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"THE MULTIPLICITY OF WHAT I AM": BLACK SCOTTISHNESS IN THE POETRY OF JACKIE KAY

"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" (Brooks). This remark made by Jackie Kay in 2002 vividly illustrates what she has elsewhere referred to as the "inherent contradiction" (Wilson 121) of her Black Scottish identity. It likewise gives an insight into "the refusal of dominant Scottish culture to find any way of accommodating blackness" (Winning 240), its narrow equation of Scottishness with whiteness being an inherent part of the more general myth of Scottish homogeneity. This cultural construct of a homogeneous and stable Scottish identity has been widely discussed with respect to its "masculinist bias" (Winning 227) responsible for the marginalisation of women in that discourse. Joanne Winning briefly discusses the inclusion of Jackie Kay's work, or, more accurately, excerpts from her autobiographical sequence "The Adoption Papers," in the anthology *Dream State: The New Scottish Poets*. She quotes from the anthology's introduction in which Daniel O'Rourke is impressed that Kay, despite her threefold status as an outsider (being Black, lesbian and Scottish) "manages to produce 'the friendliest and most 'upbeat poetry' in his collection'" (238). Despite his praise, Rourke ostensibly fails to acknowledge the pain that is conveyed alongside the humour and optimism in the sequence, in which Kay retells the story of her own transracial adoption in the intersecting voices of the white birth mother, the white adoptive mother and the adopted Black girl. This failure on Rourke's part is evaluated by Winning as possibly signifying "a larger refusal on the part of the white, male Scottish literary mainstream to work through questions of race and Scottish national identity" (238). Accordingly, in this essay I intend to foreground such questions of race and Scottish identity in Jackie Kay's poetry. By taking a closer look at some of the poems' negotiations of

identity I hope to show how Kay is gradually writing into existence the supposed "impossibility" of being Black and Scottish and how she finds ways of accommodating both strands of her identity rather than perceiving them as mutually exclusive. Additionally, I read Kay's presentation of her Scottishness and Blackness as integral parts of her identity in the light of Kay's notion of "identity as being a very fluid thing [...] not at all static and not at all fixed" (Kay qtd. in Gish 174). Ultimately, this concept is clearly in line with Wolfgang Welsch's claim that "wherever an individual is cast by differing cultural interests, the linking of such transcultural components with one another becomes a specific task in identity-forming. Work on one's identity is becoming more and more work on the integration of components of differing cultural origin."

Many of Kay's poems, particularly those focusing on experiences of childhood and adolescence, are indisputably based on autobiographical experiences and give an insight into the struggle of coming to terms with an identity conventionally considered an "anomaly." At first glance, there hardly seems a foundation for considering Kay anything but Scottish. She was born in Edinburgh to a white Scottish mother and a Nigerian father, and was raised in Glasgow by her white Scottish adoptive parents. She has thus not experienced cultural uprootedness or alienation in the way that first and second generation migrants from Africa or the Caribbean have. The fact that her immediate familial and cultural ties are Scottish is documented by Kay's natural use of Scots or, more specifically, her Glaswegian dialect in many of her poems. It is also suggested by her evident sense of Scottishness, most emphatically expressed in poems dealing with the relationship to her adoptive parents, which in turn reflect a wider sense of belonging to a white local community and its cultural practices. Accordingly, in Kay's autobiographical poems about her experiences in childhood and adolescence, the issue of race is mainly introduced in the form of racism; an experience which in turn alerts the child to her own ostensible otherness.

One example of this method is the early poem "My Grandmother," which illustrates the disturbing truth that racism does not necessarily stop at one's relatives' doorsteps. The speaker's grandmother is presented as the epitome of Scottishness, a composite image rather than a real person, rooted as she is "like a Scottish pine / Tall straight-backed proud and plentiful / [who] wears a plaid shawl / Of our clan" (129). The grandmother clearly represents an essentialist concept of Scottishness as one of generational, i.e. biological, inheritance. Her Scottishness is highlighted by her embodiment of the landscape: "Her face is ploughed like land / Her eyes shine rough as amethysts;" by her connection to Scottish (or, more specifically, Highland) history: "She is one of those women / Burnt in her croft rather than moved

off the land;" and by her connection to the indigenous language: "She speaks Gaelic mostly, English only / When she has to, then it's blasphemy" (129). Rooted and immovable like a "Scottish pine," the stereotypical concept of Scottish identity as represented by the grandmother is fixed and too narrow to accommodate racial otherness. It is in line with what Welsch describes as the "traditional concept of single cultures" being characterised "by social homogenization, ethnic consolidation and intercultural delimitation." Indeed, the exclusiveness and implicit racism of this concept is revealed by the two lines tellingly set apart from the rest of the poem: "My Grandmother sits by the fire and swears / There'll be no Darkie baby in this house" (129). However, despite the cutting blow of this statement, the speaker repeatedly undermines its validity, since the possessive pronoun "*my* grandmother" is repeated four times (including the title) and the speaker talks about "*our* clan" [emphasis added]. Although the hurt caused by the grandmother's rejection of the speaker as a child is not commented on, the speaker's concluding description of her grandmother is revealing. The initial description of the old woman is subtly altered when in the final lines her "fine head of hair, greying now / Tied up in a loose bun" is perceived as her "hair tied with *pins* in a ball of *steel* wool" [emphasis added] and her face, initially compared to "ploughed land," is now described as "tight as *ice*" (129, emphasis added). The description of the grandmother's eyes as "amethysts" completes the picture of coldness and hardness that reflects the speaker's feelings of being rejected; a feeling making it difficult for her to share her grandmother's unequivocal consciousness of familial and clan identity which she does not embody in the way the white woman does.

A similar situation of having to defend and assert one's sense of belonging and identity against other people's racial prejudice is presented in one of Kay's most widely anthologised and quoted poems titled "In my Country":

walking by the waters
down where an honest river
shakes hands with the sea,
a woman passed round me
in a slow watchful circle,
as if I were a superstition;

or the worst dregs of her imagination,
so when she finally spoke
her words sliced into bars
of an old wheel. A segment of air.
Where do you come from?
"Here," I said. "Here. These parts." (24)

Again, the possessive pronoun "my" is indicative of the speaker's sense of belonging to the place in which she was raised. However, unlike the "honest river / [shaking] hands with the sea," the woman whom she encounters eyes her warily. References to a "circle" and "an old wheel" imply the weariness the speaker feels in being confronted with the same old racial prejudice stamping her as a foreigner and trying to deny her the sense of cultural identity that goes without saying. There is no way of meeting or 'shaking hands' because of the magic circle cast by the woman's superstitious imagination, a circle in which the speaker finds herself trapped, as it were, behind the invisible "bars" set up by the familiar words: "*Where do you come from*?"

The supposed contradiction of being Black and Scottish is thus presented as a difficulty constructed by other people's restricted ideas about Scottishness based on a narrow concept of ethnic "purity." It is this concept that imposes a feeling of otherness on the speaker. As Kay herself has pointed out,

> other people's assumptions of you, whether you want them to or not, do interfere with your own image of yourself. At least until you get older and can put certain assumptions into a context. As Audre Lorde says in *Zami*, you don't have words for racism when you are a child, but you experience it. (Kay, "Let It Be Told" 532)

"Chapter 7" of "the Adoption Papers," titled "Black Bottom," addresses this issue in more depth. The poem retells the adoptive girl's early experiences of racism as well as her first discovery of a Black role model. While the adoptive mother's voice begins the poem by expressing her view that "colour matters to the nutters," she immediately qualifies this statement by admitting that "my daughter says / it matters to her" (24). It is not only other children that make colour matter to the girl by calling her names, but also the teacher whose racist remarks wound her. "Black Bottom" undermines the assumption of an essentialist Black identity in several ways when the girl, for instance, chasing and beating up the boy who has called her 'sambo,' addresses him in the Scottish idiom: 'say that again you wee shite" (24), or when, despite her teacher's assumption that she should have it in her blood to dance the Black Bottom, she vividly describes how her "right foot's left and [her] left foot's right" and how her bewilderment at the teacher's remark – "my blood / What does she mean?" – makes her "feet step out of time" (25).

However, despite repudiating any notion of an essentialist Black identity, the poem also conveys the girl's need for positive Black images and role models. This need arises from the girl's inevitable sense of otherness caused by such experiences of racial prejudice and exclusion as related above. The role models that she adopts indicate the girl's free choice of affiliation when

she, for instance, shows her solidarity with the African-American activist Angela Davis – "the only female person / I've seen (except for a nurse on TV) / who looks like me" (27). The same notion of freely chosen affiliation is conveyed in Kay's series of poems about the African-American blues singer Bessie Smith. As Kay herself has explained: "I will always associate the dawning of my own realization of being black with the blues, and particularly Bessie's blues... Bessie's blues still fill me with longing. I don't know exactly what for. Blackness? A culture that will wholly embrace me? Belonging? Who knows" (Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 138–139). As Winning puts it, "faced with the "impossibility" of being Black and Scottish, Kay found her coordinates by looking beyond its shores, searching out an iconic blackness which transcended national boundaries" (238–239).

This newly acquired sense of belonging is expressed rather bluntly and humorously in the poem "So You Think I'm a Mule?" – another poem describing a presumably autobiographical encounter starting out with the inevitable question "Where do you come from?" According to Kay, this is a question that

> probably every Black person in this country is asked too many times for comfort. And the question always implies "You don't belong here." That's why people ask it. Either they mean "Go back to where you came from," or they just have this obsessive curiosity that is all the time trying to deny the fact that you are Scottish. (Wilson 121)

In the case of "So You think I'm a Mule?" the speaker radically rejects any speculations about her racial "impurity." Cutting short the narrow-minded "manoeuvres" of her white dialogue partner, she asserts both her sense of ethnic identity as well as cultural affiliation and belonging in terms of her Blackness and gender:

> Say, I'm no mating of a
> she-ass and a stallion
> no half of this and half of that
> to put it plainly purely
> I am Black
> My blood flows evenly, powerfully
> and when they shout "Nigger"
> and you shout "shame"
> ain't nobody debating my blackness.
> You see that fine African nose
> of mine,
> my lips, my hair. You see lady
> I'm not mixed up about it.
> So take your questions, your interest,
> your patronage. Run along.
> Just leave me.

> 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." (128)

Being excluded from the traditional concept of Scottishness, the speaker makes her "home" in a transnational community of women who share her sense of otherness. Her longing for a notion of wholeness and complete acceptance is, however, a longing which cannot be permanently fulfilled. Thus, her identity as Black Scottish is frequently met with a lack of acceptance within the Black community as well, although in an interview in the late eighties Kay notes that this tendency has been changing rapidly:

> Certainly, a few years ago, Black people might have regarded other Black people who had been brought up in a White environment as being, well, you know, all these derogatory terms, like coconut, which is being Black on the outside and white on the inside. They'd be quite shunning of anyone in my situation. But now there have been so many Black kids brought up in White environments that it's no longer possible to deny them or their Blackness just because of that. (Wilson 122–123)

The transnational Black diaspora imparts a sense of identity and shared history based on collective experiences and memories of displacement, slavery and resistance, and in many of her poems Kay expresses the need to find out about and explore this collective history, not least of all because, as she puts it in "Even the Trees," a poem about the whipping of a Black slave tied to a tree: "Everything that's happened once could happen again" (9). Despite this notion of shared collective roots and history offered by the diasporic community, the longing for personal roots and unconditional acceptance has to remain a wish. This is especially so with regard to an adopted person who cannot be sure about her origins. As Carole Boyce Davies points out,

> politically, the term "Black" is linked essentially and primarily with a vision of a (Pan-Africanist) Black world which exists both in Africa and in the diaspora. But "Blackness" is a color-coded, politically-based term of marking and definition which only has meaning when questions of racial difference and, in particular, white supremacy are deployed. (7)

Although the concept of a shared "Blackness" may provide feelings of solidarity and belonging in the "imagined community" of the Black diaspora, it still does not reveal a lot about the adopted girl's specific geographic,

tribal and familial origins. Similarly, the notion of an African origin itself must be considered as "an attempt to create a monolithic construction out of a diverse continent of peoples, cultures, nations and experiences" (Davies 9).

The poem "Pride" is concerned with the longing for certainty about one's roots, disrupting the fiction of homogeneity with regard to the Black diaspora. The speaker describes a dream-like encounter with a Black stranger on a train. Throughout the poem, the idea of blackness or darkness is employed in a twofold way, on the one hand denoting the speaker's Blackness in terms of her skin colour and identity, on the other hand denoting the speaker's lack of certainty as regards her origin. The train is described as rushing "through the dark / [...] through the English countryside, / past unwritten stops in the blackness" (62). The speaker's uncertainty is highlighted by the fact that she is not even sure about her original father's name but can only tell the stranger what "[she'd] *heard* was [her] father's name. / Okafor" (63, emphasis added). Miraculously, however, the Black stranger opposite her is not only able to reveal to her the "apt and astonishing" (63) meaning of her father's name, but he is able to read her origins in the "dark pool of [her] eyes," staring into "the dark depth of [her]" (62). The stranger's excitement about recognising her "Ibo nose" and her "Ibo teeth" (62) and his subsequent narration about her tribe cause an almost ecstatic state in the speaker in which she celebrates her imagined 'homecoming' to her father's native village in Nigeria. The specific location of the village is pinned down by the stranger who is able to read the speaker's face like a map, locating her place of origin "in the lower part of [her] jaw" (62). Whereas white people perceive only her "Blackness" as opposed to their own "whiteness," the Black stranger is able to make out the specific features of her particular tribe. The notion of a homogeneous Black identity is thereby disrupted and complicated. The speaker is not just African or even Nigerian; she is an Ibo and, as the stranger informs her, in contrast to other Nigerian tribes such as the Yoruba or Hausa, "the Ibos are small in stature [...] / clever, reliable / dependable, faithful, true," and, according to the stranger, they have "no faults. Not a single one" (63). The Black stranger, whom she sees transforming into "my brother, my father as a young man, / or any member of my large clan," has "a look / I've seen on a MacLachlan, a MacDonnell, a MacLeod, / the most startling thing, pride, / a quality of being certain" (63). His "quality of being certain" that he passes on to the speaker is emphasised throughout the poem: "Ibo, *definitely*," he tells the speaker, and: "If you went back [there would be] / Massive celebrations. *Definitely*. / *Definitely*" (63, emphases added). However, this "quality of being certain" manifesting itself in the speaker's "newly acquired Ibo smile" (63) can be enjoyed only temporarily in a dream-like state bordering on trance in which the speaker experiences the celebratory discovery of and return to her Ibo roots:

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 dance towards me
dressed up for me in happy prints
[...]
My grandmother was like me exactly, only darker. (64)

Kay here gives us a version of what in her novel *Trumpet* she calls a "fantasy Africa" (Kay, *Trumpet*, 34), a place that every Black person living in the diaspora inevitably creates for him- or herself.[1] Moreover, especially the description of her Ibo grandmother's "fantastic welcome" (63) provides, of course, a stark contrast to the Scottish grandmother's rejection of the "Darkie baby" as described in the earlier poem "My Grandmother." Whereas her Scottish grandmother represented everything the Black grandchild was not, her fantasised Ibo grandmother is "like [her] exactly, only darker" (64). While in "Black Bottom" the adolescent speaker was not able to get the steps right, she now instinctively knows how to dance "dances [she] never knew [she] knew" (64). The speaker's dream-like state, however, cannot last long and she eventually "wakes" to find the stranger gone, left with the reflection of her own isolated face in the train window. She is back with her own fragmented, contradictory and multiple identities that she needs to work out.

The question remains if and how the two supposedly contradictory strands of Black Scottishness can be reconciled after all. That both strands are equally important for Kay's concept of identity is illustrated, for instance, by the positioning of individual poems in her collections. It is certainly no coincidence that in Kay's second collection *Other Lovers* a series of Bessie Smith poems, in which an awareness of Black identity is created and affirmed, is immediately followed by the poem "Watching People Sing," concerned with the impact that Scottish folk songs sung by her family and local community have had on the poet. In formal terms, Kay has moreover tried to create a kind of hybridity in her poetry not only by transgressing genre boundaries,[2] but also by fusing "the language of the blues and the language in Scotland" into some sort of "Celtic blues." As Kay explains: "I'm trying to copy some of the rhythms of the blues, but change them

[1] Here, Kay has her Black-Scottish trumpet player Joss Moody explain: "Every black person has a fantasy Africa [...]. Black British people, Black Americans, Black Caribbeans, they all have a fantasy Africa. It is all in the head."

[2] For instance, Kay's sequence "The Adoption Papers" can be considered as "a novel in poems" and is even subdivided into "chapters" (Gish 178). Moreover, prior to publication in print, the sequence was performed in a radio broadcast.

too, and echo some of the rhythms of Scottish folk songs, but change them. So what you end up with is an experiment I suppose, something new or something different: a Black voice that is Scottish and Blue" (Gish 179). One example of an attempted formal and thematic reconciliation of both strands of identity in a single poem is presented in "Kail and Callaloo," a poem published as early as 1988 in a collection of writings by Black and third-world women. Kay opens the poem with a wry observation about people's need for clear-cut labels, noticing that in passport forms or job applications,

> there's nowhere to write Celtic-Afro-Caribbean
> in answer to the origin question;
> they think that's a contradiction
> how kin ye be both? (195)

She then goes on to explore the question: "What is an Afro-Scot anyway?" (195). Her answer conjures up a number of stereotypes, thereby parodying conventional notions of what it may mean to be a "Scot" or an "African." Is the essence of Scottishness to be able to "dance a reel," to know Robert Burns and to "wear kilts" (195)? Is the essence of African identity to know Fannie Lou Hamer and to wear wraps? If so, an Afro-Scot may well be able to accomplish both. However, she may at the same time be able to dance the "salsa" (195), a dance which combines Afro-Caribbean and European influences. Is she truly Scottish because she "can celebrate Halloween and Hogmony" (196), has prejudices about the English – "The English don't know how to celebrate either / sometimes I wonder if they kin laugh at all" (196) – and believes in 'Nessie' (196)? It is not only clichés, however, that the speaker lists in this poem, but she also expresses her truly twofold cultural interests and affiliations that are not necessarily mutually exclusive but can even be mutually enlightening. The poem's title implies an approach to cultural identity in terms of food, and in the poem Kay makes it clear that her discovery of a variety of African foods such as mango, yam, cocoa root or sugar cane enriches and adds up to rather than replaces her Scottish roots: "I'm eating callaloo and kail now / tattie scones and pumpkin pie" (196). Similarly, her discovery of Black authors, activists, and the history of slavery and immigration in no way eliminates her earlier identification with Scottish writers and history:

> like I never read Ngugi or Bessie Head
> only Hugh MacDiarmid and Liz Lochead
> (and they wernie even taught in school)
> Liz was my teenage hero
> OCH Men and her stop and start rhythm
> I'd never heard of Audre Lorde then. (196)

On the contrary, the yoking together of seemingly disparate and irreconcilable elements uncovers a number of surprising similarities along the lines of colonial experience. This connection is unravelled by Joanne Winning:

> Colonialism and marginalisation are mapped across both blackness and Scottishness. Ngugi and Bessie Head may have been unavailable to the teenage Kay but so, it transpires, were MacDiarmid and Lochhead, displaced from the Scottish curriculum by the colonisations of *English* literature. (241)

Similarly, in terms of history, Kay's reading of CLR James's account of the *Black Jacobins* brings to mind "memories of the Cheviot the stag and the Highlanders / being forced oot of their crofts" (196) so that she realises: "Clearances is a common word" (197), applying to colonial experiences in the Caribbean and in Scotland alike.

It would be misleading, however, to assume that the reconciliation of Kay's apparently contradictory strands of identity is possible only through the discovery of shared colonial oppression and resistance. Rather, Kay's aim is to split open the notion of a homogeneous and static identity in favour of acknowledging and embracing what she has called "the multiplicity of what I am" (Wilson 127). It is thus certainly no coincidence that "Kail and Callaloo" refers to the Celtic goddess Corra, who is a goddess of prophecy as well as of threshold transitions. The ending of "Kail and Callaloo" mirrors Davies' concept of "Black women's subjectivity as a migratory subjectivity existing in multiple locations [thereby traversing] all of the geographical/national boundaries instituted to keep our dislocations in place" (4). Kay writes:

> I'm no forgetting the roads and the miles though
> when someone sings Ae fond kiss
> I can still tremble
> or Will Ye go Lassie go
> Aye Actually. I'd love to go to Lagos someday
> and I'll aye be back again. (197)

In the same way that she is able to travel to different places such as Lagos in Nigeria and return to her native Scotland, and in the same way that she is able to switch from English to Scots and back again, she is able to integrate aspects of various cultures into her own heterogeneous concept of self. As Kay has pointed out: "I'm interested in taking different things from Black culture, different Black cultures around the world, and linking them up to my own identity" (Gish 179). "Finding out more and more / aboot / the moving root" (196), Kay creates a mixture of kail and callaloo from a variety of transcultural ingredients encompassing aspects of language, literature, history, religion, mythology, folk traditions and food. The image of a transcultural stew seems particularly fitting here, since the result of Kay's fusion of various ingredients is synthesis rather than syncretism in

the sense that "rather than a chemical merging we have a choric synthesis of voices" (Paraskevi 127) and of seemingly contradictory influences.

Opting for inclusion and integration rather than erasure of disparate aspects, Kay's poetry consistently foregrounds dialogue, most notably in "The Adoption Papers" with its "amazingly multi-levelled synthesis of voices" (Paraskevi 131), voices which are complementary as well as contrasting. Moreover, her own awareness of external and internal difference attunes her to other kinds of difference, for instance in terms of gender or sexuality, and enables her to give a poetic voice to a diversity of marginalised groups and individuals such as transsexuals, homosexuals, people suffering from Aids, migrants, battered women etc. She thus manages to disrupt the myth of Scottish cultural homogeneity, highlighting instead the "multi-faceted nature of culture north of the Border" (Kidd 98). As Wolfgang Welsch argues, it is precisely "the recognition of a degree of internal foreignness [which] forms a prerequisite for the acceptance of the external foreign. It is precisely when we no longer deny, but rather perceive, our inner transculturality, that we will be capable of dealing with outer transculturality." I would like to conclude with a quotation by Jackie Kay commenting on her own achieved transcultural and multiple identity, which she hopes may one day be reflected in a notion of Scottishness likewise able to embrace otherness. Although Kay's vision may be still far from becoming reality, her writing has certainly contributed to the emergence of a concept of Scottishness that accommodates multiplicity – also but not only in terms of *racial* difference:

> Perhaps in another fifty years' time, black Scottish people might not be considered a contradiction. This, to me, is another thing that writing is all about, being able to embrace contradictions, acknowledge them because they have destroyed so many people. At first when I really began to acknowledge my blackness, I wanted to deny my Scottishness, because I felt ashamed at being so old without knowing any kind of black culture. Now I feel I can do both. (Kay, "Let It Be Told" 535)

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„Wielość mojej tożsamości": bycie czarnoskórą Szkotką w poezji Jackie Kay

W artykule autorka analizuje wiersze współczesnej poetki Jackie Kay, zajmując się kwestią tożsamości. Ważną rolę w twórczości poetki odgrywają elementy autobiograficzne – urodziła się w Edynburgu jako córka białej Szkotki i czarnoskórego Nigeryjczyka, a wychowała się w Glasgow w rodzinie adopcyjnej. W swojej twórczości często używa słów szkockich, a zwłaszcza dialektu z Glasgow. Jednocześnie, ze względu na kolor skóry, od dziecka spotykała się z reakcjami odrzucania jej przez otoczenie. Stąd w jej twórczości pojawia się motyw obrony – własnej tożsamości i poczucia przynależności – przed uprzedzeniami rasowymi otoczenia. Jednocześnie jednak poetka jest świadoma, że czarna diaspora nie jest wcale jednolita. Jedną z cech twórczości Kay jest położenie akcentu na dialog, na prezentację głosów zarazem kontrastujących ze sobą i wzajemnie się uzupełniających. Poetka podkreśla własną złożoną, transkulturową tożsamość.