into the past (in drawing connections with those who went before) and, hopefully, expands into the future (with those still to come). The importance of this idea is manifest in *Girl, Woman, Other* in which any one character’s present-day story is likely to veer off at any moment into a tale of mothers and grandmothers. The novel also hails – both directly and obliquely – a history of black women writers and activists who can be glimpsed at times, haunting the edges of the text; we spot them when Yazz challenges her father, a “Professor of Modern Life” at the University of London, on the absence of bell hooks in his cultural references, and when a besotted Dominique likens her new girlfriend Nzinga to “Alice and Audre and Angela and Aretha rolled into one” (2019a: 46, 80). The women who went before leave their traces in the lives of Evaristo’s characters. It also surfaces in “The Evaristo Manifesto”, the final declaration of which reads:

The ancestors are swaying silently behind us, the dead souls of the once dearly departed who are the reason why we came into being – we must remember them.  
(2021: 190)

Evaristo's manifesto, like her essay and like her novel, champions individual female creativity, but does so explicitly in the context of lifting up other creative women, acknowledging the trailblazers, and finding strength in community.

### **A history of feminist manifestos**

When Evaristo chose to call her autobiography *Manifesto*, and to conclude it with a formal nine-point manifesto, she was aware, of course, that her work would consequently speak to and be read against a history of such documents. Operating at the limits of the literary tradition, manifestos typically occupy a space that is marginal and insecure; a guerrilla mode of writing, the manifesto is both easily identifiable as a published declaration of principles or demands, and at the same time, it readily blurs into other forms (the essay, the argument, the polemic). Although its precise qualities are perhaps surprisingly hard to pin down, it primarily declares itself as a revolutionary document, hailing an imagined readership united by unhappiness with the status quo. As Breanne Fahs observes, “in both style and content, manifestos embody resistance” (Fahs 2020: 9), and this essentially resistive nature, combined with the malleability of the form, sits well with Evaristo's instinct for genre subversion and stylistic experimentation.

Commonly traced back to the seventeenth century pamphlet wars in England (see Lyon 1999), manifestos were a particular feature of nineteenth and twentieth century political and artistic movements. From Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) to F. T. Marinetti's *The Founding and Futurist Manifesto* (1909) to Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), the form persistently demonstrates its capacity to speak loudly and forcefully to myriad disparate causes and is taken up, again and again, by rebels, agitators and visionaries, who each rewrite it afresh according to their own needs. As such, it holds a

particular attraction for feminists. For Lyon, the manifesto, at its core, arises out of the modern state, addressing and calling into being “the People” in order to “negotiate a place” for “new” subjects around the *fin de siècle* (1999: 40). Its attraction, therefore, for the New Woman of the period is unsurprising. Starting with perhaps the earliest example – the 1848 Seneca Falls Woman’s Rights Convention and its ensuing “Declaration of Sentiments” – women involved in the often-overlapping suffrage, family planning, labour, and artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century took to the manifesto as an established means of making visible their struggle and broadcasting their demands (see Moynagh 2012).

With the Second Wave, the feminist manifesto became resurgent as feminists found use for its ability to declare new formations of personhood once again. Early examples such as Kate Millett’s 1968 “Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for the Revolution” and the 1969 “Redstockings Manifesto” (both collected in Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt’s *Notes from the Second Year* (1970)) started to test and articulate the demands of radical feminism, calling for “the end of sexual repression” (Millett 1968: 112) and declaring that “[a]ll other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy” (Redstockings 1969: 113). Such manifestos became a springboard for subsequent feminist theorising and debate. bell hooks, for example, writing in 1984, returns to the anti-male sentiment of the “Redstockings Manifesto” to address white feminism’s failure to comprehend political solidarity between black women and black men. While fully cognisant of and resistant to sexism, she argues, black women also recognise the “special tie binding people together who struggle collectively for liberation” (hooks 1984/2015: 70), and consequently are alienated by the anti-male stance of the kind of white feminist activism described by the Redstockings. In such critical returns to foundational documents, we see

how the manifesto is woven into Second Wave feminism. Extending across two centuries of agitating, feminists repeatedly return to the manifesto, both as a mode of defiant public expression, and as a site of debate, where first principles are both declared and contested. For Lyon, “to write a manifesto is to announce one’s participation, however discursive, in a history of struggle against oppressive forces” (1999: 10), and with its foundational vocabulary of oppression, liberation and revolution, it is clear why feminism was naturally drawn to this particular mode of writing.

While manifestos come in many guises, there are certain features that simultaneously work to define them as such. Working contrapuntally with the wide variety of ideological positions that manifestos have been deployed to declare is the persistence of certain conventions and characteristics which, although neither fixed nor assured, nevertheless make the rhetorical form of the manifesto immediately familiar. Manifestos most typically occur as a list of statements or demands; the tone is often declarative, exhortative, or one of righteous anger; the document hails its reader, assuming a shared sense of injustice or purpose. For Fahs, whose 2020 anthology *Burn it Down!* collects 77 mostly twentieth century feminist manifestos, including iconic works such as Mina Loy’s 1914 *The Feminist Manifesto*, Valerie Solanas’s 1967 *SCUM Manifesto* and Bikini Kill’s 1991 *RIOT GRRRL Manifesto*, they “operate as an infectious, contagious kind of document, one that purposefully ignites readers or listeners with its messages, making little room for disagreement or rational back-and-forth discourse” (2020: 5). In another recent anthology, which focuses instead on lesser-known, co-authored activist feminist manifestos from women’s groups around the world, Penny Weiss rather emphasises the manifesto’s capacity to sustain very different approaches. Manifestos, she suggests:

differ dramatically in form, one resembling an indictment, another an oath; one an essay, another a letter; one a set of demands, another a set of principles. [...]

Flexibility in form means that we hear from the unflinchingly angry, the necessarily dogged, and the unapologetically passionate; from historical, political, and cultural viewpoints; and in analytical, statistical, rhetorical, and narrative tones. Form can fit the needs of equality. (2018: 2)

These seeming contradictions – between manifestations of a recognisable rhetorical form that share a sense of injustice, but locate it in myriad and sometimes opposing forces, that likewise share recognisable conventions but also operate in a wide variety of potentially irreconcilable modes – point, again, to the ungovernable nature of the manifesto itself.

With “The Evaristo Manifesto”, Evaristo adopts some of the most recognisable elements of the form. While it lacks the kind of typographic unruliness that sometimes accompanies manifestos (different sized font, capitalised or underlined words and phrases, expressive ellipses, noisy exclamatory punctuation), it is structured as a short, declarative list of principles, mostly pertaining to the creative life, that clearly proclaims its function as a manifesto. Evaristo exhorts her reader, for example, to:

Be wild, disobedient & daring with your creativity, take risks instead of following predictable routes; those who play it safe do not advance our culture or civilization. (2019b: 189)

In its focus on the creative life – on its call to the fellow artist – her manifesto works most immediately within the (traditionally male dominated) lineage of art manifestos, such as the

*Futurist Manifesto* or Wyndham Lewis's *BLAST*, the manifesto-journal of the Vorticists (1914). This would seem to draw her into what Kimber Charles Pearce, writing more than twenty years ago, identifies as an ongoing "controversial" debate around the radical feminist use of the manifesto form and the efficacy of appropriating a predominantly masculinist genre.<sup>1</sup> Pearce cites critics such as Gerda Lerner, who argue that "revolutionary ideas can be generated only when the oppressed have an alternative to the symbol and meaning system of those who dominated them" and, contrarily, those like Jo Freeman who argue that pre-existing rhetorical strategies are "co-optable to the ideas of the new movement" (Pearce 1999: 308). For Evaristo, evidently (and in concordance with the manifesto-writing feminists who have gone before her), the manifesto maintains its subversive, resistive power, even as an historically masculine genre now taken up by a woman writer.

This leaves the question of how to read Evaristo's manifesto within a history of specifically feminist manifestos. Indeed, it is not, on the surface, a particularly feminist intervention. Evaristo's addressee is ungendered and the manifesto speaks in terms of an encompassing "we" / "our" – "we must establish our own systems" (2019b: 189) – a seductively inclusive rhetorical device typical of the form, which, although not directed in this instance to "we women", nevertheless also chimes with the collectivist spirit of Second Wave feminism. Such inclusivity is key to understanding Evaristo's project. Signalled in the title of her novel, in which the term "*Other*" potentially invites in anyone for whom "*Girl*" or "*Woman*" fails as an appropriate mode of address, Evaristo's manifesto resists the exclusionary, separatist pressures of the manifesto tradition. Her open, inclusive address baffles the hierarchical binarism of a genre that commonly "claim[s] for 'us' the moral high ground of revolutionary idealism, and construct[s] 'them' as ideological tyrants" (Lyon 1999: 2).

Working in the context of a legacy of feminist manifestos, “The Evaristo Manifesto” is quietly in conversation with the documents that have gone before. In foregrounding inclusion, Evaristo provides a riposte to previous manifestos that prioritise division. One might think, most strikingly, of Solanas’s notorious *SCUM Manifesto*, which calls for the “elimination” of men but ultimately turns its vituperative anger on “approval seeking Daddy’s Girls” (1967: 68, 71), reducing the “us” of the manifesto – those hailed to membership of the “Society for Cutting Up Men” – to the slender few willing to reject organised protest and operate on the margins of violent extremism. “If SCUM ever marches,” warns Solanas, “it will be over the President’s stupid, sickening face; if SCUM ever strikes, it will be in the dark with a six-inch blade” (1967: 76). Often dismissed as a rogue outlier, Avital Ronell points out that Solanas’s methods have their roots in the “destructive demands” (2015: 5) of prior manifestos,<sup>2</sup> but locates her startlingly savage document in her particular frustrations as a marginalised and diminished experimental woman artist; as Ronell concludes: “Sometimes you have to scream to be heard” (2015: 3). For Lyon, also invested in connecting Solanas to an artistic-literary tradition from which she is too often excluded as a deranged outsider, *SCUM* is “a kind of hyper-manifesto”, spanning the divide “between ‘outrageous’ avant-garde performance and the pedagogy of theory” (1999: 175). This bridge leads us to feminist works that are unapologetically revolutionary and iconoclastic, but function in a very different register from Solanas: from Firestone’s Marxist-Freudian call in *The Dialectic of Sex* to harness technology to dismantle “a discriminatory sex class system” (Firestone 1970: 10) to Haraway’s vision in *A Cyborg Manifesto* of a post-gender, post-human world that champions “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (Haraway 1985: 154). These three texts operate very differently in terms of language, tone, and address, yet each adopts the mantle of ‘feminist manifesto’ – a restless,

malleable genre that has always sustained difference and which, I suggest, is capable of still further expansion.

While Evaristo adopts the familiar frame of the manifesto, at the same time, she also works to undermine some of the formal qualities to which she has otherwise seemingly carefully adhered. She prefaces “The Evaristo Manifesto” by declaring: “There is a manifesto in each of us, emerging over the course of our lives, changing & reconfiguring through our experiences. This is mine” (2019b: 189). Here, the manifesto is not a fixed, eventually arrived at statement of truth values, but a document that evolves, changes and emerges in a notably organic manner. The statement “This is mine” is both proprietorial and potentially works to invite the reader to reflect and respond with their own. Furthermore, of course, it is not just the concluding document that is self-proclaimed a manifesto, but the encompassing memoir itself. Evaristo’s *Künstlerroman*, it seems, is also a manifesto, and having been so directed, the reader reads it as such. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed proposes that “[a] life can be a manifesto” (2017: 256). In taking up this proposition and exploring its use as a frame for reading Evaristo’s work, we can start to see how both *Manifesto* and *Girl, Woman, Other* can be conceived of as extending the purpose of fiction and life-writing to operate also within the realm of the feminist manifesto.

### **A life can be a manifesto: *Girl, Woman, Other***

Evaristo’s writing is steeped in this legacy of feminist manifestos. When Amma and Dominique in *Girl, Woman, Other* start Bush Women Theatre Company in the 1980s, they instinctively reach for the declarative form of the manifesto, coining as their motto: “On Our Own Terms / or Not At All” (2019a: 14). There is a world of radical feminist spaces, and the language that circulates – in the theatre, in underground samizdat publishing, in

consciousness-raising groups, and in the ‘wimmin’s land’ alternative communities where Dominique and Nzinga settle – is the language of radical feminist manifestos. Evaristo brings to this period a sense of deep nostalgia for its earnestness and political commitment, but also an often-humorous sense of perspective. Amma recalls the tense negotiations around communal living policy at her Kings Cross squat between the radical feminists, the lesbian radical feminists, and the black radical lesbian feminists, not to mention (using Amma’s descriptors of the various factions) the anarchists, the Marxists, the hippies, the environmentalists, the vegetarians, the Rastas, the Hari-Krishnas, the punks and the gays. As each group looks to realise its own manifesto for living, Amma becomes the voice of scepticism, resisting any too-prescriptive utopian impulses, preferring “mixing with others who didn’t try to impose their will on anyone else” (2019a: 18). Indeed, in a novel in which many women find liberation in feminist ideas – from 1960s housewife Penelope who is slipped a clandestine copy of *The Feminine Mystique* by a librarian, to 2010s Megan (later Morgan) who discovers transfeminism and intersectional feminism via online chatrooms – Evaristo remains cautious of zealotry and dogmatism. When Nzinga lectures Amma’s friends on how “to live a truly womanist life”, her words echoing the tenets of many Second Wave manifestos as she declares that “male energy is disruptive [...] the patriarchy is divisive, violent and authoritarian, misogyny is so unthinkingly entrenched” (2019a: 102-103), Amma instinctively rejects the narrowness of her position, pleading with Dominique: “we see men as individuals, don’t we? you were never separatist or misandrist, what’s happened to you?” (2019a: 103). The feminism that Nzinga espouses is adjacent to the feminism of Amma, but in its absolutism it fails to provide for her a persuasive manifesto for living a feminist life.

For Fahs, the manifesto form, by its nature, encourages extremism; its urgent call to revolution allows “no possibility for equivocation, refutation, or disagreement, shattering

possibilities for other ways of seeing” (2020: 9). This becomes, then, a potential site of tension for an author like Evaristo, drawn to the vision and hope of a manifesto for change, but cognisant of the potentially exclusionary danger of any radical document that proposes to speak to and for certain people and not others. Her solution, I suggest, lies in drawing out connections and legacies, even where uncomfortable or problematic. In “What a Time to be a (Black) (British) (Womxn) Writer”, she urges young black women writers to recognise that “they are part of a continuum” (2019b: 90), and in *Girl, Woman, Other*, the novel’s multiple disparate life-stories are ultimately unified by revelations of connection, from the incidental crossing of paths to the most profound discovery of familial ties.

While charting an unexpected network of affiliations that eventually coalesce on a scene of reconciliation, Evaristo remains always sharply cognisant of the troublesome history of feminism, and the matrilineage of characters she devises are nuanced, sometimes failing, and often contradictory. From the early 1900s, she depicts the fearsome “enlightened” Edwardian ladies who take in orphaned Grace and “believe in women’s suffrage” but reject the tactics “of those militant protesters [...] because it only results in public opprobrium” (2019a: 381); these excellent women (to borrow Barbara Pym’s phrase) can only conceive of a working-class mixed-race woman going into service, but nevertheless provide her with education and opportunity. There is also a wry sympathy in the novel for feminist-but-racially-prejudiced Penelope who “couldn’t get enough of Ms Friedan, whom she hid in the cupboard with the brooms, Hoover and ironing board” (288), but who, in the 1990s, “loathed that feminism was on the descent, and the vociferous multi-culti brigade was on the ascent” (298). And one of the most sympathetically depicted characters of the novel, Grace’s daughter Hattie, born in the 1920s, loves and marries a passionately anti-racist African-American man, but in her later widowhood supports the right-wing UKIP party and, in protest at “foreign labour” and

“foreign produce coming into the country from the whole damn world”, votes Leave in the 2016 Brexit referendum (2019a: 346). While Hattie struggles with her grandchild Morgan’s coming out as non-binary – “you sound mental, dear” (2019a: 351) – she recalls with affection the lesbian couple who were the only ones to welcome her mother to their Northumbrian village, and gruffly tells Morgan: “just be who you want to be and let’s agree not to talk about it” (2019a: 352). Evaristo acknowledges all these entangled feminist histories, with their overlapping and competing priorities, their vision and their limitations.

*As Girl, Woman, Other* closes on “The After-party” (2019a: 405), a packed celebration of Amma’s opening night triumph, the novel’s variously charted winding paths – of women’s lives and of feminist histories – narrow to an intimate scene of Amma and Dominique (briefly returned from America to catch the performance), talking late into the night in Amma’s shabby London terrace. In time, the conversation turns to feminism. The two friends, veterans of the radical 1980s, wrestle with competing visions of feminism in the twenty-first century. For Dominique, the movement’s sudden popularity (“feminism was massive right now” (2019a: 319)) precipitates its commodification, diminishing its transgressive power: “feminism needs tectonic plates to shift,” she argues, “not a trendy make-over” (2019a: 437). Her suspicions echo Evaristo in “What a Time to be a (Black) (British) (Womxn) Writer”, observing that feminism is now fashionable and warning that a trend is “intrinsically ephemeral” (2019b: 102). Dominique’s complaints extend further, however, taking on “trans troublemakers” who denounce her LA women’s festival as transphobic. Anticipating her friend’s sympathy, Amma instead likens their own youthful acts of protest and troublemaking to those currently targeting Dominique: “the trans community is entitled to fight for their rights,” she tells Dominique; “you need to be more open-minded on that score or you’ll risk becoming irrelevant” (2019a: 437).

When we read Evaristo's recent work as a cumulative manifesto, we discern her central tenets for living a feminist life. Firstly, at the heart of both *Manifesto* and *Girl, Woman, Other* is a call for an inclusive, expansive feminism, open to "others" and open to challenge. Secondly, her work solicits recognition of feminist legacy and continuity in the face of seeming divergence and rupture. Just as Amma compares her and Dominique's Second-Wave activism to today's fights for trans rights, so Morgan traces a question about the political adoption of a trans position back to the kind of radical political lesbianism espoused by Adrienne Rich ("Morgan had come across this in the online archive of long defunct, second-wave feminist magazine called *Spare Rib*" (2019a: 338)); similarly, Nzinga's wimmin's land Spirit Moon estate is reimagined in Morgan's plans for a safe-space retreat, "reinventing [Hattie's] farm for people who had reinvented themselves" (2019a: 332). These connections can be problematic and unwanted. Dominique's experience of abuse and coercive control in the "magical alternate society" (2019a: 87) of Spirit Moon troubles our reading of Morgan's possibly "naïve utopian dream" of "a completely gender-free world" (2019a: 327). At the same time, they provide a sense of legacy and continuity that Evaristo deems crucial to the sustenance and resilience of feminist practice. Thirdly, in writings filled with women and non-binary people engaged in the creative arts – from novelists to playwrights to bloggers to newly confident readers – Evaristo calls on her artists to be fearless and disruptive, as she is in her own resistive work. "Manifestos are mighty", writes Fahs; they take "concrete social problems and infuse[] them with the emotional and *affective* qualities of resistance and revolution" (2020: 11. Emphasis in original). This affective quality is best realised in, fourthly, Evaristo's commitment to making manifest the reality of women's lives, whether through life writing or through literary fiction: a process which is, as Ahmed proposes, the starting point for making a feminist manifesto.

Evaristo's manifesto is not one of straightforward sisterly solidarity. Her miscellaneous cast of characters challenge the cohesion and the limits of that Second Wave term, "sisterhood". We see this, before the novel even commences, in the dedication to *Girl, Woman, Other*, which reads:

*For the sisters & the sistas & the sistahs & the sistren  
& the women & the womxn & the wimmin & the womyn  
& our brethren & our bredrin & our brothers & our bruvv  
& our men & our mandem & the LGBTQI+ members  
of the human family*

Prioritising sisterhood, but emphasising diverse relations, Evaristo takes a poet's pleasure in language, particularly as it manifests in marginal, defiantly non-standard community idiolects. Her terminology is expansive, inviting the addressee to identify as they wish. This emphasis on hospitable language is a discernible thread in Evaristo's work; the same celebration of inclusive vocabulary is touched on in "What a Time to be a (Black) (British) (Womxn) Writer", in which she cheers the easy expansiveness "of twenty-somethings who use the term 'womxn', with its inclusive emphasis on women of colour, queer and trans people" (2019b: 93). Read retrospectively, the novel's dedication becomes a riposte to both the kind of proprietorial feminism espoused in *Girl, Woman, Other* by Nzinga and the neoliberal rejection of solidarity by Roland in favour of individual success ("his bredren and sistren could damn well speak up for themselves" [415]). The call to "our brothers & our bruvv" recalls the shared histories and the extended solidarity of black men and women that bell hooks acknowledged in her rejection of anti-male white feminist manifestos. The

dedication calls to the reader, who is hailed – however they identify – as belonging: as an insider rather than an outsider. In this paratextual address, Evaristo asserts a fundamental principle also articulated in “The Evaristo Manifesto” – “We are all interconnected & must look after each other” (2019b: 189) – and introduces a theme that both shapes her novel and expands beyond the limits of the text. To conclude with a line from Ahmed, in Evaristo’s expansive, generous work we recognise that, finally, “[a] manifesto is an outstretched hand” (2017: 256), not excluding and dividing, but rather inviting one in.

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<sup>1</sup> Marinetti’s *Founding and Futurist Manifesto* – still the preeminent example of the form – notoriously states: “9. We wish to glorify war – the only health giver of the world – militarism, patriotism, the destructive arm of the Anarchist, beautiful Ideas that kill, the contempt for women” (1909: 4). As Lyon observes, “Clearly

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'women' [...] are associated with the cultural stasis and decay decried at length throughout the futurist program" (Lyon 1999: 99-100).

<sup>2</sup> Marinetti's *Founding and Futurist Manifesto* (published in English in 1912 as "initial Manifesto of Futurism"), as Ronell observes, famously declares: "10. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, and fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice." (Marinetti 1909: 4).