

## **Transracial Negotiation of the Self in the Poetry of Jackie Kay**

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### **Abstract**

Applying some notions formulated by the cultural critic Stuart Hall about identity formation in contemporary Britain, this paper tries to show how the contemporary British poet Jackie Kay (b.1961) negotiates a sense of the self from the perspective of mixed parentage—a black child born to a Nigerian father and a white Scottish mother, and adopted by white Scottish parents. Though her autobiographical verse *The Adoption Papers* (1991) largely examines her adopted identity, it contains references to her black identity, enlarged on in her next two volumes, *Other Lovers* (1993) and *Off Color* (1998). Although she writes as poet whose original culture and language are British—her accent and idioms are Scottish—her identity is questioned due to the fact of her mixed parentage. Color—also blood and health—becomes a mark of difference, a difference which she tries to get over. It is rather this politicized sense of identity which she challenges. She constructs her identity in relation to a white majority that has the power to decide who should and who should not claim a true British identity. In order to construct a "positive" image of her, she has to get recognition from that other, to go through the eye of his "needle, according to Hall. But the eye of that "needle" has narrowed down because of racial discrimination that reached its peak with Thatcher's Nationality Act (1981), which denied people of color a claim for a British national identity. This attitude created different forms of resistance on the part of all Black writers. On Kay's part, the present researcher detects physical violence, verbal irony, identification with other blacks who achieved "cultural visibility" and imaginative border crossings. All these emphasize her search for an identity, based not on ethnic, but on social and cultural identification, a national identity that includes a local sense of belonging and extends also beyond it, in short one that reconciles her blackness and Britishness. For her, poetry becomes a site of representation, resisting a gaze that ignores her voice and focuses only on her face.

## نحو مفهوم للذات متجاوز للعرق في شعر جاكي كاي Jackie Kay

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### ملخص

باستخدام بعض آراء الناقد الثقافى البريطانى ستيفورات هول حول تشكيل الذات فى المجتمع البريطانى المعاصر يحاول هذا البحث دراسة تشكيل الذات عند الشاعرة البريطانية المعاصرة جاكي كاي Jackie Kay (المولودة فى 1961) المنطلق من منظور أصلها المختلط كطفلة سوداء مولودة لأب نيجيرى وأم اسكتلندية بيضاء، ثم تبنيها على يد أبوين اسكتلنديين بيض أيضاً. وبالرغم أن مجموعتها الشعرية الأولى "أوراق التبني" (1991) *The Adoption Papers* (1991) تعالج بشكل كبير الذات المتبناه إلا أنها تحوى اشارات—توسعت فيها كاي فى مجموعتيها التاليتين "عشاق آخرون" (1993) *Other Lovers* و "شحوب اللون" (1998) *Off Color* (1998) — إلى الذات السمراء ، وعلى الرغم من أنها تكتب إنطلاقاً من خلفية ثقافية ولغوية بريطانية إلا أن ذاتها دائماً محل تساؤل بسبب أصولها المختلطة ، ولذا يصبح اللون — شأنه شأن الدم والصحة العامة — مؤشر اختلاف تحاول كاي Kay أن تتجاوزه. بمعنى أدق تحاول التصدى للمفهوم السياسى للذات، فهي تحاول أن تعطى صورة لذاتها من خلال علاقاتها بالأغلبية البيضاء التى تمتلك القوة كى تعطى أو تمنع صك الهوية القومية لمن تشاء ، وتحاول ان تخلق صورة ايجابية لنفسها من خلال إعراف الآخر بها، لكن المشكلة إن العين التى ينظر بها الآخر لها يغيم عليها التمييز العنصرى الذى وصل ذروته مع صدور قانون الجنسية فى عهد تاتشر (1981) والذى بمقتضاه حرم الملونون من الحق فى الجنسية البريطانية ولكنها— شأن الكثيرين— تبنى أشكالاً من المقاومة لذلك التمييز العنصرى تشمل العنف الجسدى، والمفارقة اللفظية الساخرة، والتضامن مع ذوى البشرة السمراء اللذين حققوا حضوراً ثقافياً، وكذلك رحلات متخيلة عبر الحدود. وتعكس كل هذه الاشكال محاولتها لخلق مفهوم للذات متجاوزا العرق يقوم على روابط ثقافية واجتماعية بينها وبين الأغلبية، فى محاولة لفض التعارض بين لون البشرة (الاسمر) ولإلتناء للمكان (بريطانيا).

The 1970s represent a defining historical moment in which black as "an identificatory category" or a "political signifier" (Donnell xii) asserted itself in British society. When people of Asian, African, and Caribbean descent were marked as black, a new "collective identity" was conceived in "political" rather than "biological" terms, showing how all of these races shared a "common historical experience of British racism" (Mercer 291). By then Britain was viewed as a country in which they were "in but not of," a country in which they were "estranged, dispossessed, and brutalized," and in which they felt a need to resist and protest against white culture that appeared unchallenged (Hall *et al. Policing the Crisis* 357). First generation writers such as George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, and Samuel Selvon wrote works whose settings were non-British as they referred back to their childhood homes. Lamming's *In The Castle of My Skin* (1953) and *Emigrants* (1954) and Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) express a sense of foreignness felt in their characters' accents and skin, both marking them as outsiders. They, however, ignore addressing Britain from inside where "the mixture of races is now a real facet of [British] identity" (Philips 428). They define a secure and holistic identity—often described as "postcolonial" (Dawes 261)—in terms of either their "common origin" or "common structure of experience or both" in order to contest "negative images" about themselves and replace those images with positive ones by trying to discover the true and credible content of who they are (Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 223).

A second generation of writers appeared in the 1990s, and that sense of collective identity was replaced by "diverse acts of self-definition" that articulated a new sense of what it means to be British. "Black" started to be seen as one identificatory category alongside that of an artist, writer, woman, or Muslim, or gay. This new perception testifies to the fact that "cultural identities are formed through complex patterns of difference and alliance, in the context of a nation in which definitions of nationality are now more mobile and multiple" (Donnell xiii- xiv). Writers of this generation such as Diran Adebayo, Zadie Smith, Jackie Kay—among many others—started to define what it means to be British, showing how the two categories—black and

British—could be reconciled. They started to produce their works in more localized tones, marking a shift in terms of "identification and representation," from being seen as "the black presence in Britain" to being seen as "the black dimension" of it" (xiii). If the identity of the first generation was defined in terms of their immigrant status, that of the second was based either on ancestry or a British birthplace. No longer was there a need to take pride in one's heritage—be it African, West Indian or Asian—because there was a strong desire on their part to claim identity from inside British culture. Publishing houses played a significant role in helping them not only to discard the "postcolonial hat" but also to "flee from any notion of another home..."(Dawes 261). Therefore, they no longer accepted labels such African, Afro-Caribbean, or postcolonial, since those labels, politically motivated, meant their marginality. Testifying to the hybridity of contemporary society, they challenged a concept of British identity based on the opposition between black and white. Instead they constructed an identity that was "relational and incomplete, in process" (Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 224), an identity that sought to negotiate with the other (white), in order to justify its claim for a national (British) identity.

The British identity that was then defined in imperial days as "strongly centered" and "highly exclusivist" (Hall, "The Local and the Global" 20) is now being replaced by one that is multiple and diverse. Several reasons have contributed to that change. These include post-war "migration, devolution, globalization, the end of Empire," the decline of Britain's influence globally, and "cultural pluralism and some degree of integration with Europe" (Weedon 74). Another influential factor is racism which shapes the blacks' relationship with Britishness, and drives them to produce different forms of resistance. Because of racism, black people have trouble getting to know who they are in relation to white people who have the power to decide who should and who should not have the right to claim a British identity. With regard to that inherited legacy—Gilroy argues that it "bears the imprint of the past" in which blacks were denied a British identity because they were conceived as "non-humans or non citizens" (*The Black Atlantic* 443)—they showed resistance because if their identity, as Hall explains, was to achieve its "positive," it had to do so through

"the narrow eye of the negative. It had to go through the eye of the other's needle before it could construct itself" ("The Local and the Global"21). The narrow eye of the negative (the white) gave rise to a limited and limiting concept of British identity that was strengthened by Thatcher's Nationality Act (1981), which restricted the British nationality only to whites<sup>1</sup>. And "the eye of the needle of the other"—the white—would not allow them a satisfying and secure sense of self. It rather created uncertainty about who they were. Therefore, they were constantly struggling to create different forms of resistance to that narrow concept of British identity. They were after a broader, more diverse, and non-exclusive concept that would guarantee them an equal space within that national one.

Applying some of Hall's notions about identity construction in contemporary Britain, this paper tries to show how the contemporary British poet Jackie Kay (b.1961) negotiates a sense of the self from the perspective of mixed parentage—a black child born to a Nigerian father and a white Scottish mother, and adopted by white Scottish parents. Though her autobiographical verse *The Adoption Papers* (1991) largely examines her adopted identity, it contains references to her black identity, enlarged on in her next two volumes, *Other Lovers* (1993) and *Off Color* (1998). While reflecting Kay's attempt to infiltrate the narrow eye of the other to construct a "positive" image of herself, a number of poems in those volumes reveal her dissatisfaction with being looked upon or appreciated in terms of her skin color alone. In other words, they explain how she rejects black as an identificatory category, as a "a color-coded, politically-based term of marking and definition which has only meaning when questions of racial difference and, in particular, white supremacy are deployed" (Davis 7). She insists on carrying out the process of infiltration on her own terms. This is because she seeks to reconcile her "unfinished" identities (Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* 439), namely, her blackness and her Britishness.

The poems in those volumes record Kay's struggle to reconcile her two heritages—the Scottish and the African—so that she can construct a fluid and non-exclusive identity that integrates "a black face and a Scottish voice" (Gish 182). *The Adoption Papers* shows

how in the absence of what Said calls a "filiative" mode of belonging, an "affiliative" (16) one fails to create a secure sense of self. The speaker, a biracial female, born to a white Scottish mother and black Nigerian father and adopted by a white Scottish couple, is doubly displaced because of her having been adopted and of her being black. Though the volume largely focuses on her adopted identity, which weakens her sense of self, the researcher's focus will be on her black identity which is equally threatened by racial abuse as in "Black Bottom"—a poem halfway through the volume (24-27). The interplay of voices, creating what Patke calls the "polyphonic cohesion" (38) of the poem, reflects the differing perspectives on the question of color in contemporary Britain: the adoptive mother's, the birth mother's, and the daughter's." While examining racial abuse as a threat to the speaker's sense of self, the poem also showcases her strategy to resist that abuse (this strategy includes physical violence, performing arts, identification with a celebrity of color—civil rights activist Angela Davis).

The eye of the needle through which a black person has to go to construct a positive sense of self has narrowed down because of different forms of racism which are plaguing contemporary Britain. Undermining one's sense of self, some of these forms such as "harassment and denial of social right," "name-calling" and "exclusion," and inferior treatment of people (Lewis and Phoenix 121) are powerfully criticized in this poem. The adoptive mother's recount of the circumstances under which the daughter was adopted suggests that a black person at that time (the early sixties of the previous century) was less of a human being, an entity without a full identity. However, for the white adoptive parents, color does not matter. Though this attitude saves them from being put on the waiting list for long, it surprises the adoption agency officer:

and they said *oh well are you sure*  
*in that case we have a baby for you ---*  
to think she wasn't even thought of as a baby,  
my baby, my baby (13-16).

Some of the technical qualities which King detects in the whole volume appear in this poem—indeed many of them reappear in subsequent volumes. They include, "strongly stressed rhythms of

Glaswegian speech with its monosyllabic diction and phrasal cadences," lines of varying lengths and rich rhymes, especially internal rhymes, alliteration, and recurring pattern of sounds, different "kinds of English," a "variety of tones, attitudes, and emotions," and deliberate use of "syntactical repetition" and "rhetorical questions"—the last two qualities are reminiscent of traditions of the blues music (517). Except for the word "baby," the quoted lines, like much of the poem, are monosyllabics, and all are heavily stressed. The syntactical repetition of "my bay, may baby" indicates some of the shifting tones of the poem, the relaxing, and somehow disrespectful, tone of the agency officer, and the ironic one of the adoptive mother.

The response of the adoption officer reflects a general social attitude of racial discrimination which the adoptive mother tries to resist. Tolerant and compassionate, she ignores colour, justifies her daughter's aggressive response to her peers' abusive attitude, and considers "racialism" as ignorance. She is a symbol of those ready to accept others who are different, but she is not powerful enough to change her society's inferior perception of coloured people. Her experience of racial discrimination seems to echo that of the birth mother, though the latter seems less resistant to that discrimination. The latter recalls the feelings brought on her because of her attachment to someone—the daughter's would-be-father—who was "the colour of peat":

when we walked out heads turned  
like horses, folk stood like trees  
their eyes fixed on us---it made me  
burn, that hot glare; my hand  
would sweat down to his bone.  
Finally, alone, we'd melt  
Nothing, nothing would matter. (84-90)

These heavily accented monosyllabics uttered by the birth mother suggest a tone of embarrassment and defiance simultaneously. Ignoring her society's disapproval of her attachment to a colored person, she went far in her relation with him. But soon she was deserted by him. However, she could see his colour in the face of her

newborn baby "as if he was there / in that glass cot looking back through her" (92-93).

The embarrassment she felt because of that attachment was replaced by the humiliation, caused by name-calling, her daughter was exposed to by the neighbourhood children, schoolmates, and teachers. But the daughter was not passive: she responded to a school boy calling her "Sambo" and "Dirty Darkie," (racially motivated words) by hitting him, a violent act which invited the teacher's anger:

In a few years time you'll be a juvenile delinquent.

Do you know what it is? Look it up in the dictionary.

She spells each letter with slow pressure.

Read it out to the class.

Thug. Vandal. Hooligan. Speak up. Have you lost your tongue? (36-40)

With their varying lengths, short utterances, and rhetorical questions, the lines reflect society's stereotypes about colored people, which are again asserted in the teacher's assumption that as a black person, the girl should have a sense of rhythm. When the girl fails to get her steps right while preparing for the school show, the teacher shouts: "I thought / you [black] people had it in your blood" (55-56). In such a racist atmosphere, blood, or rather genealogy, becomes another indicator of identity. That form of racism brings in the contrast between the notion of pure blood—the genealogy of white people—and the notion of impure blood—that of black people. Accordingly, that teacher believes that the blood of black people is different from that of the white. She represents an attitude which suggests that blood-mixing contaminates the white blood (though this so-called "scientific" racism was discredited by biologists in 1951, it still lingers in the popular consciousness<sup>2</sup>). When the daughter asks, "*What Is In My Blood?*" we discover a gap between what society thinks of that girl's culture of origin and her ignorance of it. However, the question has wider implications, given her background as a black child adopted and brought up by white parents, a fact that dissociated her from that culture.

Like the majority of "black children brought up in a white environment," this daughter then experiences "some form of psychological distress," which makes it difficult for her to "get a



strong sense of being black and proud when there is nothing to reinforce this notion" (Kay, "Interview with Mason" 38). Belonging to two racial groups, one valued by society and the other devalued by it, she tries to reconcile her racial identity to her national one. But she fails to establish connection with her birth-mother, a connection that would heal that sense of a shattered being. She then turns to role models such as the white American movie stars Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, and the African American black activist Angela Davis—figures, whose "cultural visibility" (Hargreaves 6) cannot be ignored. Realizing the impossibility of reckoning with the first three because of the colour of their skin, she settles on Angela Davis as a role model. As far as physical appearance is concerned, she rejoices in the typical similarity between her and Davis: besides the colour of their skin, both have "big hair" that "grows out instead of down." But thinking about the colour of her skin becomes an obsession as the mirror constantly reminds her of it. She gives herself "a bit of shock," wonders whether she really looks like this, as if she were somebody else, and asks whether Davis herself thought about her colour. To overcome that confusion, she realizes that identification with Davis should go beyond the colour of her skin to encompass courage and personal achievement. This accounts for her emotional defence of Davis who had been tried and acquitted of suspected involvement in the abduction and murder of Judge Harold Haley in California in 1970<sup>3</sup>. Her political awareness is clear, and that sets her above her school peers. Her adoptive parents were Marxist and anti-nuclear activists. Because of this political background, she was encouraged to wear a badge at school which said, "FREE ANGELA DAVIS" to which her school peers responded, 'Who's she?' (132-133). Her choice of Davis validates the claims that "the discontinuous histories" of black Americans contributed to "the distinctive experiences" of their British counterparts (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 98). Unable to know her ancestry, she turned to that black model who, though experiencing alienation in her society, insisted on making a connection between her identity and place.

For Kay, that connection does not seem easy to obtain because the place still bears strong marks of racism that is not limited to

harassment and name-calling, but also extends to a person's well-being. This becomes clear in her volume *Off Color* where she extends her concern with disease and sickness from the personal to the social, suggesting that a person is "off color" if that person is part black in a white society, and society is "off color" if it is biased against people of color. Referring then to both not feeling well and to "mixed race-ness" ("Kay in Conversation with Dyer" 57), the title suggests that health—like the color of skin and blood—becomes another discriminatory indicator of racial identity in contemporary Britain.

The opening poem of the volume "Where It Hurts" (9-12) articulates the threat that racism causes to one's sense of self in terms of a sick black person examined by a prejudiced white doctor. So the eye of the needle that a black person has to go through is not only limited to school peers and teachers, but also extends itself to include the doctor who, because of the nature of his profession, is supposed to be unbiased. The site of abuse is the sick body of the black person which, because constantly inflicted with disease and pain, becomes a "bloody battlefield" (line 10). A lower sense of self becomes clear at the end when the poetic persona foretells that she, compared to white people, would receive a different death. Both the life and death of that self are determined by racial discrimination.

This poem displays some of the technical qualities which King detects in the first volume such as shifting tones, parallel structures, monosyllables, and occasional and internal rhymes. In a frightening tone, for example, the poetic persona describes the ruthlessness of the doctor's hand as it examines the sick body: it rests on her "guts" like "claws," beaks at her kidney like "crow," presses heavily across her chest, with a final impression that the body itself has turned into a "bloody battlefield." To show how that physical self is threatened by disease, she descends to the lower part of the body. She depicts her knees as being heavily filled with water whose flowing sound is echoed in the music created by alliteration in "slapping, slopping, / slobbering at the shore." The constantly changing physical condition that that sick black person experiences makes it hard for others to reach a truer sense of who she is: she lies down when other people are in motion, and is locked in a dark room when they are "laughing in light."

Sick and "sick to death of being sick," she turns to the doctor, whose tone is humiliating:

When did you start feeling this way? he mumbles,  
Already scribbling my sentence, my fate.  
What's the disease inheritance? What's in the family?  
What odd traits have been passed down? Background?  
(32-36)

She is viewed as a "germ" by the doctor, a view that generates a sensation of real physical pain. Representing not only himself but a whole social attitude, this doctor has already constructed a negative image not only of her but also of her whole race. This general perception of identity formation in contemporary Britain shows how racism and "the stress of living in a hostile" atmosphere "directly harm health" (*Parekh Report* 178). From the first moment, she realizes that this is not a medical examination in the usual sense of the term. She feels that the doctor seeks to read, or rather attempts to misread, the history of the whole race in her personal history. She spots this prejudice in his eyes, a prejudice that reflects damaging mythologies whose racist discourses suggest a strong connection between blackness and ill-health<sup>4</sup>. However, she is on the offensive, answering in a light tone, rendered in parallel structures which are rich in monosyllabics—mostly verbs that mock the doctor's misguided perception of her race:

Christ! I come from a long line of sufferers.  
We lived with live-in disease-ridden beasts.  
We caught rabies, had babies, passed madness down.  
We clenched our crossed teeth. (32-40)

But her irony cannot mar the fact that she is prone to sickness and pain because her identity is socially conceived in negative terms. Suffering because of her illness and the negative social category the doctor tries to imprison her in, she, however, continues fighting humiliating stereotypes concerning her black identity. Besides her light tone, she adopts another strategy—though escapist in nature—to counteract the doctor's racist gaze. It is a longing for disembodiment: "If I could have a day, an ordinary day, / away from the worry—the body—I would be happy" (58-60). But this remains a wish, and the burden of sickness

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becomes so grave that it is actually estranging her from her real self: "I've begun to think in obscenities, I can't stop... / How did I get like this? So far away from myself" (76-77). Despite her brave attempt to overcome the doctor's racist gaze, her body fails her:

Bored to death, belching, burping, breaking wind.  
Oh the terrible ennui, the listlessness of illness.

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There's not a pain I haven't had.  
I could paint the pains on a big white sheet.  
The weary wabbit world of the worried unwell.

"(99-100, 118-120)

She feels powerless because she has tried without success all kinds of medicine—official and popular. She then starts to wonder whether her personal fate is indeed related to that of the whole race: "It's not just me is it? Was I? I'm not the only one. / Were we always this ill? Was I?" (121-122). These rhetorical questions seem to establish a link between health and racial identity, one reinforced in her prediction that she—indeed the whole race—would die a different kind of death, again articulated mostly in monosyllabics with occasional and internal rhymes:

When we die is the sensation heavy, light?  
I'll die a weighty, hefty, heaving death.  
Other light people around me might take flight  
Like graceful swallows. But I'll be a huge pig  
Squealing. A ... great buffalo roaring.  
What a big bitter pill to swallow  
--will it be red, will it be yellow?  
After all I've been through. A great thumping death.

(123-129).

As a system of belief, racism determines both her life and her death as the double meaning of the word "light" suggests. It could refer either to physical weight or to skin color—notable indicators which racist discourse propagates about the formation of racial identity in contemporary Britain. The obvious contrast between the images of "graceful swallows" and "roaring buffalo" hint that those of light weight and skin (white people) can live and die in a different way from those who do not have it (black people).

The burden of illness, coupled then with racism, has almost estranged the speaker from herself. The danger of the latter is that it creates a fixed type of identity in which a person is doomed to remain in spite of his/her strenuous attempts to dissociate himself/herself from it. It is a type of identity according to which people are denied their social rights and treated as inferior. In short, a person of color is allowed to pass through "the eye of the needle" only as a non-citizen, and—worst of all—as an animal if he does not accept to be called black. In "Race, Racist, Racism"—from the same volume (21-23)—we are made aware that a black person who does not accept black as an identificatory category is called a "donkey." This poem suggests that this racial categorization starts with language which creates stereotypes that become, as the metaphor of the rope suggests, suffocating.

The poem is a monologue spoken by an apparently black person who could also be Kay's alter ego, with an occasional intervention from the poet. It is divided into six sections of varying length (the fifth being the shortest, consisting only of two lines). It blends narrative and dramatic modes of expression, the former being limited to the speaker and the latter engaging him with the poet, and containing repeated structures. The poem plays on the derivations of the word "race": the word itself positively designates a group identity based on shared characteristics, but its derivations become derogative when they denote a negative characterization of group identity, promoted individually or collectively. The opening and closing monosyllabic line—"Say the words came first"—seems to suggest that racial categorization, which threatens one's sense of self, starts with language (and can be resisted with language as well).

The images of the rope and the chair in the first section of the poem explain how suffocating a racially fixed identity can be. In the second section, that fixed identity appears to be a false obsession haunting the speaker: "It is all my fault for reading / Something into nothing. / I know it is driving me insane" (15-17). But this obsession becomes real once we reach the third section. Here we realize that the speaker's sense of self is threatened because of the curse of racial categorization, carried first and foremost by language. The speaker is

still marked as "other" because of the color of his skin, and therefore excluded from mainstream national identity. This threat to his sense of identity is not only a matter of individual but rather of communal designation. It then creates an insecure sense of self, given the fact that its verbal manifestation (racism) becomes, ironically, the curse of the English language, the gift given by the country to its people. That curse becomes a sickness not only of one individual, but of a whole society, a sickness not only of the tongue, but also of the mind: "Who could help then? / What doctors could come to scrub a tongue / to disinfect a mind, to stop a plague. / Nobody knew how to cure it" (31-34).

The speaker tries to evade the burden of such a plague by almost denying his black color as an identificatory category, as the fourth section shows:

There is no such thing as black, said he.  
A pot is black, the earth, a shoe.  
But not I, said he, not I.  
I am not black, said he. (44-47).

Images of the pot, earth, and a shoe suggest a fixed type of identity—hence a lower sense of self—which he tries to escape from. In his refusal to be permanently fixed in that discriminatory category, he is after a fluid sense of self "I will be oak or hazelnut or coffee. / I will be toffee. I will be donkey. / But I will not be black..."(52-54). All these objects seem to support that fluid concept of identity, a concept that contradicts the one that his society tries to force on him. It is the contradiction between these concepts that Kay wants to resolve in order to have a secure sense of self. In other words, she wants to eliminate what appears to be a disparity between being black and being British, and believes that once this apparent disparity removed, it can be a source of strength.

But resolving this contradiction does not seem to be an easy task, given society's insistence on characterizing coloured people like her—when she passes through the eye of its needle—as "other," she is hence deemed inferior. This exclusion is coupled with feelings of estrangement, which the speaker in "So You think I'm a Mule?"—a poem from the first volume (n.p.<sup>5</sup>)—tries to resist strongly. The poem, a dialogue between Kay and a white Glaswegian woman, examines

the relationship between identity, space, and race. In the process, it presents two notions of identity, a racist one based on skin colour and adopted by the woman asking Kay about her original home, and a collective one based on a common historical condition preferred by Kay. There is then a conflict between the identity Kay adopts and that ascribed to her because of "things 'read' from her" (Lewis and Phoenix 131)—particularly her skin colour. The poet mixes various linguistic registers such as the Scots dialect ("take your beady eyes offa my skin" and "ain't nobody debating my blackness"), colloquial English ("Snookered she wonders where she should go / from here"), and the jargon of educated people (" 'mixed race problem'" and "the 'dialectics of mixtures'") in order to articulate tension between those notions. The woman seems to disrupt a sense of identity defined in terms of place: she does not imagine that a black person can belong to Scotland. She appears to be confused because of that preconceived notion of black people's identity, a notion that excludes them from the national (British) identity. Ignoring Kay's Glaswegian accent, she insists that her colour qualifies her as an outsider, usually an immigrant: "The white face hesitates / the eyebrows raise / the mouth opens / then snaps shut / incredulous / yet too polite to say outright liar" (5-10). Her notion of identity is marked by difference. Accordingly, she defines Kay as an outsider, consequently deemed inferior in the light of the unequal relationship between "them and us." This is part of the inherited ideology of colonialism that excludes coloured people and denies them a British identity, as Gilroy mentioned before (see page 2).

At best, Kay falls to the category of a non-citizen, according to that woman. Such a characterization of Kay brings to light the question of racial purity. When she is cornered by Kay's insistence on her rootedness—"Glasgow and Fife"—the woman turns to that question. She is convinced that Kay is "mulatto," "hybrid," "half-caste," and "mixed race"—vocabulary that suggests racial hybridity. But Kay rejects that woman's argument. In so doing, she wants to settle on a notion of identity based not on an immediate biological origin but rather on a historical one. Although she uses a sexual metaphor suggestive of her mixed biological origin, she refuses the

hybrid personal identity consequent upon it and prefers a collective racial one instead:

I'm going to my Black sisters  
to women who nourish each other  
on belonging  
There's a lot of us  
Black women struggling to define  
just who we are  
where we belong  
and if we know no home  
we know one thing:  
we are Black  
we're at home with that." (55-65)

If the woman wants to view identity as unchanging, thus locating black people like Kay in a permanent category, The latter's response disrupts such a view, shaking that certainty. Kay, moreover, prefers to identify herself with a collective identity which gives meaning to her individual one. The monosyllabic parallel structures which come at the end illustrate that though Kay may not know where she comes from, she knows who she is and where she belongs. She celebrates difference in order to control her identity. And this requires the "us", like this woman, to be tolerant of, and accepting of the "them" like her on their terms.

But Kay, who was at the beginning intent on establishing a link between her personal identity and her space ("Glasgow and Fife") now settles on a problematic choice, a racially gendered alliance. Though tempting as this choice may seem to be, it undermines her search for a sense of self that is not defined according to a racial or political category, the identity of the "other" which this woman tries to trap her in. Therefore, when she had to answer that question again many years later, she deliberately reaffirmed her racial identity in terms of place, an association insisted on in "In My Country" (*Other Lovers* 24). Written in the first person in colloquial English, and divided into two-six-line-stanzas with occasional rhyme and half rhyme (sea / me, superstition / imagination), the poem asserts that strong link between the speaker's personal identity and her place, an assertion which defeats the expectation of the white woman asking her



a question about her whereabouts. The implicit assumption of the white woman's question is that Kay does not belong here. Kay infiltrates her eye less as a resident and more as an "immigrant," a term which, according to Hall, "places one so equivocally as *really* belonging *somewhere else*" ("Signification"109) to which they one day would return. By means of personification, Kay draws a contrast between the friendly meeting of the two sources of water—river and sea—and the unfriendly encounter between her and the woman asking her the question. Being black in a white community generates superstitions about that racial identity, and is a constant reason for questioning and wondering, and even for a hidden enmity: When the woman spoke, "her words spliced into bars / of an old wheel" (9-10). The coarseness of the woman's words suggested by this metaphor is immediately countered by the ironic undertone of the speaker's words, "'Here,' I said, 'Here. These parts'"(12). This irony refers to the irony in the title. Therefore, irony becomes a counteroffensive weapon to defend her rootedness, a means to integrate with her less accepting, less multiracial environment. She wants to negotiate a move beyond the need to answer that question, "seeking to displace legitimate positioning" in Britain by "ostensibly *placing* identity—a common White British move to make a racialized claim to territory" (Wisker 12). It becomes a means of asserting her Britishness, to reject that sense of "alienness" that is forced on her, to dismiss that "identity of 'otherness'" (Arana and Ramey 3), and share with the other a strong social and cultural context.

Kay's vision is then more comprehensive than that of a homogeneous Scottish society that that woman believes in—this vision is clear in her concern with language, (as mentioned before, she introduces in her poetry the Glaswegian accent and reads it in a clear one as well), song, and place. Again her dialogue with that woman explains that her identity formation is "relational" and that it has to go through the narrow eye of this white woman before she can construct a positive image of herself, before she can claim an identity like that of the woman. But because that woman—who represents the attitude of the majority—still holds on to that narrow concept of a British identity, Kay undertakes imaginative border crossings that allow for

free movement betwixt and between, a movement that shows how a person of color can identify with outsiders and still claim a British identity. Denied then access to that identity, she tries to discover who she is, to find, according to Hall, "some ground, some place, some position on which to stand" ("Old and New Identities" 52). In "Pride"—from *Off Colour* (62-64)—she undertakes that border crossing, moving beyond that sense of local belonging to one based on "genetic" bonds (Sauerberg 104), to discover the necessity of both senses of belonging for the construction of a transracial identity. The metaphor of the "face" as "map" and that of the journey articulate the search for that particular identity. The first metaphor—so central to the basic argument of the poem—suggests that just as a map is an external label of a country's identity, a face, especially a black one, is an external label of the speaker's identity. The second metaphor suggests the border crossing the speaker tries to undertake.

The speaker who is on a train journey looks at her reflection in the window. In it, she sees a black man, "a kind of black angel-cum-God figure, who embodies her own heritage" (Rice 66). Engaging in an exchange with that Ibo (a Nigerian clan,) she is lured into a particular kinship with him. Suggestive of her racial identity, the word "black" is repeated insistently in connection with the man she meets and with the setting itself. She meets that "black man" on a train that slides out of Euston station, rushing "through the dark" in the "English countryside / past unwritten stops in the blackness" (23-24). He looks into "the dark pool" of her eyes and penetrates "the dark depth" of her soul. Examining her face (especially her nose and teeth), this stranger is quick to identify her as an "Ibo":

There was a moment when  
my whole face changed into a map,  
and the stranger on the train  
located even the name  
of my village in Nigeria  
in the lower part of my jaw. (34-39)

The lines move quickly and smoothly, centering on the metaphor of the "map" that suggests a connection between face and place. They also show that an ethnic kinship between him and her is possible: she feels he could be her brother, her "father as a young man" or any

member of her clan. It is a sense of identity that is based on "ethnic exclusivity" (Low 109) which he—and she in turn—feels proud of. It is comparable to that of "a MacLachlan, a MacDonell, a Macleod," native Scots who have that "quality of being certain" about their Scottishness. This man's discourse of exclusion is apparent in his characterization of his Ibo clan as "clever, reliable, / dependable, faithful, true." He contends that though "small in stature" if compared to other clans such as the Yoruba or Hausa, they are faultless and incorruptible—qualities which qualify them to rule Nigeria. His sense of identity depends then on excluding other tribes or clans except his own: he acknowledges others only when they mirror himself. His discourse encourages Kay to seek an identity of kinship, to make a border crossing where she would be enthusiastically received with massive celebrations from her supposed grandparents:

I saw myself arriving  
The hot dust, the red road,  
The trees heavy with other fruits,  
The bright things, the flowers.  
I saw myself watching  
The old people dancing towards me  
Dressed up for me in happy prints.  
And I found my feet.  
I started to dance.  
I danced a dance I never knew I knew.  
Words and sounds fell out of my mouth like seeds.  
I astonished myself.

My grandmother was like me exactly, only darker. (76-88)

Just as Kay is astonished because of the quick identification she makes with her supposed clan, we are astonished at the continuous, quick tempo of the lines that makes us hold our breath, waiting for what would happen next. Soon, we realize that the climax of that internal drama does not lead to the intended purpose of the journey. At the moment this border crossing seems to be successful, the Nigerian disappears leaving her with her reflection in the dark train window. Now she realizes that though seductive, this kinship-based identity seems to be as unimportant as a national identity which appears to

elude her because of the color of her skin. The danger again is that that exclusion-based identity contradicts the transracial identity that Kay wants to assert. She seeks to consolidate her mixed race identity by referring to her ethnic origins as the daughter of a black Nigerian father and a white Scottish mother.

Therefore, when she makes another border crossing in "The Red Graveyard" (*Other Lovers* 4), the identification she seeks with the blues singer Bessie Smith becomes political and cultural, signifying a common cultural history of racism, a "sharing of blood" through the performance of song. The poem focuses on the haunting trans-atlantic cultural presence of Bessie Smith. In the conclusion of her biography of the blues singer, Kay links "the dawning of [her] realization of being black with the blues" (Kay, *Bessie Smith* 135). In the blues singer, she could see a reflection of herself. As a child, she stood in front of a mirror and imitated her songs. She identified herself with her physically, guessing that perhaps "her [Kay's] great grandmother was a blues singer" (14). Her admiration for that icon allows her to reflect on her racial, sexual, and cultural identity, and also shows how homosexuality informs the life and art of such a lesbian artist. Kay is attracted to that aspect of Smith's life in which she is seen as a free, sexually inciting woman who managed her life against all odds. In this poem, the sensuality and sexuality of the blues singer are symbolically formulated:

There are some stones that open in the night like flowers  
Down in the red graveyard where Bessie haunts her lover.  
There are some stones that shake and weep in the heart of night  
Down in the red graveyard where Bessie haunts her lovers. (1-4)

Deliberate use of syntactical repetition is an aspect of Kay's poetry which she developed under the influence the blues. "Repetition," she says, "is the secret of the blues" because it allows one to experience the "same truth over and over again" (139). It is apparent not only in the structure of this stanza, but also in that of the whole poem as the same stanza is repeated at the end, serving as a refrain. Here, she uses it to experience the truth of a blues singer in a familial context. She foregrounds her artistic as well as sexual flowering. The stones become a symbol of her identity, and by analogy Kay's. The sexual identity of both is surrounded by secrecy—given the fact that

lesbianism was less tolerated in the twenties of the previous century in America, just as it was in Britain later in the eighties when Kay embraced hers.

But as the poem progresses, we realize that Kay's primary focus is on cultural identification. She creates a contact with black culture in a white context—the home of her white adoptive parents. In recollection, she remembers how the singer's voice creates a lovely atmosphere in her family home. Although she gives a less attractive image of her mother's voice—she describes it as a "flat stone for skitting. An old rock / Long long grass. Asphalt. Wind. Hail. / Cotton. Linen. Salt. Treacle" (16-18)—she creates a lovely image of the singer's voice as it claims the rooms of the house. As her father responds to the music by dancing—his "feet tap a shiny beat on the floor"—she caresses the wallpaper, "bumping flower into flower," picking up Smith's album cover with her "fingers all over her face. / Her black face. Her magnificent black face" (29-30). Kay highlights Smith's—and in turn her own—black identity by characterizing her face as "magnificent black." Embodying both "distance and intimacy" (Stewart 137), the album becomes both a cultural artifact which will inspire Kay to produce hers (her poetry), and an object of desire which encourages her lesbian orientation. It is initial physical identification which finally leads to cultural identification which is realized through "voice," be it of the blues or poetry. Smith bent her voice "to her will," as Kay says in "The Same Note" (*Other Lovers* 12). It was a powerful voice that could turn "the sails of the windmill / or knock down a tree with the force of a hurricane" (4-5). It was a voice that could stop the rain, and like a church bell could bring people together, telling them "she'd been in their heaven or hell" (19). It was a voice that spoke for the people. And that is the positive identification that Kay desires as she seeks to speak for herself and for people of color. Identification with Smith then becomes personal as well as cultural. Both are black artists in a dominantly white society that enforces invisibility on them. Therefore, both embark on an artistic career to create their cultural visibility. Kay makes this transnational link with Smith in order to create multiple sites of identification: "I did not think that Bessie Smith only belonged to African Americans, or that Nelson Mandela

belonged to South Africa. I could not think like that because I knew then of no black Scottish heroes that I could claim for my own. I reached out and claimed Bessie" (*Smith* 15). Challenged by the limited physical space, she forges that imaginative border crossing where she can place her icons in the same space as political leaders. With this identification, she hopes to achieve a cultural visibility that could validate her claim for a national identity, and create a sense of belonging that also extends beyond the local one.

To conclude, we can argue that Kay, like many black writers, is concerned with the complexities of a biracial identity in contemporary Britain. Formed out of the encounter between two cultures—African, or Afro-Caribbean or Asian and British—this biracial identity explains the relevancy of both blackness and Britishness, offering an image of Britain as a multicultural society. Kay's racially mixed background constantly drives her to address that question of identity, seeking to negotiate a transracial sense of it. Although in all her interviews she designates herself as a black Scottish woman writer, she resists blackness as identificatory category unless it is used as "umbrella term" ("Interview with Severin", n.p.), covering non-white minorities.

Though she writes as a poet whose original culture and language are British—her accent and idioms are Scottish—her identity is questioned because of her mixed parentage. Like blood and health, color, rather than culture, becomes a mark of difference—a difference which she tries to get over. It is rather this politicized sense of identity which she challenges: one that is located in her "otherness" (*Wisker* 15). She constructs her identity in relation to a white majority that has the power to decide who should and who should not belong to the nation. Therefore, in order for her to construct a positive image of herself, she has to get recognition from that other after going through the eye of his/her needle. But the eye of that needle has narrowed down because of racial discrimination perpetuated by Thatcher's Nationality Act, which denied people of color a claim to a British national identity. This attitude created different forms of resistance on the part of all black writers. On Kay's part, we find physical violence, verbal irony, identification with other blacks who achieved "cultural visibility" and imaginative border crossings. All these emphasize her

search for an identity based, not on ethnic, but on a social and cultural identification, one that could reconcile her blackness and Britishness. For her, poetry becomes a site for representation that aims at resisting a gaze that sees the surface only: "I still have Scottish people asking me where I'm from. They won't actually hear my voice, because they're too busy seeing my face" ("Interview with Brooks" n.p.).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> – For more details about that Act which limits the British nationality to white people only, see Eldridge.

<sup>2</sup> – For more details about this kind of racism, see Hargreaves.

<sup>3</sup> – For a profile of Angela Davis, see Wikipedia article about her.

<sup>4</sup> – For texts which record those racist discourses that associate blackness with physical as well as mental diseases, see, for example, Gilman and Chilling.

<sup>5</sup> –Although Kay dropped the poem from subsequent editions of the volume, I—quoting from an electronic source—find it relevant to my argument.

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