In Conversation

Her Excellency Professor Abena P. A. Busia interviewed Bernardine Evaristo, author of the 2019 Booker Prize-winning *Girl, Woman, Other*, during the 3rd Kwame Nkrumah Festival at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. Themed "Pan Africanism, Feminism, and the Next Generation: Liberating the Cultural Economy", the festival was held from 15 to 24 September 2021.

H.E. Abena Busia (APAB): Hello everybody and thank you for joining us, wherever in the world you're joining us from. My name is Abena Busia. I am a Ghanaian, very proud to be so, a Ghanaian writer and poet, and currently Ghana's ambassador to Brazil. I am very, very honoured today, however, to be part of this festival and to interview a friend of mine, an extraordinary woman herself who today is best known for co-winning the 2019 Booker Prize with her eighth book, *Girl, Woman, Other*, making her the first Black woman to win it. But for some of us, her reputation preceded that. For some of us, she is a person who is a trailblazer and a visionary who has helped put Black women writers – particularly those writing out of Britain – on the map. She is visionary, she is feisty, and she has an acute sense of the politics of being and the politics of representation. Yet in all of that, her wit and her wisdom have brought to consciousness the place of those of us Black people of African descent growing up in England – the way we negotiate our identities, the way we negotiate the politics of space, the way we interact intergenerationally and between ourselves [which] has been, for some of us, the food of life.

Her first non-fiction book, *Manifesto*, on never giving up, is to be published next month. And she has taken that wit and wisdom so many places, including, most crucially, the academy, where today she is professor of creative writing at Brunel University in London and vice-president of the Royal Society of Literature.

Bernardine, it is wonderful to see you, and welcome you to this space from London.

Bernardine Evaristo (BE): Hi! I wish I was there too! And I am really looking forward to being interviewed by you and I am really excited to be part of this amazing conference.

APAB: I know you must be aware of the fact that after your decades of labour in the shadows, the Booker Prize has changed your life. That goes without saying, I think. But I would like to begin, not with the Booker Prize, but with your beginnings. I would like [some] background to what makes you a writer and what makes you engage with the ideas and the themes that you do in your works. I guess that's a shorthand way of saying, what made you write your first book? (*laughing*)

BE: Yes, yes. Well, you know, my background obviously shaped me as our backgrounds often do. I was raised in the sixties and seventies in Woolwich in South East London, which is like Little Lagos today, but it wasn't when I was growing up. My Nigerian father was basically the only Black man in the village, and we were one of the only Black families there – mixed race family because my mother is White – so I grew up in a society where I didn't really fit in, or I wasn't seen to fit in. I was, of course, a British child but I had brown skin. And I think that sense of not fitting in has been instrumental in terms of the kinds of creativity and works that I produced as an adult. At the age of 12, I went to my local youth theatre, and I *did* fit in there. I was the only Black child or child of colour for most of my time there, but I felt very welcome, it was a safe space, a creative space, and that was my introduction to my creativity.

Just to say that I came from a very political background. My father was political in terms of being a local labour counsellor; he was a shop steward. My mother was a trade union rep at the school where she taught. She was a teacher, and my father was a welder in a factory. So, I grew up in a family where we challenged the status quo, where my parents were activists, they were social justice warriors, if you like. And that began when they married because marrying as a Black and White couple in the 1950s was a serious act of rebellion on my mother's part; her family did not approve.

So, I got into theatre, went to drama school, encountered four other Black women, which was more than I had encountered in my life, pretty much previously, other than my sisters – I have three sisters and four brothers – so I became

very politicised, I became very feminist and left drama school, formed a theatre with Black women and began my professional career writing for theatre, writing plays by and about Black women. I eventually left theatre behind and then started writing books. My first book, *Island of Abraham*, was published in 1994. So, my childhood and heritage led me to become the kind of writer I became, which was somebody who wanted to write about the African diaspora, and to tell those stories I hadn't been told and explore all those hidden histories, and that's what I have been doing ever since!

APAB: Yes, and we will come back to that and the matter of your hidden histories. But I now want to ask a question about something that not many people think and talk about. And that is, what is a catholic grasp, if you like, of the place of Black writers in British society? I had the privilege of hearing you speak, five years ago, at [the] African Literature Association conference in Germany and I remember being struck by your keynote speech, about the way you could so clearly map the progress of Black writing, the recognition of Black writing and the issues that Black writers had taken on in the public space: naming the challenges and difficulties you face in the sense of not just *what* you wrote but *that* you wrote at all, that you existed at all. And I was wondering if you could share a little bit of that activist part of the collectivity before we return to the question of your personal creativity.

BE: Yes, that keynote speech was looking at Black British women's literature; it's something that I have been very aware of, obviously, because of who I am, all my life. And there has been an absence of it for most of my life. Very few exceptions. I am one of the few exceptions. And so, I am really interested in creating a more inclusive publishing culture and making sure that people of colour, women of colour, Black women, more specifically, are represented in the publishing world. That's something I have been doing as an activist for a very long time.

If people want to access something about Black British women's history, then you can find it in an essay I wrote, bits of it were extracted in *The Guardian* about two years ago. That might give you an overview of the history of the literature. It's so important that we do see ourselves represented in the literature. But for somebody who was Black British growing up at the time that I did, we didn't see ourselves. And it's very important to say that because unless you grew up at that time in Britain, you're unlikely to understand or appreciate that. It's not like if I was

growing up in Nigeria where, actually, there was a body of literature, or Ghana or other parts of Africa, even though women, we know, are still underrepresented. But in Britain there simply was almost no Black representation in literature. And what existed was often by people who had come to Britain as adults and were then writing about their home countries. One exception [was] Buchi Emecheta, although most of her body of work was about Nigeria where she came from. If we have to talk about a mother of Black British writing, we have to say Buchi Emecheta because she arrived, I think in 1960 or so and published about twenty books, and even though she was sidelined by the literary establishment, she was an important literary figure in our history. But in terms of people being born or raised in Britain and writing from that perspective, there was almost a dearth of literature. And that's why when I started, when I went to drama school and started writing for theatre, that's one of the reasons why I was writing Black women's theatre, because it was like, well, if we don't do it, it's never going to exist and there's nothing for us to perform anyway because the idea of cross-racial casting wasn't really as prevalent then as it is now. And so, I have traced the history, the genesis of our literature through the decades. In the nineties, we had a bit of an upsurge, a bit of a moment and then a lot of those writers disappeared. And we're going through a bit of an upsurge now on a very different scale, a much, much larger scale. So, it is as if finally the publishing industry has woken up to the fact that we are around, we've got stories to tell, that people want to buy those stories, and that it's really important that we are included in the publishing world. I won't go into my activism, but I have set up various arts inclusion projects over the decades that have been working towards this moment, along with other people who have also set up projects.

APAB: And that's important. I do want us to turn to your own writing, but I have to acknowledge that it is characteristic of you not only that you have been an activist but that you always acknowledge the people that you've been working with, and the importance of a collective voice and solidarity has always been part of your work which some of us really appreciate. I'm going to extrapolate something from that, that may or may not be true, and that is: I see that collectivity actually in the structure of your novels. I am thinking in particular of *Mr. Loverman* and *Girl, Woman, Other* and the way in which you are so consciously giving us plural voices and different perspectives engaged in a sort of common

project. That is, the question of community is always there, but the different voices of that community are what you're trying to share and give us. Is that fair to say?

BE: I think so. I tend to talk about communities, rather than [the] singular, although we can talk about community broadly as well. *Girl, Woman, Other*, for example, is a polyvocal novel, everyone acknowledges that [with] 12, primarily Black British women, one of whom is non-binary. But polyvocality is something that is sewn throughout all my work. So, the big project for me is the African diaspora. And I always say to people that that is not limiting. And that is what I talk about in my book *Manifesto* actually, because people have said to me, "When are you going to move beyond writing about Black people?" (*APAB and BE laugh*) I have to remind them about the billion or so Black people on the African continent and then the rest of the world as well. There are only sixty million British people and nobody would even dream of suggesting that to a White British writer who only writes White British fiction with no Black or Asian characters, that they are somehow limiting. So that field, the African diaspora, is broad and vast and historical, goes back to prehistory and goes into the future and so many different communities, and you know I have a particular interest in Britain, but my work also spans the world in many ways; different characters come from different parts of the world. I take my characters or situate [them] in different parts of the world and that is really important to me because we are about multiplicity. And one of the most damaging things [about] being racialised as Black in this world, is that it is often very reductive or very stereotypical. If you are Black, you are a particular kind of person and it's very restricting and it can be very oppressive. So, I am telling lots of different kinds of stories. Some of them are fantastical in the sense that they create alternate universes. You mention *Mr. Loverman*. He is a seventy-four-year-old gay Caribbean London man who has lived in London for 50 years; he's with his lover Morris [with whom he's] been together 60 years, married to his wife Carmel 50 years; [he is a] father and grandfather. It's the end of his marriage, she doesn't know he's gay. So, I'm telling this story, this very buried aspect of Black British history or Black British culture which is an older, gay Caribbean man or gay Black man who has led this secret life the whole of his life. Those are the kinds of stories that excite me. Or *The Emperor's Babe*, which was published in 2001, and it's about a Black girl who grows up in Roman London 1,800 years ago, because there were Africans

in Britain 1800 years ago. And that was my starting point for that character. And when I created the character, I was told that there were no Black people in Roman London, which is crazy because Rome was a multicultural city-state. The Roman Empire stretched over thousands of miles. Britain was a Roman colony – why wouldn't there have been Black people in Roman London? A few years after the book was published, they discovered there were Black people in Roman London, so I got there ahead of the historians and archaeologists. (*APAB and BE laugh*) There's so much, it's such a rich field to play with, and that's what I do, I play with it and explore so many different aspects.

APAB: Yes, which is really wonderful. As you say, history, time, space and so on. [Do] you have the novel in front of you?

BE: (*Laughs*) I do.

APAB: Great! Do you have a piece that you would like to read to us?

BE: Carole. A lot of people relate to Carole because she's a young woman in her late twenties who is occupying a space in the corporate world and so she is having to change who she is in order to fit into that world, which is primarily White and predominantly male. And she is of Nigerian heritage. Both her parents are Nigerian but immigrants and she's being brought up and raised in Peckham, South East London. She is very bright, she's mentored by teachers, she goes to Oxford, then she goes into banking. This is Carole on her way to work:

> Carole
>
> walks through Liverpool Street station with its inter-galactic glass and steel ceiling propped up by towering Corinthian columns
>
> she's headed for the escalators and the soaring windows that let in a holy glow of morning light
>
> she passes underneath the timetable board listing departures and arrivals articulated through the medium of glowing alphanumeric, text flipping and updating as announcements bellow from the clustered boom boxes informing passengers about platform numbers and itemizing all stations on routes to final destinations

where this train will end

and the numerous delays due to vandalism on the tracks or leaves on the line or sun on the line or a body under a train

how very inconsiderate, not to her

to choose to throw yourself in front of a mechanical iron beast weighing thousands of tons and racing at a top speed of one hundred and forty milesc per hour?

To choose such a brutal and dramatic finale

Carole knows what drives people to such despair, knows what it's like to appear normal but to feel herself swaying

just one leap away

from

the amassed crowds on the platforms who carry enough hope in their hearts to stay alive

swaying

just one leap away from

eternal

peace

That wasn't actually the best example, but anyway, that's Carole on her way to work.

APAB: It was a good piece because it creates the atmosphere and the vision. Carole is very interesting, of course, because she is the woman of disguises. The woman who has a secret that she needs to [or] feels she needs to keep quiet about in order to negotiate. I love her mother who is like, "I am a Nigerian and so are you, and we're not going to get past this, so let's…" The scenes with her mother and the ways in which the mother helps her re-find herself by dealing with, who is the person that you're going to marry. I will ask you now about the structure of this particular book and the multiple voices, the twelve different voices, all of whom are connected – some intimately, some tangentially. I am one of these

obsessive people that find myself going back, going "Oh! Oh! Oh yes! That was that person's classmate" and "Oh yes! It's the same teacher." Going through all of that and trying to understand. I wonder, what inspired you to create the book that way and what was the kernel that made you in a sense move out and flourish from?

BE: It was because I was fed up with not seeing enough Black women in British literature. It's very simple. It's the same thing that I did when I was a drama student, you know, we were not there in the library, so I thought, well, I was going to create those stories. [I]t was my eighth book and I had written all kinds of other stories, but I hadn't written a book solely dedicated to a number of Black British women and I thought, okay, let me do that, let me show the diversity and the multiplicity of who we are in this country. Or, give a sense of it because, of course, you cannot say that any single work is going to define who we are. So, I started with Carole, actually, and then her mother came into her story, and I thought, okay, her mother is going to be the second character. Then eventually her friend came into the story. LaTisha. So, then LaTisha also had her own section. And then Carole's school teacher, Shirley, then came into the story, and she had her own section. So, it kind of grew in that way. And I was just trying to look [at] all the different ways I could represent these characters so that they are really distinct from each other. So, they have origins in countries in Africa; in countries in the Caribbean; some of them are direct immigrants (two of them are); some of them are mixed race; they grow up and live in different parts of the United Kingdom; they have different classes, different family set-ups, different sexualities – that was very important; I wanted to show a range of sexualities, not to have the usual heterosexual story there and nothing else. Also, as I said, one character in there is non-binary, so that was also important to explore. You've got twelve characters, eleven are women, one is non-binary, and they have different kinds of relationship set-ups, different occupations, they are different ages… so the youngest is 19 [and] the oldest is 93. But with each character – all coming of age in different eras – you see them from their childhood or even from before they are born through to the age that they are in the book. So, there's a huge wealth of experience through the ages in the UK and also in some of the other countries of origin. So, it just became really fertile ground for exploring these characters and originally, I was going to have many more than twelve, but then

each woman has her own section – or their own section – and each section that they are given is about 30 pages, but you get a real sense of their whole lives in those 30 pages. And as you said, they are also interconnected, so there are four mother-daughter relationships out of the main characters but also many other mother-daughter relationships in the background of the stories; it was like creating a collage and trying to make all the pieces work well together and then a lot of very serious research to do that.

APAB: So, you started with Carole and not with Amma.

BE: Yeah, I did.

APAB: That's interesting.

BE: Amma actually begins the book. I just shifted the pieces around when I was editing it. I started [writing] with Carole because I am interested in how power works and Carole is somebody who has bought into the status quo. She loses something of herself, her childhood, the way she speaks, and her culture; she rejects it in order to buy into the status quo and become successful. And she is. And that was something that has interested me for a while, and she seems to embody that, and that is why I began with Carole. Amma is somebody of my generation, a theatre maker, she's a lesbian, she's had a very radical alternative lifestyle and she also is really interesting to me because she is the closest to myself when I was in my twenties. So, I was writing about the 1980s countercultural London scene that I was a part of, and I also knew that Amma would be completely unfamiliar to British readers other than those people who had gone through that era with me. I thought Amma would blow their minds because they would start reading about Amma and they would think, "Oh my God, who is she?!" You know, you hear about her background, which actually is part-Ghanaian, and this kind of squatting lifestyle, and [she's] very much a free spirit, very angry and radical and then she ends up, at my age, having a play at the National Theatre so she's basically joined the establishment in a sense but it's on her own terms. And I just knew that people wouldn't have encountered such a character because there are probably only two women around who are writing books who would write that character because we were around at that time. That would be Jackie Kay and myself. So that's why I started with [Amma]. And also, Carole has a very traumatic experience as a young girl and I didn't

want that to set the tone for the book. I didn't want it to be seen as a tragic book, even though because it is a book about Black women, some people assume it's about suffering. Some people have said to me, "Oh, it's a tragedy and it's about struggle and suffering" and I'm like, "No, no, it's not." And these people have not read it, they assume because this is about Black women, it's going to be tragic and traumatic. And well…

APAB: No, it's not.

BE: I know! But that's what they think.

APAB: It's so joyous. Yes, there's tragedy in it, whose life hasn't got tragedy? There's difficulty, there's confusion, there's "I wish I hadn't said that, I wish I had done that, I wish I had changed my mind" ... whatever… it's the way we live our lives.

I want to turn to the character whose section ends the book, who I call "M'gan" (*laughs*)

BE: M'gan??

APAB: M'gan. M-apostrophe, then you don't have to decide whether it is M-O-R/ or M-E-G/ A-N

BE: Oh, I see, I see… I'm with you, then.

APAB: (*laughing*) Yes! But for me, that was in fact one of the wittiest and bravest parts of the book because of the way you make the person who is born in a Black woman's body and wants to critique that, be the person who is navigating the language and understanding the meaning of being non-binary and they are as confused as the rest of us. And I love that moment when she sort of discovers her community on the Internet and is trying to figure out how to talk about herself at that moment and keeps getting it wrong and keeps being politically incorrect and keeps being chastised. I love that because so many of us have gone through that. And to have *her* going through that so that we become part of her learning process so by the time she is insisting on being 'they' rather than 'he' or 'she', we understand it. I was wondering if you know the piece I'm talking about.

BE: Yes.

APAB: I was wondering if you could read a little bit of that computer exchange (*laughs*).

BE: Okay, so let me find it.

BE: At this stage Morgan is Megan, still identifying as female but wondering about her gender and as you say, she's on the Internet trying to work things out, and she's talking to somebody called Bibi.

> she found sanctuary in chat rooms with other young outsiders as pissed off
>
> as she was, discovered the trans world, engaged in conversations with
>
> people on the trans spectrum
>
> sometimes saying the wrong thing online, encountering someone called
>
> Bibi who wrote back, I'm going to hit the next person who confuses
>
> transsexual with transgender, I swear! people won't tolerate ignorance on
>
> here, love, transgender people are only transsexual when they medically
>
> transition, okay?
>
> right
>
> Fine
>
> Megan clearly had to walk on eggshells or risk setting off a land mine,
>
> none of it really made sense to her, weren't manhood and womanhood set in
>
> stone? she asked Bibi
>
> wrong again! Bibi replied, gender's a social construction, most of us are
>
> born male or female but the concepts of masculinity and femininity are
>
> society's inventions, none of it is innate, are you following?
>
> no, not really
>
> hey, it's actually 'Feminism 101', where you been, Megan? head in the clouds?

> yeh, 'spose so, living on Planet Parents, don't bite, btw, just curious
>
> ah, a sensitive one, I'll go easy on you from now on, do your research, seriously

It was interesting writing Megan who transitions to Morgan, non-binary, because I was learning about what that means while I was writing it and when I first wrote her section – wrote their section – I wrote it where Megan is already Morgan, already non-binary, and using the personal pronoun 'they'. And then I found that I kept tripping up over the use of the 'they' in the text and I just thought, "If I'm tripping up, the reader's going to trip up" so, I went back to her childhood and showed you her process of her transitioning, which you're talking about, and the journey she goes on and then eventually when Morgan becomes 'they', the reader gets it totally, they get where Morgan is coming from and yes, so Morgan walking on eggshells trying to find the right language to describe this new transgender world, it's difficult for them as it is for many of us. So, yeah, that's what I did, I put that dilemma in their hands (*laughs*).

APAB: (*laughing*) Well, you did it very well, I must confess . You do succeed in bringing us along. To the point where I am about to send your novel to somebody facing that dilemma. Because it's not easy on either side. And to be honest, yours was the first thing I read that made it so clear how difficult it was, but at the same time humanised the process both from the point of view of the person transitioning as well as the point of view of the people receiving them. Her grandmother's responses, the point where her grandmother says, "Look, love, I was born in the 1920s" or whatever it was, you know, "You do your thing but it's too late for me, I'm a hundred, take it or leave it!" (*APAB and BE laughing*) "I love you anyway, you can come to the farm but that… I've got other things to fight!" Which was also very [much] to the point. Her grandmother had had different things to negotiate, generations of displacement, fatherlessness or in her case, a father who didn't get it, and looking for her daughter for seventy years. So, again, the complexity of the stories that get bound up in this vision of "This is who we are and need to understand".

There are a couple of people who have identified themselves [in the chat], including the person who invited us both here, Amina Mama, and I just want to read what Amina says because I think it's important and it emphasises what you said when you introduced yourself and your origins. Amina has put up on the platform that she grew up between Nigeria and London, so the exactness of your portrayals hits her very deeply. And it is true that there was only Buchi Emecheta in those days, and [she's] celebrating the fact that our daughters and mothers have you to read. So that was her comment.

BE: Thank you.

APAB: Yes, I knew you wouldn't have had the chance to read that so I thought I would share it. Amina also said she loved *The Emperor's Babe*, so I want to go back to that just a little. You've talked about why you wrote that, but what went into being able to present that story in a way that was so convincing it made people challenge you?

BE: I had read a book called *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* by Peter Fryer published in about 1984. It was the first book I had read, although there were three or four books before that one, that looked at the deeper Black British history that, of course, we hadn't been taught in schools and we're still not taught in schools in the UK. He talks about a legion of Moors in the Roman army being stationed at Hadrian's Wall in the north of the country in 211 AD and that always stuck with me because the idea of Africans being in Britain nearly 2000 years ago, staying here, living here was just extraordinary at the point at which I read that book, which was in the 1980s. And so, I always thought, "Oh, this is so exciting, I want more people to know about it" and I didn't know how to put that information out there. *The Emperor's Babe* was published in 2001, so it was a long time later that I actually found the story that I wanted to tell, and it was like, "Okay, I'm going to put this Black girl in Roman London". A lot of the research was into Roman London and the Romans because there wasn't then, in the 1990s, much information written about Black people in the Roman Empire or Black people in Roman London, but there's a lot, there's a helluva lot of information about the Romans, of course. So, I did a lot of research, and you know, because I am a creative writer rather than an academic writer, the books that were most useful were things like *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* because as a writer you just want to imagine how people lived their lives. And so that book,

even though it was in Rome, I transplanted the culture to London, because a lot of it would have been transplanted. It would tell you what happened in the Romans' daily life from the minute they woke up to what happened while they were sleeping - what they slept on, how they washed, what kind of toilets they had, what make-up they wore, women and how did they do their hair, what clothes did they wear, what did they eat, right through to the end of the day. And that was brilliant because I was then able to create this really vivid picture of Roman London and put my character inside it. But yeah, I was using my imagination. And in this book, I also play around with history, so again, I have created an alternate universe; some of it is very true historically and some of it I have just made up so I can muck about. That's why I can never be an historian because I just muck about.

APAB: It's interesting though. I had a similar experience very, very recently. I am working on an epic poem, in fact, of Black women all over the place, the spirit of a Black woman from what is now Ghana who is following her lost daughters in all these spaces and through time. And I was so excited to discover that book about Black Tudors, Black people in Tudor England.[1] What excited me was looking at the timeline. I grew up in this little English country village outside Oxford which was part of the divorce settlement between Henry VIII and Anne of Cleves … (*laughs*)... documented! And I found enough material in this book on Black Tudors to decide that one of my little daughters is going to get lost in Standlake in Anne of Cleves' manor house!

BE: Great! Great!

APAB: Those histories can be inspiring because they let us know, you know…

BE: You know, years ago, when I started acting, they would never cast people of colour in British period dramas because they said there were no people of colour. But "Cheddar Man" was a Black man; Cheddar Man is 10,000 years old, the fossils of Cheddar Man, this Black person, [are] 10,000 years old.

So, we have been here through time. And I think people are slowly starting to acknowledge that. And certainly, *Black Tudors* as well, those books that are bringing this history alive.

1 Miranda Kaufmann. 2017. Black Tudors: The Untold Story. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

APAB: Yes, it is liberating and so wonderful to find the historians supporting our imaginative lives.

BE: (*laughs*) Yeah.

APAB: I just want to acknowledge people who are slowly typing in [the chat] where they are. So, there are people, of course, here at the Institute [of African Studies, Legon], there's somebody in from Nigeria, somebody listening in from London, and people in the United States. Now, somebody's asking, Minna Salami who's listening from London says, "Thank you for such a compelling conversation." She enjoyed and loved *Girl, Woman, Other*. She says the book has been translated into numerous languages and she says, "I wondered if there has been anything that stands out for you in its reception in other cultures, especially in the African diaspora outside of the UK." A wonderful question.

BE: Okay. Hi Minna! I know Minna. Minna's the author of *Sensuous Pleasures* [sic][2] which is a fantastic book about African feminism [and] spirituality. Everybody should go out and get that book.

[*Girl, Woman, Other*] is published in America and I have had responses there from African origin people and it's been very positive and very revelatory for them because I think in America, we are still pretty invisible as Black British people so people have said they have found it very informative and surprising, so that's good. And it's published in about 35 other languages and ongoing and it's very hard, actually, because you don't know how books are going down, you don't know what the translations are like; you don't know what they have done with your text so I haven't had a lot of responses at all almost from anywhere else in the world, from the African diaspora. Just occasionally individuals might get through because they speak English and they send me messages, but I don't really know, I just know that it's out there. It's very heartwarming to think that people are reading it and engaging with it, people of the African diaspora [who] may be in Korea or Georgia or Mongolia, but I don't really know what their responses are.

APAB: That's interesting that it already exists in 35 languages; that is very fast, that's wonderful.

2 Minna Salami. 2020. Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone. New York, NY: Amistad.

BE: I mean, yeah, that's amazing. Previously I had four books translated into four languages over the course of 26 years, so it's a change, it's a big change.

APAB: Yes, the glittering prizes are sometimes really wonderful.

BE: Absolutely. Life-changing.

APAB: Thirty-five. Which is the most surprising language for you, that it has been translated into?

BE: Actually, Mongolian.

APAB: Mongolian?

BE: Yeah, Mongolian!

APAB: Oh wow!

BE: It is extraordinary. You know, one of the covers for one of the languages in the Far East, they sent me the cover for approval and they made the cover look like a person from their country as opposed to a Black person. So, I sent it back. That's happened before. They're probably thinking, "Well, if it's got a Black person on the cover it's not going to sell in our country" so they put a person from their ethnic group on the cover. And it's like, "No, no, no, no, no, you're not doing that!" (*laughs*)

APAB: Interesting!

BE: Yeah, very interesting.

APAB: There's always that tension between, how shall I say it, fidelity and market sales, right? Really interesting.

APAB: Somebody else is asking if there's one character you could have written a whole novel about, one of your twelve characters.

BE: Oh, quite a few of them, actually. I think Amma, Yazz, Carole, Bummi, Shirley, Winsome…

APAB: All of them!

BE: Yeah, most of them… Can I just show you? This is my new book, *Manifesto*. Published on the seventh of October. It's called *Never Giving Up* as well. It's about how my life has been shaped by my creativity and vice versa.

APAB: Wonderful! Would you like to read something from that?

BE: Okay, let me do that.

APAB: We have a few [minutes] so in fact, that can be the closing remarks. That's exciting.

BE: Oh, let me just read from the introduction. Cos I am not used to reading from it.

APAB: (*laughs*) It's hot off the press! Thank you!

BE: Yeah, hot off the press. So, this is from my introduction:

> Most people in the arts have role models – writers, artists, creatives – who have inspired them. But what are the other elements that lay the foundation for our creativity and steer the direction of our careers? This book is my answer to this question for myself, offering insights into my heritage and childhood, my lifestyle and relationships, the origins and nature of my creativity, and my personal development strategies and activism. For those who have only encountered my writing at this newly elevated point of arrival, this book reveals what it took to keep going and growing, and for those who have been struggling for a long time who might recognise their stories in mine, I hope you find it inspirational as you travel along your own paths towards achieving your ambitions.

Tada!

APAB: Thank you! That's a wonderful concluding statement. As always, motivating us to be inspirational and think about our own lives. On that note, I would like to thank all of you who are out there in different parts of the world, those of you who are in this room, for being here. This has been a privilege.

BE: Thank you.

APAB: Always, always, always uplifting to see and hear you, Bernardine. It matters to some of us that you are out there in the world, so keep on your journey, and thank you so much.

BE: Thank you!