genealogy

MDPI

Article

Transracial Adoption, Memory, and Mobile, Processual Identity in Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*

Pirjo Ahokas

Faculty of Humanities, University of Turku, FI-20014 Turku, Finland; piraho@utu.fi

Abstract: Representations of adoptions tend to concentrate on normatively conceived forms of identity, which prioritize the genetic lineage of adoptees. In contrast, scholarship on autobiographical writing emphasizes that identities are not fixed but are always in process and intersectional because they are formed in within inequal power relations. Kay's experimental, autobiographical narrative *Red Dust Road* (2010) tackles the themes of adoption, the search for close relatives, and reunion. Many scholars of her autobiographical writings describe the fluidity of the diasporic adoptee identities created by her. My aim is more specific: I examine what I call Kay's continuously mobile, processual identity construction as a transracial adoptee in *Red Dust Road*. I argue that her identity formation, which is also intersectional, is interconnected with her multidirectional networks of attachments and the experimental form of her adoption narrative. In addition to an intersectional approach and autobiographical studies, I draw on insights from adoption studies. In my reading of Kay's work, I pay special attention to the inequalities derived from the intersecting vectors of adoption and race, which also intersect with other dimensions of difference, such as nation, gender, class, and sexual orientation. I employ the notion of the multidirectional in the sense in which McLeod applies it to the study of adoption writing. As I demonstrate, multidirectionality and the complex form of *Red Dust Road* provide versatile means of conveying Kay's fragmented acts of memory, which assist her ongoing mobile, processual identity construction. Her multidirectional lines of transformative attachments finally bond her to her adoptive and biogenetic families as well as other affective connections. While Kay's socially significant narrative indicates, amongst other adoption issues, that transracial adoptions can be successful, it is significant that it has no closure. The last chapter gestures toward potential new beginnings, which indicates that the story of adoption has no end.

Keywords: transracial adoption; race; search and reunion; identity construction; processual; intersectional; experimental form

Citation: Ahokas, Pirjo. 2023. Transracial Adoption, Memory, and Mobile, Processual Identity in Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*. *Genealogy* 7: 93. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7040093

Received: 8 October 2023
Revised: 13 November 2023
Accepted: 21 November 2023
Published: 25 November 2023

1. Introduction

On 22 March 2023, Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, apologized on behalf of her government for the injustice of historical forced adoptions, which had taken place in Scotland from the 1950s until the 1970s. In her statement, she acknowledged that large numbers of young, unmarried Scottish women had been stigmatized when they became pregnant. The young women were sent to so-called mother-and-baby homes where they gave birth and where a combination of charities, church bodies, health professionals, or social workers coerced them into parting with their babies (Sturgeon 2023). In her apology, Sturgeon pointed out that they were accused of being selfish if they wanted to keep their babies. Moreover, they were consistently lied to about the adoption process. If they objected, "they were bullied or ignored", which resulted in tens of thousands of newborn babies being taken away from their mothers. Sturgeon (2023) claimed that these patriarchal practices "were the product of a society where women were regarded as second class citizens; where [. . .] people in authority had too much power". In addition to the birth

mothers and the adoptees, many other people such as the fathers and the half-siblings of these babies, were affected by the practice of forced adoptions (Sturgeon 2023).

The unavailability of the original adoption records has made it practically impossible to reconnect the mothers with their children. Indeed, as Sturgeon (2023) also indicated, many women were "threatened with terrible consequences if they ever tried" to contact their children. Jackie Kay, one of today's foremost Scottish literary figures, is the author of an autobiographical narrative called *Red Dust Road* (2010), which tackles themes of adoption, the search for close relatives, and reunion. Kay was born in Edinburgh in 1961. She is black and was transracially adopted by a white Scottish couple. In her first book, *Adoption Papers* (1991), an autobiographical volume of poetry, Kay first began to investigate her identity via her own writing by experimenting with the voices of three members of the adoption triad: the birth mother, the adoptive mother, and the adopted child.[1] As *Red Dust Road* shows, Kay's closed adoption became a fertile source of inspiration for her literary career. *Red Dust Road* represents experimentation in life writing; it is a dynamic and flexible form that is closely related to autobiographical self-representation and also shares many features with fiction (Smith and Watson 2010, pp. 9–10). Kay describes her adoptive family as "a very positive thing" (Jaggi and Dyer 1999, p. 54), which makes her adoption narrative relatively uncommon.

Representations of adoptions tend to focus on normatively conceived forms of identity, which prioritize the consanguineous kinship and natal origins of adoptees (McLeod 2015, pp. 14–17). In contrast, scholarship on autobiographical writing emphasizes that identities are not fixed but are always in process because they are relational and are formed discursively (Smith and Watson 2010; Eakin 1999). Like Kay herself, many scholars of her autobiographical writings describe the fluidity of the diasporic adoptee identities that she creates (Jaggi and Dyer 1999; Tournay-Theodotou 2014a; Fox 2015; Palazzolo 2017). While I agree with them, my aim is more specific. Autobiographical identities are mobile because, as indicated above, they are always in process. Moreover, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, they are also intersectional and not additive (Smith and Watson 2010, p. 41). This means that the social construction of identities, in everyday life, as well as in autobiographical narratives, takes place "within larger systems of power, oppression and social privilege" (Baylorn and Orbe 2013, p. 19). In this article, I examine what I call Kay's continuously mobile, processual identity construction, which is also intersectional, in *Red Dust Road*. Adoption is an important social category of difference in Kay's intersectional, mobile, processual identity construction.[2] Moreover, as Peter Clandfield (2002, p. 2) argues, her "writings consistently and inventively underline the inextricability of racial issues from ones of gender, sexuality, class, and generation." Sexual orientation and nation also belong to these intersecting vectors, which lie at the core of the first-person narrator's acts of memory in *Red Dust Road.* While this invites intersectionality theory as a supplemental approach to my reading of *Red Dust Road*, I will also draw on insights from adoption studies in addition to autobiographical studies.

According to Michael Rothberg (2009, pp. 4–5), memory can assist in the formulation of identity, but the relationship to the past is never straightforward or direct. John McLeod usefully brings Rothberg's concept of "multidirectional memory" into the context of transcultural adoption. He claims that Rothberg's notion of multidirectionality nourishes "adoption's creativity by calling up and coalescing the material and historical contexts of one's biogenetic as well as adoptive filial attachments" (McLeod 2015, p. 28). By doing so, it also refers to the various networks of attachment upon which an adoptee can draw emotional support. In this article, I further argue that Kay's continuous, intersectional, mobile, and processual identity construction in *Red Dust Road* is interconnected with multidirectionality and the complex, experimental form of her adoption narrative. In addition to capturing the intricacies of her ongoing narrative identity construction, they serve as vehicles to explore various possibilities for adoptive connections and bonding.

2. The Adoptee and Her Adoptive Parents

The episodic, non-linear text of Kay's narrative is divided into chapters, the titles of which refer to various locations, journeys between different places, or certain years, while its form traverses many genres. The short chapters that are simply headed with a year refer to important turning points in Kay's life. They use a different font from the other chapters, and italics are utilized for interspersed letters and emails.[3] Kay's narrative employs many voices and shuttles back and forth between the past and the present as well as between different locations. Her acts of memory delve into remembrances of her adoptive life as well as her search for her biological parents. Kay not only gives the voice to her younger self in her reminiscences but, as the narrator of her life writing, she also retrospectively reflects on her earlier experiences. This is achieved by her narrative moving between different time levels within individual chapters. Her fragmented remembrances are suggestive of Rothberg's (2009, p. 3) characterization of acts of memory as multidirectional because they are "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing."[4] Taken together, Kay's employment of various experimental narrative techniques, which are often linked to literary representations of trauma in literary trauma studies, reinforces the complexity of her traumatic experience of adoption and the fragmentary nature of her mobile, processual identity construction. Significantly, the book begins *in medias res* as it plunges the reader into Kay's bizarre meeting in 2003 in Abuja with her Nigerian birth father, Jonathan O., who is a born-again Christian. During two hours of non-stop praying and dancing in her hotel room, he lets her understand that she is "the life embodiment of his sin" committed as a graduate student in Aberdee (p. 6), with his eyes seeming to "light up from behind like a scary Halloween mask" (p. 5). Kay's depiction of this painful episode also demonstrates her deft use of humor, irony, and sarcasm as a tool for overcoming the embarrassing situation. The next chapter, entitled "1969", jolts the reader from Kay's adulthood to her childhood in Glasgow.

When Kay was seven, she watched a western with her mother and her adopted brother. Empathizing with the losing Native Americans, she realizes that she shares her skin "color" with them and not with her adoptive mother. Kay's parents, Helen and John Kay, had not disclosed to her that she had been adopted, and when she innocently asks the reason for this, she encounters what is called "a basic paradox of adoption" (Novy 2001, p. 1): shockingly, her mother is not her mother, and her father is not her father. Acknowledging the difference in adoption is of importance to parents as well as to their adoptees (Triseliotis et al. 2005, pp. 197–98). In *Red Dust Road*, the episode appropriately ends with a big cuddle. Years later, Kay doubts the genuineness of her mother's consolation that she had been "chosen" (p. 13), which is a standard expression in disclosure situations (Triseliotis et al. 2005, p. 198). She sadly concludes that, in different circumstances, her parents would have randomly adopted different children.

The following chapter in *Red Dust Road* begins with the narrator's multidirectional story about her adoptive parents' past as young migrants in New Zealand, which is interspersed with their dialogue concerning this period in their lives. These reminiscences are important for the construction of the multigenerational Kay family because they sustain the adoptee's affiliative attachment to it. The Kays met and married in Christchurch, where they joined the Communist Party. Back in Scotland, they waited for five years until they found an adoption agency that accepted them in spite of their politics. The policy of transracial adoption began in Britain in the 1960s and was instigated as a result of government concerns about finding good homes for the relatively large numbers of adoptable ethnic minority children (Barn and Kirton 2012, p. 27). The Kays were initially waiting to adopt a white child, but when they mentioned that "they don't mind what colour the child is" (p. 22), they soon became the adoptive parents to Kay's older brother.

Two years later, the Kays were contacted by the Scottish Adoption Agency. They were told about a pregnant mother who wanted to give her mixed-race baby up for adoption. The Kays were not present at the moment of their daughter's birth. A British study entitled *The Adoption Triangle Revisited* indicates that a group of white, childless adoptive parents

expressed regret that they had missed "the actual giving of birth" (Triseliotis et al. 2005, p. 195). In contrast to their experience, Helen Kay describes the time when they were waiting for Kay's birth as "the closest I could get to giving birth myself" (p. 25). The Kays were not allowed to take their newborn baby home until she was five months old due to the child's ill health. During their visits to the hospital in Edinburgh, Helen was, however, allowed to hold the baby. By doing this, she became Kay's attachment figure, who, according to attachment theory, provided her baby with a feeling of safety and helped her to develop reciprocal relationships (Simmonds 2000, pp. 33–34). In retrospect, Kay believes that this early mutual attachment contributed to her recovery (p. 26).

The familial bond between Kay and her adoptive parents proves to be strong and lasting, but adoption is an emotive subject for them all. In Kay's childhood, the family's daily life, their stories, and their enjoyable holiday trips in Scotland buttress her familially constructed identity and divert her thoughts from adoption. Nevertheless, as a pivotal chapter entitled "Fantasy Africa" shows early in *Red Dust Road*, Kay harbors what she calls "a windy place" in her inner self that is comparable to Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights "out on open moors" (p. 45). As Pamela Fox (2015, p. 291) explains, Kay literally "bifurcates but also bridges narrated moments of her younger and older selves." Notwithstanding that Kay's older self is happy in her present life, she resents that this windy place still haunts her "in her dark hours" with its "ghostly something" (p. 46). The ghosts of difference, such as those of adoption, abandonment, kinship, and race, can be "conjured at various points in a child's adoption history" (Dorow 2006, p. 258). In addition to referring to the way in which everybody is alone, Kay writes about "another layer of aloneness" (p. 46). She renders it with a moving image of "the bundle of child that is wrapped up in the ghostly shawl of adoption", which seems to have "another layer of loneliness wrapped up there" (p. 46). This second layer of aloneness evinces her unshakeable mourning, which haunts her as a transracial adoptee and negatively affects her mobile, processual identity formation.

Like other adoptive families of the period, the Kays were given only snippets of information about their daughter's birth parents. They were told that Kay's white Scottish biological mother was a young, unmarried nurse who had gone to a mother-and-baby home to have her child. Storytelling plays a significant role in the construction of family life and history in families with adopted children (Simmonds 2000, pp. 28–29). Helen is a skillful storyteller and sensitive to her children's needs. Her storytelling inspires Kay to imagine her birth parents and boosts her self-esteem by proposing that maybe she is an African princess. This and the suggestion that Kay might possess plots of land in Africa lights her imagination. It is significant, therefore, that an image of the eponymous red dust road emerges in this episode. At the beginning of "Fantasy Africa", Kay tries to visualize her unknown birth father by drawing pictures of him that are patterned on contemporary, historical black males such as "the young Sidney Poitier or Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King or Cassius Clay" (p. 37). She fantasizes that he possesses "great dignity, stature" (p. 37) and, seemingly influenced by her parents' egalitarian values, trusts that he "would give his goodness *for the world* as all good black men have to" (p. 38, italics in the original). When the edges of her drawing become "a bit fuzzier, a bit less whole" (p. 37), Kay has to admit a failure of her imagination.

In the 1950s and 1960s, birth mothers were often blamed for having surrendered their babies born out of wedlock, whilst birth fathers "largely escaped social condemnation" (Fessler 2007, pp. 74–76, 148). In marked contrast, Helen and Kay's imagination concerning the latter's biological mother is empathic. Ultimately, her "heart-breaking story" (p. 44) grows into a bond between Kay, her adoptive mother, and her birth mother (McLeod 2015, p. 217). Furthermore, Helen conjures up a romantic story that idealizes the love between Kay's birth parents, but she also turns it into a tragic love triangle owing to the birth father's assumed engagement in Nigeria. Most adoptions take place in unequal social circumstances since adoptive parents often represent the middle class, while the children they adopt are from a working-class or from a lower middle-class background (McLeod 2015, p. 2). Helen stresses a class difference between Kay's birth parents: "That

was a clash, an academic student who was also *betrothed*" to someone else (p. 42, italics in the original). The expression "betrothed" captures the little girl's fantasy with its "sweet romantic flavour" (p. 42).

The members of the adoption triad occupy different positions in regard to choice. Like many adoptive parents, Helen implies that Kay's birth parents had no choice. Kay takes it with a pinch of salt, noting that it "was also perhaps a story of betrayal" (p. 43). Since Kay's narrative moves between different time levels, her childhood memories are interrupted by the ruminations of her older self about how people make up stories: "[W]e never know where the truth ends, and the story starts and in a way it doesn't matter" (p. 43). This also applies to a chapter entitled "The Granite City", which can be found in the middle of the book. It tells of Kay's two visits to Aberdeen in 2003 and 2009 as an invited and established author. Her birth parents had originally met at a local dance hall, and they also spent time together in Aberdeen after her birth. Kay claims that she has come there in search of their romance: "I prefer to believe that that I've been made out of love" (p. 133). This reveals that the traumatic pain of adoption still forms a vital part of her mobile, processual identity construction and that she hopes that her birth fantasy may mitigate this.

3. The Adoptee and Her Racial Difference

As noted above, the differences between adoption and race intersect in Kay's identity construction in the context of transracial adoption. Controversies over transracial adoptions have been ongoing in the United States and Britain since the 1970s. They have focused on the question of whether white people should adopt black and ethnic minority children. Critics of transracial adoption claim that since white adoptive parents live in predominantly white middle-class neighborhoods, transracial adoptees may suffer from alienation in these areas. They further question whether such adoptions are able to prepare adoptees for the everyday and institutional racism that they face throughout their lives.[5] Jackie Kay's older self recalls that the Kays used to dub Bishopsbriggs, where the family lived, as *Spam Valley* (p. 116, italics in the original). According to them, the upwardly mobile residents in their suburb aspired to be middle-class so much that when they bought a house, a middle-class symbol, they could only afford to eat inexpensive Spam, which was first produced during the Great Depression. Kay characterizes her parents as "working class socialists" (Rowell 2014, p. 268). They clearly differ from their normative neighbors: they used to host black political visitors, and Kay reminisces that when she was a child, she and her mother used to send Christmas cards to South African political prisoners. Yet, she explains in an interview that there were no other black people around her apart from her brother in the suburb where they were raised (Jaggi and Dyer 1999, p. 55).

In addition to ordinary family life, Kay's participation in her parents' political activities and social life strengthened her general sense of belonging. Yet, she still found it complicated to be both Scottish and black. Scotland's discourse of normative cultural identity signified whiteness in spite of the fact that the nation has a long history of black presence, which is not free from racism. Scotland had been involved in the slave trade,[6] and, in the 1990s, racism was still "proportionally more [. . .] common in Scotland compared to England and Wales" (Jackson 2020, p. 2).[7] An entrenched narrative of absent racism in Scotland has also lasted for decades and left issues of racial discrimination unquestioned (Davidson and Virdee 2018, pp. 9–10). In their discussion about life writing as a genre, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson contend that for all their similarities, fiction, and life writing "are distinguished by their relationship to and claims about a referential world" whilst fiction represents "*a* world", life writing refers to "*the* world" (Smith and Watson 2010, p. 10, italics in the original). This is especially true in regard to the chapters in which Kay depicts her past encounters with Scottish racism. In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich writes about minority forms of individual trauma, which are "connected to the textures of everyday experiences" and simultaneously suppressed "by the amnesiac powers of national culture" (Cvetkovich 2003, pp. 3–4, 16). Her description matches the traumatizing

effects of insidious racism on Kay's continuous intersectional, mobile, and processual identity construction.

The fairy-tale fantasies about Africa are counterpointed by Kay's memories of the stereotypical and colonial images of the continent that were taught at her school. They prompted her classmates to turn around and look at her, pulling faces every time Africa was mentioned. Worse yet, when she was six, three boys inflicted hierarchical racism and gendered violence on Kay by wrestling her to the ground and forcing her to eat mud "because you are from a mud hut" (p. 184). The effects of these agonizing moments intersect with Kay's sense of adoption and further reinforce her feelings of non-belonging.

Paul John Eakin (1999, p. 52, italics in the original) stresses that "identity is *necessarily* relational". This means that the autobiographical subject is "imbricated in the constant self-other interactions of the social world" (Smith and Watson 2010, p. 217). Relationality is also associated with the ethics of self-narration and how it "relates to the vulnerability of the subject" (ibid). In a key chapter entitled "Reality Britain", Kay also depicts her conflicting and vacillating emotions concerning the processual construction of her black racial identity. In a memory from her school years, Kay yearns for a sense of group belonging and remembers joining in with her white classmates in verbally assaulting two Chinese girls. In an early chapter entitled "1976", she recalls how "[o]perating along the exclusionary lines of race" (Tournay-Theodotou 2014b, p. 18), she brought her Nigerian boyfriend home the long way in order to avoid her hostile, white neighborhood. However, after the visit with her supportive parents, she held his hand and walked him back the short way. Kay's memories are multilayered, and this initially embarrassing incident awakens an older, fragmentary memory: as a little child, she guiltily hid her Maori doll in a cupboard and comically ended up apologizing for her behavior toward it. Nonetheless, a reminiscence from the time when Kay was sixteen demonstrates her capacity for resistance to the injustice of racialization. After she had watched the television miniseries *Roots*, somebody follows her in a park, shouting "Kunta Kinte, Kunta Kinte" (p. 186). Positively identifying with the black characters, Kay turns around and furiously asks her harasser, who uses the African-born slave's name in *Roots* as an insult, whether s/he had watched the program. This incident illustrates that she is no longer scared but rightfully angry at the insult.

Pietra Palazzolo also indicates that Kay's emphasis "on memory and recollection shows how personal and public discourses are intertwined" (Palazzolo 2017, p. 11). In "Reality Britain", Kay remembers two incidents in which she had been subjected to institutional racism. The British Movement (BM), a neo-Nazi organization with a history of violence, targeted Kay when she was a student at the University of Stirling. They disseminated racist posters, which not only employed an anti-black slur but also falsely accused her of being an Irish Catholic.[8] In Bishopsbriggs, Kay was often saved from racist incidents by her family members, and on this occasion, too, her adoptive mother bravely intervenes. Despite her social position outside the academic world, Helen decides that they should organize a meeting in which Kay should speak. Although the university helped to organize this event, it also revealed its institutional bias: the presence of the BM at the university was not disclosed to the press. Nearly a year later, when the BM, the National Front, and other racist parties were gaining increasing support in Britain, Kay witnessed another racist episode in which a respectable-looking businessman proclaimed his support for the racists after they had verbally attacked and physically threatened her young friend in London. Only then did she realize that racial bias exists across British society.

Besides Kay's adoption and blackness, her sexual orientation is an intersectional marker of her mobile, processual identity. She narrates that she thought that she was "the only black lesbian in the world" (p. 200) until she traveled from Stirling to London and participated in a "life-changing meeting" that led to the formation of the Black Lesbian Group (BLG).[9] Communities can also be crucial to relational identity building. In this group, Kay found a community in which she could also acknowledge her "African heritage and be proud" (p. 201). Kay's processual identity formation is also informed by Franz

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which rails against colonialism and calls for anti-colonial struggle. She reads Fanon's book in her early twenties, and it "changed the mirror that [she] held up to [her]self" (p. 40) as a black Scottish woman. This is why Kay "vows to avoid the trap of colonial mimicry" (Fox 2015, p. 291). Lacking multidirectional biogenetic connections with her African relatives, her subsequent discovery of African American literary "foremothers" such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lorde provided an imaginary community that not only changed her "racial awareness" but reading their works also changed her life (p. 41).[10] Yet, toward the end of "Reality Britain", Kay ponders whether she has gone too far in attempting to create a strong black identity. Ultimately, she is famously told by Lorde that she can "be proudly African *and* Scottish" (p. 201, italics in the original).

4. The Adoptee and Her Birth Mother

The metaphor of a psychic jigsaw puzzle is commonly employed in adoptee texts (Homans 2013, p. 224). This imagery harks back to Betty Jean Lifton, a white adoption rights reform advocate, who urged open adoptions and stressed the importance of searching for and reuniting adoptees with their biogenetic relations for their mental well-being (McLeod 2015, p. 18; Volkman 2005, p. 97). In "Fantasy Africa", however, the metaphor of a psychic jigsaw puzzle occurs with regard to Kay's frustration with her birth parents after their reunions. Her exploration of blackness is linked multidirectionally to her paternal bloodline, but she begins her search from her birth mother during her pregnancy at the age of twenty-six when doctors asked her about her hereditary diseases. Kay discovers four people with her birth mother's name at the New Register House in Edinburgh. The second chapter, entitled "1988", is dedicated to her memory of this watershed moment in her life. She first contacts her birth grandmother and later an aunt who promises to write to Kay's birth mother, Elizabeth Frazer. Kay's biological relatives use her preadoption name, Joy, which was given to social services by her birth father. Names can be potent sites of identification, and Kay's preadoption name is an uncomfortable reminder to her of the doubleness of adopted lives.

Adoptee search and reunion narratives are imbued with fantasies among the members of the adoption triad. Not surprisingly, Elizabeth and Kay's adoptive mother had envisaged each other differently. When Kay finally meets Elizabeth, she remembers how she had imagined her mother as Shirley Bassey when she was a child. Needless to say, her finding out that her birth mother was not the glamorous singer of "Goldfinger", whose mother was English and whose father was Nigerian, was a disappointment. Moreover, the adoption authorities had lied to Elizabeth as they informed her that John Kay was in the army and that Jackie Kay would be brought up abroad.

McLeod (2015, p. 53) argues that the birth mother is the least explored member of the adoption triad in adoption representations due to required legal and emotional "erasure" and "the deonthologizing of those with prior claims" (Homans 2013, p. 252) in closed adoption contracts. This bias is mirrored in the existing scholarship in regard to *Red Dust Road*, which pays little or no attention to Kay's birth mother.[11] According to Ann Fessler, a reunion between an adoptee and a birth mother can initially be euphoric, but it "is an emotionally complex process that is often fraught with anxieties" (Fessler 2007, pp. 247, 260). Elizabeth lives in Milton Keynes in England, and Kay meets her there four times in a chapter entitled "Hilton Hotel, Milton Keynes". Even arranging Kay and Elizabeth's first meeting requires a great deal of courage. Kay's excitement is compounded by the fact that she had been warned that her birth mother "is a very nervous type" (p. 128). She knows that Elizabeth showed her affection for her as a baby by sending her a knitted present via the Adoption Agency. She also demonstrates her warm feelings toward her biological daughter by hugging her with tears in her eyes in the hotel lobby. Kay, however, wonders why she herself remains emotionally numb even if she feels like she would like to cry.

A reunion can be an overpowering experience for adoptees because, for the first time in their lives, they meet somebody who looks like them or has a similar voice, gestures, or mannerisms (Fessler 2007, p. 260). To begin with, Kay conjectures about whether the fact that they have chosen a bunch of orchids for each other "has anything to do with genetics" (p. 62). Failing to detect facial similarities, she notices a certain family resemblance in a photo: Elizabeth had married a dark-skinned man, and her two subsequent daughters are black. Elizabeth also mentions that her younger daughter looks a little like Kay. All in all, they are markedly ill-at-ease in each other's company, and after a while, Elizabeth begins to deflect from her sense of embarrassment at what Kay calls their "uncomfortable intimacy" (p. 65) by talking about her neighbor's heart problems. Emotional numbing is a protective response to trauma. Afterward, Kay experiences an unexpected emotional turmoil, in which she cries on and off for three weeks without knowing whether she is grieving for her birth mother or the imaginary mother she had had in her head. She concludes that regardless of whether a reunion proves to be positive or negative, it "turns your life upside down" (p. 48). Yet, Kay feels sorry for Elizabeth, who clearly avoids thinking about the painful time when she gave up her daughter for adoption.

Studies conducted in the United States and Australia indicate that birth mothers may experience long-term physical, psychological, and social problems in conjunction with feeling an unresolved sense of loss (Fessler 2007, p. 222). Elizabeth has suffered several breakdowns and also lost a son to suicide. Even later, Kay and her birth mother continue to see each other in public places at intervals of several years. Kay's choice of venues may also contribute to Elizabeth's uneasiness because it presents evidence of their social distance. In spite of feeling upset, Kay tries to ease her mind by joking about their having run into "each other in peculiar places like cold-war spies, exchanging strange packages" (p. 74). Their second meeting takes place at a café inside the main shopping center in Milton Keynes, a venue selected by Elizabeth. She tells Kay at this meeting that she is a Mormon. According to their view of adoption, which appears to be important to Elizabeth, babies ask to be adopted in the womb. Elizabeth had also prayed that Kay's parents would be perfect[12]. While Kay finds this "preposterous" (p. 70), she intuitively surmises that Elizabeth's new religion is connected with her traumatic experience of having given up her daughter for adoption.

Kay's subsequent visit to Nairn, a small Highland town (p. 154), helps to elucidate Elizabeth's past. Her three sisters, who have always lived there, attend her poetry reading, and one of them startlingly looks like Kay. They subsequently visit Ivy Cottage, where Elizabeth had lived with her grandparents and where she had been with Jonathan. It transpires at this moment that she had also been an adoptee in her own way. As a child, Kay had heard that Elizabeth had been forced to relinquish her by her grandmother "because of racism in the Highlands" (p. 44). The aunts shamelessly agree that "[n]obody thought it right that she should keep you" (p. 156). Small wonder Elizabeth, a mother of four mixed-race children, says that a "very racist" Scotland had betrayed her expectations (p. 71).

When referring to Kay's birth parents in the past, Helen had repeatedly used the word "*circumstances*" (p. 43, italics in the original), whereas one of Kay's aunts refers to the "climate" (p. 156) in order to euphemistically describe the social and personal pressures that had led to Elizabeth's parting with her non-marital baby. Intersectional discrimination against unwed mothers of that time period also implied that they were sexually promiscuous and therefore they would disgrace both themselves and their families. Unsurprisingly, many of them were "burdened with feelings of low self-esteem and unworthiness, and laden with secrets, shame, loss, and grief" (Fessler 2007, p. 153). This description fits the multiply oppressed Elizabeth. She invites Kay to her home eight years after their previous meeting when she is already noticeably suffering from memory loss. Kay hopes that this visit might eventually enable her to expand her multidirectional connections to her half-sisters. An adoption secret is a big burden to carry, but research shows that some birth mothers conceal it from their new families even after contact (Triseliotis et al. 2005,

p. 79). Elizabeth also prefers to keep her relationship with Kay shrouded in secrecy. She calls her a friend because she is apprehensive that one of the other daughters would reveal Kay's true identity to their father, from whom Elizabeth is separated. Presumably, she has internalized the stigma assigned to unmarried mothers and fears that the truth would harm her relationship with him. In spite of her problems, Elizabeth's Post-It note saying "*Jackie, Elizabeth loves you*" (p. 90, italics in the original), which Kay finds in her purse, confirms her continuous affective attachment to her estranged daughter.

5. The Adoptee, Her Birth Father and Africa

The majority of the birth fathers included in the study by Triseliotis et al. (2005, pp. 320, 323) maintained that they had been concerned about the well-being of their non-marital, adopted children and were pleased when they were contacted by them. After years of wondering about how to search for her biological father, Kay is able to find him via Google because, in addition to being a lay reader of the Anglican church in Nigeria, he is an internationally known academic who specializes in the study of trees. Jonathan, too, expresses his happiness about hearing from Kay and learning about her career as an author. He contends that their being in touch is God's intention, and in an ensuing letter, he makes it clear that "the issue of new birth" will be discussed during their reunion (p. 56). Kay replies that she "wouldn't wish to be reborn" (p. 130). Yet he keeps pressuring her to convert.

Nonetheless, adoption reunions can bring about healing and forgiveness. For example, the birth mothers interviewed by Fessler felt that their reunion with their long-lost children began their healing process (Fessler 2007, p. 247). In Kay's second memory about her reunion with the father, they have moved on to the hotel's swimming pool bar. The word "healing" takes on an entirely different meaning when Jonathan announces there that he is a healer. Kay cynically asks him to heal her, but after a ceremony in which Jonathan is loud and even hurts his daughter physically, she confesses that "nothing felt any different" (p. 100). In her first reminiscence about their reunion, Kay humorously mocked Jonathan as "a kind of holy vampire" (p. 8). Later, she calls him "a charlatan" (p. 102). Nevertheless, Kay recognizes the importance of religion in Nigerian society. Resenting the influence of British colonialism and the activities of missionaries, she sadly concludes that Christianity had taken away Jonathan's "African culture and given him this" (p. 6).

A memory from the reunion with her birth father strikes Kay as being important in Aberdeen in 2008. Jonathan, who is an Igbo, had been "physically juddered" (p. 145) when he told her about the horrible experience of the Biafran war. It had not only taken "everything personal" from his family[13], but, according to Kay, it was also "partly responsible for the plethora of born-again groups in East Nigeria" (p. 145). Undoubtedly, the national traumas that have taken place in Nigeria have deeply affected Jonathan. Furthermore, like birth mothers, birth fathers are known to suffer from a sense of loss and guilt after they make the decision to part from a child (Triseliotis et al. 2005, pp. 74, 320). Like Elizabeth, Jonathan is reluctant to speak about their common past. This suggests that the events surrounding Kay's adoption have subjected him to a similar individual trauma, which is confined to the private sphere of everyday life, as those described by Cvetkovich.

When Kay returned to Nigeria in 2009, she wanted to meet Jonathan, who ultimately refuses to see her. Like Elizabeth, he does not want to introduce her to his adult children, insisting that even God agrees that it is best to keep Kay a secret. In doing so, Jonathan further hinders her exploration of her other multidirectional, biogenetic African connections. Petra Tournay-Theodotou (2014b, pp. 15–16) observes that "[t]hroughout her writing career, Jackie Kay has been concerned with defining a personal and cultural place for herself" and that Africa plays an important role in this search. After running her workshop in Lagos, Kay travels to Jonathan's ancestral village of Nzagha in Ukpor in Southeast Nigeria in order to familiarize herself with her Igbo heritage and to explore her sense of cultural belonging. The red dust road is the central image in her narrative, and when she sees it for the first time in Nzagha, it is "exactly like the one in my imagination" (p. 213). Hence,

Kay walks barefoot and treads on footprints others have made on the road as if they were hers. She feels as if the anthropomorphized "benevolent, warm, friendly, accepting" road was welcoming her "like a new blood relative" (p. 213)[14]. This epiphanic experience of filial affinity with the landscape establishes an affective connection with the place that has ancestral meaning to her. It is also integrated as an important component in Kay's mobile, processual identity construction.

Blackness connects Kay with her African roots, but it is perceived differently in Nigeria. In the first chapter, entitled "2003", two young black women join her in the hotel bar and tell her that she is their sister. She enjoys their company and experiences a sense of racial solidarity until one of them asks her for money. Kay is resentful as she realizes that they tried to cheat her as they perceived her to be a light-skinned foreigner. On this trip, Igbo women call her "Oyibo", that is, a white person (pp. 215–16) at the Ukpor market. This causes Kay to revise her notions about racial identification as the meaning of "being mixed race" (p. 216) finally dawns on her. Yet she wishes to be as dark black as her father. At the same time, the syncretic similarities Kay observes during her trip between Scottish and African landscapes prefigure her new ability to fuse her dual heritage[15] and to make it part of her complex ongoing mobile, processual identity construction.

Kay's second trip is narrated in a more continuous manner than much of *Red Dust Road*[16]. This implies that her new multidirectional attachments have a positive influence on her sense of racial group identification. Traumatized by her father's behavior, Kay asks Nigerians, including the oldest Igbo woman, if Jonathan had done right by her. The unanimous answer is that he was wrong. The well-to-do, educated uncles of Kay's traveling companion know Jonathan and regret that his religious fanaticism has increased. Kay also continues to be bothered by the burning ethical dilemma of whether or not she has the right to contact her half-siblings. As with her father, she also found her oldest half-brother, Sidney, via Google. Kay ultimately manages to meet him on her return trip to Lagos Airport. Many adoptees find it positive for themselves to meet their half-siblings (Triseliotis et al. 2005, p. 173). Sidney and Kay's relationship is not emotionally fraught in the same way as Kay's relationship with her birth parents, and since he is only a couple of years younger than she, they share generational similarities, which contributes to the fact that "[t]heir meeting creates the only purely happy scene of reunion" in *Red Dust Road* (Homans 2020, pp. 69, 84). Significantly, Kay's transformative biogenetic reunion with Sidney banishes "[t]he empty ghost, the wraithlike figure" (p. 276), which has troubled her since childhood as an excruciating manifestation of her painful differences as experienced in terms of adoption and race. Sidney not only looks like Kay and laughs like her, but he also open-heartedly welcomes her. He even calls her his senior sister. Topping it all off, the humorous dream of Kay's adoptive mother about giving birth to her "forty-five-year-old Nigerian son" (p. 284) suggests that Sidney and the optimistic future-oriented potential he embodies will be integrated into the Kay family.

Bloodlines are important to adoptees like Kay, and she started to demythologize her birth parents on her second trip to Aberdeen. In her imagination, the young Elizabeth and Jonathan finally became "ghosts one minute [. . .] and ordinary people the next" (p. 151), but they also undergo a transformation. Kay believes that she should let them go, admitting that, in reality, they are good people. Toward the end of her memoir, she fondly imagines them as ordinary human beings going about their daily lives as best as they can. After returning to the home of her adoptive parents in Scotland, Kay feels "flooded with love for them" (p. 286), but her multidirectional lines of affiliative and filial attachment bond her to her adoptive family, as well as to her biogenetic and other connections. Ultimately, as McLeod (2015, p. 210) suggests, "the inventive and seriously playful" form of Kay's life writing fashions "a new kind of text", in which 'being adopted' changes into a representation of transformative "adoptive being", which is his term for personhood that captures the challenging and multidirectional productivity of adoption.

Early in *Red Dust Road*, Kay claims that adoption is a story that "has no end" (p. 46). On her first trip to Africa, she asked Jonathan to give her a Nigerian name, and she picks

"Ijeoma", which means "good journey" (p. 107). Kay's transfigurative adoption story can be regarded as a journey without an end. At the end of the book, she plans to transplant the pods of the *Moringa oleifera* tree she had been given in Ukpor to mark her meeting with Sidney. This is reminiscent of how Helen had planted a cherry tree to celebrate her son's adoption. Imagining her transplanted moringa—known for its healing properties—in ten years' time, Kay asks herself whether she will still live in the same place in Manchester. This reinforces a vision of her potential relocation in the future to another place where the story of her adoption will continue, and her mobile, processual identity formation will be nourished by her multiple affective attachments. This is similar to how the roots of her imagined "magical moringa" will keep transporting nutrients to the rest of the tree.

To conclude, *Red Dust Road* is not only a fascinating narrative about Kay's adoption, searches, and reunions, but, as an inventive experimentation in life writing, it also sheds light on the representation of the autobiographical narrator's complicated intersectional, mobile, and processual identity construction as a transracial adoptee. In addition to autobiographical and adoption studies, I used an intersectional approach in my reading of Kay's work. Autobiographical identities are formed within unequal power relations. Hence, I paid special attention to the inequalities derived from the intersecting vectors of adoption and race, which also intersect with other dimensions of difference, such as nation, gender, sexual orientation, and class, in Kay's ongoing identity formation. Moreover, I employed the notion of the multidirectional in the sense in which McLeod applies it to the study of adoption writing. As I have demonstrated, multidirectionality and the complex experimental form of *Red Dust Road* provide versatile means of conveying Kay's fragmented acts of memory, which assist her relational identity construction. Kay's multidirectional lines of transformative attachments finally bond her to her adoptive and biogenetic families, as well as other affective connections in the course of her ongoing mobile, processual identity construction. While Kay's socially significant narrative indicates, amongst other adoption issues, that transracial adoptions can be successful, it has no closure. According to her, the story of adoption "has no end". Thus, the last chapter gestures toward potential new beginnings, which can make productive use of her former and future multidirectional attachments.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 McLeod (2015, p. 2) criticizes "the infamous adoption 'triad'" because "it redesignates mother and child as 'birth-mother' and 'adoptee'" and creates adoptive parent(s)' as an acceptable substitute for consanguineous kin".

2 Kay discusses her sense of the difference in adoption in an interview. See (Gish 2001, p. 172).

3 For a detailed analysis of the multilayered form of *Red Dust Road*, see (Palazzolo 2017, pp. 106–7, 109–10).

4 According to McLeod (2015, p. 27), this quotation refers to acts of memory as productive. For the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory, see Rothberg (2009, p. 5).

5 See, for instance, (Patton 2000, pp. 2–3; Barn and Kirton 2012, pp. 25, 27–28).

6 Kay depicts slavery and the historical participation of Scotland in the slave trade in her epic poem/play *The Lamplighter* (2008). For more on this, see (Kay 2020). See also (Rodríguez González 2015, pp. 115–16).

7 See also note 11 (Jackson 2020, p. 21).

8 For more on anti-Irish racism in Scotland, see, for instance, (Slaven 2018, pp. 34–68).

9 Gish (2001, p. 181) writes about Kay's lesbianism: "She began writing as a teenager [. . .] and addressed one of her poems to Audre Lorde because she had not known there was another lesbian in the world".

[10] Ralph Ellison was a literary "forefather" in this imaginary community. For Kay's career as a black feminist activist, see, for instance, (Rodríguez González 2015, pp. 104–5).

[11] McLeod's sensitive reading of Elizabeth and Kay's relationship is an exception. See (McLeod 2015, pp. 219–21).

[12] Elizabeth fails to mention that the babies are supposedly going to be adopted by temple-worthy parents, which is at odds with the reality of the Kays.

[13] The Biafran War lasted from 1967 until 1970. The area was inhabited mainly by Igbo people.

[14] Tournay-Theodotou (2014b, p. 17) comments that "through tactile contact with the land", Kay substitutes it "for the absent person of her father" and "literally leaves an imprint in order to turn her forced absence into a presence".

[15] For more on this, see (Tournay-Theodotou 2014b, p. 19). See also (McLeod 2015, p. 222).

[16] Kay kept a day-to-day diary on this trip. (Gee 2010, p. 19).

References

Primary Source

(Kay 2010) Kay, Jackie. 2010. *Red Dust Road: An Autobiographical Journey*. London: Picador.

Secondary Source

Barn, Ravinder, and Derek Kirton. 2012. Transracial Adoption in Britain: Politics, Ideology and Reality. *Adoption & Fostering* 36: 25–37.

Baylorn, Robin M., and Mark P. Orbe. 2013. Introduction: Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice. In *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*. Edited by Robin M. Baylorn and Mark P. Orbe. Walnut Creek: Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 13–26.

Clandfield, Peter. 2002. What is in my blood?: Contemporary Black Scottishness and the Work of Jacie Kay. In *Literature and Ambiguity*. Edited by Teresa Hubel and Neil Brooks. Amsterdam: Brill, pp. 1–25. Available online: https://doi-org.ezproxy.utu.fi/10.1163/97890033229_001 (accessed on 20 April 2023).

Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *Archives of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Davidson, Neil, and Satnam Virdee. 2018. Introduction: Understanding Racism in Scotland. In *No Problem Here: Understanding Racism in Scotland*. Edited by Neil Davidson and Satnam Virdee. Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, pp. 9–12.

Dorow, Sara K. 2006. *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*. New York: New York University Press.

Eakin, John Paul. 1999. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Fessler, Ann. 2007. *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade*. New York: Penguin.

Fox, Pamela. 2015. The 'Telling Part': Reimagining Racial Recognition in Jackie Kay's Adoptee Search Narratives. *Contemporary Women's Writing* 9: 277–96. Available online: https://doi-org.ezproxy.utu.fi.10.1093.cww.vpu01 (accessed on 28 March 2023). [CrossRef]

Gee, Maggie. 2010. Stories and Survival: An Interview with Jackie Kay. *Wasafiri* 25: 19–22. Available online: https://doi-org.ezproxy.utu.fi/10.1080/02690055/2010.510366 (accessed on 18 April 2023). [CrossRef]

Gish, Nancy K. 2001. Adoption, Identity, and Voice: Jackie Kay's Inventions of Self. In *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*. Edited by Marianne Novy. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 171–90.

Homans, Margaret. 2013. *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Homans, Margaret. 2020. Reunions with Siblings in Search Memoir across Cultures. In *Adoption and Multiculturalism: Europe, the Americas, and the Pacific*. Edited by Jenny Heijun Wills, Tobias Hübinette and Indigo A.W. Wlling. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 69–96.

Jackson, Joseph H. 2020. *Writing Black Scotland: Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Jaggi, Maya, and Richard Dyer. 1999. Interview: Jackie Kay in Conversation to Maya Jaggi and Richard Dyer. *Wasafiri* 14: 53–61. Available online: http//doi-org.ezproxy.utu.fi/10.1080/02690059908589637 (accessed on 18 April 2023). [CrossRef]

Kay, Jackie. 2020. Missing faces: Jackie Kay on Scotland's Involvement in the British Slave Trade. Available online: https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/literary/jackie-kay-on-the-british-slave-trade (accessed on 12 July 2023).

McLeod, John. 2015. *Life Lines: Transcultural Adoption*. London: Bloomsbury.

Novy, Marianne. 2001. Introduction: Imagining Adoption. In *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*. Edited by Marianne Novy. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 1–16.

Palazzolo, Pietra. 2017. 'Tell[ing] One Story in Place of Another': Journeys of Discovery in Jackie Kay's Autobiographical Prose and Poetry. In *Experiments on Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*. Edited by Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak. Cham: Palgrave McMillan, pp. 105–26. [CrossRef]

Patton, Sandra. 2000. *BirthMarks: Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America*. New York: New York University Press.

Rodríguez González, Carla. 2015. Re-charting the Black Atlantic: Jackie Kay's Cartographies of the Self. *Études Écoissaises* 17: 103–19. Available online: http://journals.openedition.org/etudesecoissaises/97 (accessed on 12 July 2023).

Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Rowell, Charles Henry. 2014. An Interview with Jackie Kay. *Callaloo* 37: 268–80. Available online: http://www.jstor.org/stable/226993 (accessed on 4 July 2023). [CrossRef]
Simmonds, John. 2000. The Adoption Narrative: Stories that We Tell and Those that We Can't. In *The Dynamics of Adoption: Social and Personal Perspectives*. Edited by Amal Treacher and Ilan Katz. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 27–41.
Slaven, Jim. 2018. The Irish Experience in Historical Perspective. In *No Problem Here: Understanding Racism in Scotland*. Edited by Neil Davidson, Minna Liinpää, Maureen McBride and Satnam Virdee. Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, pp. 5–68.
Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. 2010. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Sturgeon, Nicola. 2023. Apology for historical adoption practices: First Minister's Speech—22 March 2023. Available online: https://www.gov.scot/publications/apology-historical-adoption-practices-first-ministers-speech-22-march-2023/ (accessed on 11 April 2023).
Tournay-Theodotou, Petra. 2014a. Some Connection to Place: Exploring displacement and belonging with Jackie Kay. *Transition* 113: 81–101. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/transition.113.82 (accessed on 28 March 2023).
Tournay-Theodotou, Petra. 2014b. Some Connection with the Place: Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*. *Wasafiri* 29: 15–20. Available online: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02690055.2014.861254 (accessed on 28 March 2023). [CrossRef]
Triseliotis, John, Julia Feast, and Fiona Kyle. 2005. *The Adoption Triangle Revisited: A Study of Adoption, Search and Reunion Experiences*. London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering.
Volkman, Toby. 2005. Embodying Chinese Culture: Transnational Adoption in North America. In *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*. Edited by Toby Alice Volkman. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 81–113.