

The Unruly Chorus: Polyphony, Postcolonial Futurity, and the Limits of Manifesto Form in Bernardine Evaristo's *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*

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Abstract

Bernardine Evaristo's *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (2021) occupies an unusual position between memoir and manifesto. It is a personal narrative that repeatedly extends beyond the individual self. It is also a story of success that repeatedly reflects experiences of rejection, exclusion, and institutional failure. This article examines how Evaristo employs polyphonic techniques, such as shifting pronouns, interpolated lists, and recursive temporal structures. These formal strategies function not merely as aesthetic experimentation but as a challenge to what may be termed the monologic memoir. Drawing on Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, postcolonial critiques of linear historicism by Chakrabarty and Mbembe, and recent scholarship on Black British publishing, the article explores how *Manifesto* imagines a collective mode of self-representation. It argues that the text constructs a form of postcolonial futurity that is neither teleological nor conventionally utopian. Instead, futurity emerges from repetition, endurance, and collective cultural memory. The article also examines a key tension in the text, as Evaristo's frequent formal experimentation can lead to exhaustion rather than resolution. This raises an important question about the limits of polyphony within autobiography. Can a single life narrative fully escape the pull of the heroic individual subject? Through close readings of Evaristo's reflections on rejection, her counter-archival catalogues of overlooked Black British writers, and her direct addresses to readers, the article argues that *Manifesto* derives its force from this unresolved tension. The text succeeds as a manifesto of endurance because it embraces formal instability rather than overcoming it. Its fragility ultimately becomes one of its most distinctive postcolonial features.

Keywords: Bernardine Evaristo; polyphony; postcolonial futurity; Black British literature; Bakhtin; decolonial aesthetics.

Introduction

A manifesto traditionally proclaims. It speaks in a singular voice or on behalf of a tightly coordinated collective. It also claims authority over the future. When Bernardine

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Evaristo titles her 2021 hybrid text *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*, she invokes that tradition and its performative force. The genre promises certainty. It declares, in effect, "thus it shall be." Yet the book that follows repeatedly unsettles such authority. The text moves between first, second, and third-person perspectives. It interrupts narrative progression with dated inventories of rejection letters. At one point, Evaristo devotes an entire chapter to more than one hundred Black British artists whom she argues the literary establishment has overlooked or forgotten. The result is not the forceful and unified rhetoric associated with Futurist or Surrealist manifestos. Instead, the text develops a deliberately fragmented and multi-voiced texture. It resists the authority of a single declarative "I."

Why would a writer who has just won the Booker Prize choose to frame her story through a genre she immediately begins to deconstruct? The answer lies in Evaristo's critique of autobiography itself. For a Black British writer of Nigerian heritage, the conventional memoir of perseverance leading to success is not a neutral narrative form. It carries its own ideological assumptions. The familiar sequence of adversity, struggle, and triumph has often been used to suggest that racial barriers can be overcome through individual determination alone. Evaristo's disruption of this structure functions as a formal refusal of such neoliberal heroics.

This article advances two interconnected claims. First, Evaristo's polyphonic techniques, including pronoun shifts, recursive temporalities, and counter-archival lists, enact a decolonial mode of knowing. These strategies suggest that survival and creativity are never purely individual achievements. They emerge through collective histories and remain shaped by forgotten predecessors and embattled contemporaries. Second, the text develops a distinctive model of postcolonial futurity. This futurity is neither a distant utopian horizon nor a narrative of inevitable progress. Instead, it appears as a repetitive and materially grounded practice of "never giving up." At the same time, the article introduces a critical reservation. The formal restlessness of the *Manifesto* occasionally produces a sense of exhaustion rather than renewal. Its refusal to settle into a stable narrative mode mirrors the struggle it seeks to document. This tension raises an important question. Can polyphony ever fully escape the master narrative of the triumphant individual? I suggest that Evaristo respond that such escape may be impossible. The friction between polyphonic aspiration and monologic constraint becomes part of the lived reality of postcolonial existence in the aftermath of empire.

The discussion proceeds in three stages. It begins by placing polyphony within a postcolonial framework through a dialogue between Bakhtin and Black British cultural criticism. It then turns to a close reading of key passages in *Manifesto*, including the rejection lists, the shifting pronouns, and the counter-archival chapter "Visible." Finally, it examines the text's treatment of temporality and its construction of futurity as an iterative practice rather than a climactic destination. The conclusion reflects on both the political possibilities and the limitations of Evaristo's formal choices.

Polyphony and Its Postcolonial Discontents

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, developed in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), describes a literary work in which "a plurality of independent and unmerged

voices and consciousnesses" coexist without being subordinated to a single authorial perspective (18). For Bakhtin, polyphony is fundamentally dialogic. Voices address one another, disagree, and remain distinct. The polyphonic novel is therefore democratic in form, even when its content is not.

Postcolonial critics have approached Bakhtin's framework with both interest and caution. His emphasis on heteroglossia aligns closely with postcolonial concerns about linguistic and cultural multiplicity. Heteroglossia highlights the coexistence of social dialects, professional languages, and historical layers within discourse. Homi Bhabha draws on Bakhtin in his discussion of the "third space of enunciation," a site where colonial binaries begin to unravel (212).

However, several critics have questioned the political limits of polyphony. Emily Apter argues that the concept can become a romanticised image of harmonious pluralism (87). Such a reading risks overlooking the unequal conditions that determine whose voices are heard and whose remain marginalised. A postcolonial understanding of polyphony must therefore account for structures of exclusion as well as multiplicity. The existence of many voices is not enough. The history of their suppression must also be acknowledged.

Evaristo's *Manifesto* engages directly with this problem. Its polyphony is not a celebration of easy diversity. Instead, it presents a fractured and often uncomfortable chorus. Throughout the text, traces of exclusion remain visible rather than being resolved. The reader encounters absence, erasure, and institutional silencing alongside expressions of creativity and self-assertion.

This tension is evident from the opening pages. Evaristo writes:

"I am British, I am Nigerian, I am a woman, I am a writer, I am a rebel, I am a mother, I am an auntie, I am a friend, I am a dreamer, I am a realist, I am a sinner, I am a saint. None of these selves cancels out the others" (Evaristo 5).

On the surface, the passage affirms a complex and intersectional identity. However, the repeated phrase "I am" also carries a defensive force. The assertion gains meaning through what it resists. A few pages later, Evaristo recalls being told by a teacher, "You will never be a writer. People like you do not become writers" (12). Read in this context, the multiplication of identities becomes a response to exclusion. The polyphonic "I" emerges as a counterweight to a monologic prohibition.

Scholarship on Black British publishing reinforces Evaristo's critique. In *The Black Volume* (2022), Deirdre Osborne examines gatekeeping practices within UK trade publishing between 1980 and 2010. Her research shows that manuscripts by Black British writers were frequently rejected unless they conformed to narrow expectations of "ghetto realism" or "postcolonial pastoral" (134). Evaristo identifies the same tendency within the *Manifesto*. As she notes, "They wanted my Nigerian heritage as decoration, not as form. They wanted exotic scenery but linear English plotting" (67). In this context, formal experimentation takes on particular significance. Polyphonic structures, temporal disruptions, and multiple narrative strands were often described as confusing when employed by Black writers. Similar

techniques, however, were frequently praised as signs of literary sophistication when associated with figures such as Virginia Woolf or Julian Barnes. The issue was not alone. It was also a question of cultural legitimacy and access.

Evaristo's polyphony should therefore be understood as a response to a specific institutional history rather than as a simple adaptation of Bakhtinian theory. By writing a memoir that rejects a smooth, linear narrative arc, she enacts the complexity that publishing institutions often discourage. The manifesto form becomes the vehicle for that intervention. However, the performance remains intentionally unfinished. Its imperfections are not failures of form. They are part of the argument the text seeks to make.

Close Readings: Lists, Pronouns, and the Counter-Archive

The Inventory of Rejection

One of the most striking formal devices in *Manifesto* is the multi-page catalogue of rejection letters Evaristo received between 1982 and 1999. The entries are not heavily narrativised. In most cases, only the date and the name of the publisher or agent are provided. A representative sequence reads as follows:

1987. Faber & Faber. "Not for us at this time."

1988. André Deutsch. "We do not feel the commercial potential."

1989. Jonathan Cape. "Admire the ambition, but the structure is too disruptive" (Evaristo 44).

The effect of repetition is difficult to ignore. Its power derives not from eloquence but from restraint. A conventional memoir might transform these rejections into a narrative of perseverance and eventual success. Evaristo's list resists that impulse. The entries accumulate without dramatic embellishment. They resemble a ledger of injuries that cannot be neatly absorbed into a redemptive story.

The sequence can be understood as a form of counter-archival practice. In Foucauldian terms, archives organise documents into structures that produce authorised narratives. Scholars such as Saidiya Hartman have instead explored ways of presenting records of exclusion without converting them into stories of inevitable progress (11). Evaristo adopts a similar strategy. The list does not culminate in a triumphant declaration of overcoming adversity. Instead, it insists on repetition. "This happened, and this, and this." The refusal of closure carries political significance. Structural racism appears not as a single obstacle but as a recurring and systemic process.

Polyphony emerges here through the juxtaposition of multiple institutional voices. Faber, Cape, and André Deutsch all speak through their rejection letters. Evaristo offers almost no direct response. She records rather than interprets. Readers are left to confront the cumulative weight of the archive for themselves. From a Bakhtinian perspective, these fragments of bureaucratic discourse retain their autonomy. They are not absorbed into the narrator's consciousness or transformed into a unified perspective. Instead, they remain

external and resistant. Their presence on the page creates a dialogue between institutional authority and personal experience without resolving the tension between them.

The Shifting Pronoun: “I,” “You,” and the Collective “We”

A second polyphonic strategy in *Manifesto* is Evaristo's continual movement between grammatical persons. Within a single paragraph, she shifts from first-person recollection to second-person address and then to first-person plural identification. A representative example appears in the chapter "Loud Black Boy":

"I learned to lower my voice in school assemblies. You know the feeling, that tightening in your throat when you realise your natural pitch is considered aggressive. We were the children of the Windrush generation, told to be grateful for a place in a country that did not want us" (Evaristo 33).

The movement from "I" to "you" to "we" is striking. The second-person address creates a bridge between narrator and reader. It assumes either a shared experience or a willingness to imagine one. The shift to "we" then transforms an individual experience into a collective condition. However, the first-person voice remains present throughout. The passage never loses its grounding in Evaristo's own embodied experience.

Narratological scholarship provides a useful framework for understanding this technique. Monika Fludernik (2020) argues that second-person address in memoir creates a form of "ethical immediacy" that disrupts the detached and retrospective perspective often associated with autobiography (89). Evaristo's phrase "you know the feeling" works in precisely this way. Rather than speaking from the position of an exceptional survivor looking back on a completed struggle, she draws readers into the emotional conditions of that struggle as it unfolds. The transition to "we" extends this effect. Individual memory becomes collective memory. At the same time, the collective remains carefully limited. Evaristo does not claim to speak for all Black British subjects. The pronoun refers only to those who recognise themselves in the experience she describes. Community emerges through identification rather than representation.

These shifts in pronoun use significantly expand Bakhtin's understanding of polyphony. In Bakhtin's model, dialogue occurs primarily among characters and voices within the represented world. Evaristo repeatedly moves beyond those boundaries. Her movement between "I," "you," and "we" draws readers directly into the text's dialogic structure. Readers become participants in the conversation rather than distant observers. The manifesto form strengthens this strategy. Historically, manifestos rely on direct address and collective appeals. Statements such as "Workers of the world, unite!" illustrate this rhetorical tradition. Evaristo adapts that inheritance to autobiographical writing. Direct address becomes a means of transforming personal experience into a shared political conversation.

“Visible”: The Counter-Archive as Chorus

The chapter titled "Visible" contains the most sustained example of polyphony in *Manifesto*. Here, Evaristo lists more than one hundred Black British writers, artists, and activists who preceded her. The chapter does not follow a conventional narrative structure.

Instead, it consists largely of names accompanied by brief descriptions: "James Berry, poet; Grace Nichols, poet; Jamal Ali, director; Yvonne Brewster, theatre director; Valerie Bloom, poet" (Evaristo 147–152). The catalogue extends across six pages.

At first glance, the chapter may appear to be a tribute. However, its function extends beyond commemoration. Evaristo uses the list to intervene in the archive itself. She is not simply honouring predecessors. She is insisting upon their presence within her text. Their names interrupt the memoir and become part of its structure.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, these figures operate as independent consciousnesses rather than as supporting characters in Evaristo's personal narrative. They are not absorbed into a unified autobiographical voice. Instead, they remain distinct and adjacent to it. The chapter, therefore, disrupts the flow of life writing. Readers are required to pause and shift their mode of attention. Narrative immersion gives way to enumeration and recognition.

Many of the names included in "Visible" will be unfamiliar even to readers with specialist knowledge of Black British literature. Evaristo acknowledges this directly. Some of the individuals she records received only a single review, staged only one performance, or published only one poem before disappearing from the historical record. As she writes, "This is not a roll call of success. It is a record of survival against erasure" (149).

The chapter can also be read alongside Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation. Hartman describes a practice of addressing archival absence without claiming to recover a complete or authentic past. Evaristo adopts a comparable strategy (74). She does not reconstruct the lives of these forgotten figures in detail. Instead, she names them. The gesture is deliberately modest, yet politically significant. Presence is acknowledged without pretending that loss can be repaired.

The polyphony of "Visible" is therefore incomplete by design. Many voices appear only as traces. Their stories remain fragmented or inaccessible. Rather than concealing that absence, the chapter foregrounds it. The resulting chorus is partial, interrupted, and unfinished. That incompleteness is not a weakness of the form. It is central to the chapter's political and archival purpose.

Postcolonial Futurity: Iteration as Praxis

The future imagined by Evaristo's polyphony does not follow a conventional narrative of progress. Significantly, the Booker Prize does not function as the triumphant climax one might expect. Although it represents a major literary achievement, Evaristo discusses it with noticeable ambivalence. She writes:

"The morning after the ceremony, I woke up still me. Still the same woman whom twelve publishers had rejected before *Girl, Woman, Other* found a home. Nothing structural has changed. A young black writer emailed me that same week: she had just received her thirty-first rejection" (Evaristo 211).

This passage reframes success in striking ways. The future appears not as a destination but as an ongoing demand. "Never giving up" functions less as a motivational slogan than as a

description of the repetitive labour required under conditions of persistent exclusion. Evaristo explicitly rejects the logic of the happy ending. As she observes, "If this book has a moral, it is not that persistence guarantees success. It is that persistence is the only ethical response to failure" (212).

Such a conception of futurity recalls Achille Mbembe's discussion of afropolitanism. Mbembe rejects both nostalgic forms of nativism and narratives of colonial progress that move relentlessly forward (234). Instead, he emphasises futures shaped by multiple and overlapping temporalities. Evaristo's **Manifesto** offers a similar structure. The rejections of the 1980s remain present alongside the recognition of 2019. Neither moment cancels the other. Readers are required to hold these competing temporalities together.

A tension nevertheless emerges within the text's polyphonic project. In Bakhtin's formulation, polyphony depends upon voices that remain distinct while continuing to generate meaning through dialogue. At times, *'Manifesto'* approaches that ideal. At other moments, however, the multiplication of voices produces a sense of accumulation rather than exchange.

The rejection catalogue provides one example. Its repetition is powerful, but it remains largely static. The institutions that issued the rejections never enter into dialogue with the narrator. A similar dynamic appears in the chapter "Visible." Evaristo names forgotten Black British artists, yet many remain inaccessible beyond the brief details provided. Their presence is acknowledged, but their stories cannot be fully recovered. Evaristo recognises this limitation herself. As she writes, "I cannot resurrect them. I can only refuse to let them be erased again" (152). The statement is moving precisely because it acknowledges the limits of recovery. Naming becomes an act of resistance, even when restoration proves impossible. However, this gesture differs from Bakhtinian dialogue. It is less an exchange between voices than an act of inscription against forgetting.

For this reason, *Manifesto* does not achieve a pure form of polyphony. Instead, it presents a more unstable and perhaps more convincing version of the concept. The text aspires toward a collective voice while remaining constrained by the realities of single authorship. Evaristo cannot literally speak for the artists she records. She can only preserve traces of their presence. Likewise, the pronoun "we" never fully escapes the authority of the "I" that writes it. Rather than weakening the text, this tension gives it much of its force. The gap between collective aspiration and individual expression becomes part of the book's political argument. In the aftermath of empire and under the continuing pressures of racialised inequality, perfect polyphony may remain unattainable. What remains possible is a more modest but persistent practice: naming, listing, remembering, and refusing erasure. The future imagined by the *Manifesto* emerges from that unfinished work.

Conclusion

Manifesto: On Never Giving Up is an unexpected book from a Booker Prize winner. A conventional success narrative might have produced a confident and linear account of achievement. Evaristo instead offers a text that is recursive, self-interrupting, and oriented toward collective experience. Through lists, shifting pronouns, and the counter-archive of forgotten predecessors, she resists the logic of the heroic individual narrative. In its place, the

text imagines a postcolonial futurity grounded in repetition, solidarity, and the recognition that failure remains an ongoing condition rather than a problem that can be permanently overcome.

However, the text is marked by its own tensions. The proliferation of voices occasionally approaches formal exhaustion, while the manifesto's promise of certainty is repeatedly postponed. Rather than weakening the work, these tensions become central to its meaning. A polyphonic memoir is necessarily contradictory. The "I" can never fully become a "we." It can only move toward that possibility. Throughout the *Manifesto*, Evaristo sustains that movement with remarkable persistence.

The book also offers an important challenge to postcolonial literary studies. Much scholarship has treated the novel as the privileged form of anti-colonial and postcolonial expression. Evaristo points toward a different possibility. Her work suggests that the manifesto remains a vital genre of futurity, particularly when its claims to authority are unsettled from within. In *Manifesto*, the future is not presented as a final destination or a completed achievement. It emerges through repetition, collective effort, and unfinished struggle. It is the sound of many voices speaking at once, failing to resolve their differences, and beginning again.

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