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Giovanna Buonanno

From Page to Stage: Tanika Gupta's Theatre Adaptation of Jackie Kay's Memoir *Red Dust Road*

Abstract I: L'adattamento teatrale dell'autobiografia di Jackie Kay dal titolo *Red Dust Road* (2010), realizzato da Tanika Gupta, ha debuttato al Festival internazionale di Edimburgo nel 2019. La pièce mette in scena la ricerca dell'identità di Kay, figlia naturale di una donna scozzese delle Highlands e di uno studente nigeriano e adottata da una coppia di Glasgow nei primi anni Sessanta. L'articolo si concentra sulle strategie utilizzate da Gupta nella sua riscrittura: inserendo brani dell'opera poetica di Kay, Gupta rende un commovente omaggio alla poetessa, una delle voci più potenti della scrittura femminile nera britannica.

Abstract II: The stage adaptation of Jackie Kay's 2010 memoir *Red Dust Road* written by playwright Tanika Gupta premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2019. The play dramatises Kay's identity quest as a mixed-race child, born to a Scottish woman from the Highlands and a Nigerian student, and adopted as a baby by a Glaswegian couple in the early 1960s. The article will focus on the strategies Gupta deploys in her rewriting and argue that by incorporating passages from Kay's poetic *oeuvre*, Gupta pays a moving tribute to Kay, one of the most powerful voices in black British women's writing.

Keywords: Tanika Gupta, adaptation, Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road*, Black and Asian British women's writing.

1. Introduction

Playwright Tanika Gupta has been at the forefront of the British theatre scene for over three decades, producing a sizeable body of original plays, as well as adaptations of both classic and contemporary literary works. As a British writer of Bengali heritage, shaped by her origins, but not "bound" by them (Sierz 2012: 15), Gupta has dealt with British colonial history and the enduring legacy of colonialism in contemporary, post-imperial Britain, in both her original works and in her rewriting of existing works. Adaptations have increasingly become a key component of Gupta's writing for the stage and offer compelling illustrations of the playwright's "innovative use of the past to comment on the globalised present" (Schlote & Buonanno 2022: 263), when she revisits canonical works in the European canon, ranging from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Along with the rewriting of classic works, Gupta has also transferred onto the stage narratives written by contemporary women writers who, over the last decades

have drawn the contours of multicultural Britain in literature. These include the coming-of-age novel *Anita and Me* by Meera Syal, the comic novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* by Marina Lewycka and the work that will be discussed in this essay, Jackie Kay's memoir *Red Dust Road*.

Despite consistently questioning ethnic pigeonholing and the label of "Asian" writer (Gardner 2006), Gupta has also been 'inevitably' drawn to confronting her bicultural background, as she explains in an interview she released in 1997 (Stephenson & Langdridge 1997). The playwright has expressed her uneasiness at having to write about being "torn between two cultures", which she considers to be an "outdated and boring issue"; however, she seems aware that her writing revolves around "trying to get that character to search out their roots" and the resulting work is admittedly about "confusion and identity crisis" (Stephenson & Langdridge 1997: 117). Hence, adapting Jackie Kay's memoir *Red Dust Road* for the theatre taps into Gupta's long-standing commitment to exploring issues of identity formation in contested cultural terrains: *Red Dust Road*, first published in 2010, chronicles Kay's long and painstaking process of tracing her birth parents and consequently recomposing the multiple biological and cultural strands of herself, as the mixed-race, adoptive daughter of a Scottish couple, growing up in Glasgow in the 1960s. Gupta's adaptation dramatises Kay's identity quest and expands the performative potential of life-writing by strengthening the dialogic/discursive quality of the text, its polyphony and variety of registers, while also bringing into focus the significance of tracing both "individual and communal" genealogies in black and Asian British writing, through the act of remediation and retrieval (Döring 2020: 468).

2. Between Text and Performance: Black and Asian British Women's Writing across Genres and Media

Both Gupta and Kay have significantly contributed to shaping the burgeoning field of black and Asian British writing. They gradually matured as writers in the evolving multicultural literary and theatrical scene of the 1980s and 1990s, a thriving, creative environment enriched by newly founded women's writing collectives, whose aim was to support women writers of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian descent and challenge their exclusion from literature and the arts. As film director Pratibha Parmar states, reflecting on the predicament of the "outsiders within", namely women of minority background, "representations are a critical component of our identities, particularly for those of us who are perceived to be on the margins of the mainstream, the malestream, and the whitestream. Our need for reflections of ourselves and our communities is pivotal to our survival" (1991: 18). In the 1980s and 1990s the need for representation favoured forms of collaborative work and intense experimenting across genres and media, which also offered "a matrilineal alternative" to the predominantly male line (Rastogi 2016: 77). This pioneering phase, despite being also the result of what Gupta calls "token gesturing" (AI Profile 2021) on the part of cultural institutions that were opening up new avenues to writers of minority background, succeeded nonetheless in nurturing the talent of young writers who obtained appointments at prominent theatrical institutions, such as the Royal Court or the Tricycle, or, like Gupta, were commissioned works by the BBC.

In the early stages of their careers, both Gupta and Kay worked across various media and genres, as Gupta produced playscripts for the theatre as well as radio dramas, while Kay cooperated with *Theatre of Black Women*, the first black women's theatre company in Britain. Her debut theatre piece for the company, entitled *Chiaroscuro* (1986) is an experimental *choreopoem*, a fusion of drama and poetry with scenes arranged in non-linear sequences and contains in essence many of the thematic and formal features of Kay's work, as it explores the racial and sexual identity of four female characters of diverse backgrounds by mixing story-telling and poetic language. As has been noted, Kay's writing "reject[s] easy platitudes and challenge[s] readers to reject normative ideas of racial, sexual, and national identity" (Paddy 2002), while often drawing on her personal experience of transracial adoption that has marked her "as doubly different" (Weedon 2016: 51). Arguably, Gupta's choice to remediate Kay's memoir, which also partly recollects the ground-breaking phase of the 1980s and 1990s, is a tribute to this formative period and to Kay's and Gupta's respective coming to voice as British black and Asian writers.

3. Writing the Hybrid Self in Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*

In *Red Dust Road* Kay creates a complex, sophisticated non-linear narrative moving across time and place to weave into her memoir the complexity of her origins. The titular red dust road that leads her to her birth father's village in Nigeria symbolises her African heritage, but is only one of the several influences in her life. In her work Kay details the complex entanglement of routes and roots that have shaped her identity as a mixed-race child, born to a Scottish woman from the Highlands and a Nigerian student, and adopted as a baby by a Communist working-class, Glaswegian couple in the early 1960s. As has been pointed out, autobiographical writings have stood out as important vehicles to convey the tension between belonging and exclusion in black and Asian women's writing and have assisted women in writing their way "into the narrative of British history" (Laursen 2020: 499). As Kay argues in *Red Dust Road*: "It is not so much that being black in a white country means that people don't accept you as, say, Scottish; it is that being black in a white country makes you a stranger to yourself" (Kay 2010: 38-39). The self-reflexive genre is, therefore, a most apt vehicle to delve into herself, while simultaneously raising questions of cultural, racial and national belonging in Britain.

In Kay's other works, such as the aforementioned play *Chiaroscuro*, the identity quest is pursued through a mixture of genres and by foregrounding female experiences. Carla Rodríguez González points out that "Kay's literary identities are always intertextual and relational. Her characters and voices develop empowering strategies to fill in the gaps of a fragmented cultural memory" (2015: 104). *Red Dust Road* also relies on "empowering strategies" Rodríguez González mentions, as it consists of many fragments and snapshots of Kay's life, while it also chronicles her various journeys to meet her biological parents: the book opens in a hotel room in Abuja and describes Jackie's first meeting with her birth-father, Jonathan, but recounts also her first, much anticipated encounter with her birth-mother, Elizabeth, in a hotel reception hall in Milton Keynes, England, after many delays and cancellations. These awkward encounters with her birth parents, dotted with silences and surreal conversations, are humorously contrasted with Jackie's childhood fantasy about

them, when she imagined her mother “was Shirley Bassey”, only to be disappointed when she found out that she was a “white nurse from the Highlands” (Kay 2010: 65), or that her father could be a young Sidney Poitier or Nelson Mandela, or Martin Luther King, “the only real images of black men” at her disposal (Kay 2010: 36).

The chapters detailing the meetings with her parents or her trips to Nigeria are interspersed with Jackie’s own memories of growing up in the 1960s and 1970s as the daughter of John and Helen, a white Glaswegian couple who had adopted her and her brother Maxwell. The couple also had a migratory background, as they had originally met in New Zealand, where they had relocated as economic migrants, before settling back in Glasgow. Consequently, the memoir reads as a mosaic of her family life across time and multiple locations. By piecing together fragments of her life, Kay retraces her hybrid self and this existential trait becomes a signature of her memoir, as she conveys onto the page the investigation of her origins by creating a varied, hybrid text. She assembles multiple textual materials such as letters, emails, or chapters written in the style of diary entries that are often introduced by a reference to the year in which the events took place. They recount significant experiences as she comes of age, or document her feeling of exclusion because of her colour or uncertain origins and are vividly rendered in Gupta’s stage version, as will be shown in the next section of this article.

As John McLeod has noted, the text’s design recalls the form of *The Adoption Papers*, Kay’s debut long poem published in 1991, in which she also uses different typesets, along with a variety of registers in order to differentiate the three female voices that compose the poem (2015: 211). This earlier work ultimately reads as an ideal companion piece to *Red Dust Road*: couched in poetic form, *The Adoption Papers* emotionally expresses the process of adoption from the perspective of three women, as Kay interlaces the poetic voices of a daughter, a birth mother, and an adoptive mother, thus placing biological parentage on a par with cultural parentage and countering the commonly held view of the family as regulated by biological lines. The importance of cultural affiliations is resumed by Kay in *Red Dust Road* and reinforced by Gupta in her adaptation in which she brings to the fore the tension between filiative and affiliative relationships, as she dramatises Kay’s complex web of cultural and biological life-lines, by inserting in the stage version passages from *The Adoption Papers* and intersecting them with scenes from the memoir.

4. “...nature, nurture, genes, porridge”: Family Trees and Female Genealogies in Tanika Gupta’s *Red Dust Road*

The cover of the 2019 Oberon edition of Gupta’s stage adaptation of *Red Dust Road* shows Sasha Frost, the actress who plays Jackie Kay in the theatre production of the play, sitting next to Elaine C. Smith, who plays Helen, Jackie’s adoptive mother, signalling that the adaptation foregrounds family relationships and ties that are only partly reflected in the title: Kay’s search of her birth parents evoked by the image of the red dust road is only one of the multiple paths traced in the story. In keeping with the source text, the fraught and awkward connection with Jonathan, Kay’s Nigerian father, functions as a catalyst in the play and takes Jackie to Nigeria in two separate trips: one, in the opening scenes of both Act 1 and Act 2 and set in a hotel room in Abuja, where she meets Jonathan for the first time, and

the other towards the end of the play when she spends time in Lagos and manages to track down one of her half-siblings. Hence, finding her birth father and reclaiming her African heritage ideally frames the play, while also representing Jackie's trans-local routes which are juxtaposed with her family life in Scotland.

An additional clue to Gupta's reworking of Kay's memoir is the dedication placed at the beginning of the volume: to "all our mums, but especially to: Gairika Gupta, Monica Elizabeth Walton, and Helen Kay" (Gupta 2019: n. p.). The tribute to mothers (including Gupta's own mother) prioritises female genealogies which feature prominently in the play, in which defining passages from the memoir are selected and turned into dense and humorous dialogues that help to convey Jackie's search for her identity. In this endeavour she is often assisted by other women, ranging from her adoptive mother who is, as shown on the cover of the printed version, a constant and reassuring presence in Jackie's life, to her female friends and even include the writer Chimamanda Adichie who makes a cameo appearance in one of the final scenes set in Lagos, when both she and Kay, as prominent writers of African descent, are taking part in a literary event. As Suzanne Scafe has argued, women's autobiographies are relational, and this quality is further emphasised when rendered in the dialogic form of the play, compared to the narrative form of life-writing (Scafe 2016: 150).

Gupta states that she intended to keep both the fragmented structure of the memoir and the non-chronological order of the events recounted, but she was equally keen to add a more lyrical and poetic strand to the adaptation, as a way to make Kay's compelling poetic voice resonate more clearly. To this end, she resorts to inserting in the play extracts from *The Adoption Papers* which are indicated by the use of italics, whose function is to add a more intimate, individual female voice and break the sequence of dialogues. Hence, the intertextual links amplify Kay's poetic presence in the play, while further illustrating the significance of female ties and influences in shaping one's identity. For instance, in one of the scenes based on *The Adoption Papers*, a sixteen-year-old Jackie kisses a poster of Angela Davis hanging in her room and significantly affirms that "Angela Davis is the only female person I've seen (except for a nurse on TV) who looks like me. She had big hair like mine that grows out instead of down. My mum says it's called an Afro" (Gupta 2019: n. p.). The choice of this passage is a reminder of the limited range of images a mixed-race Scottish girl growing up in the 1960s and 1970s could reflect herself in (a nurse on TV or Angela Davis). It prefigures Kay's commitment to tracing black female genealogies later in the play, when Jackie alludes to the impact of key black literary figures, such as Audre Lorde or Toni Morrison, whose famous quote "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, you must be the one to write it", aptly crops up in a conversation between Jackie and her black female friends (Gupta 2019: n. p.).

Several of the play's scenes take place in the adoptive family home, seamlessly moving between past and present. They poignantly dramatise Jackie's coming of age and her gradual confrontation with society's views on race, gender and transracial adoption. In each scene the stage directions indicate Jackie's age and highlight different moments of her life that are crucial in sharpening her awareness of her colour, when, for instance, aged 7, she incites her brother Maxwell to side for the Indians as they watch a cowboys and Indians film: "JACKIE: I wanted the Injuns to win. MAXWELL: Don't be daft. Injuns are the enemy. JACKIE: Same

colour as me. Same colour as you of. Look” (Gupta 2019: n. p.). Similarly, Jackie’s encounter with racist bullies at 10 years of age, is also vividly re-enacted:

BULLY 1: Whit dae ye call a darkie falling from a mountain? Chocolate drop! The BULLIES laugh uproariously at their own jokes. JACKIE kicks one of them hard. One BULLY jumps on JACKIE whilst the other one tries to stuff bits of grass and mud into her mouth. BULLY 1: That’s what you should eat, mud, because you’re from a mud hut. BULLY 2: Sambo! Sambo! BULLY 1: Dirty darkie. Why don’t you go back to your own country? (Gupta 2019: n.p.).

The harshness Jackie faces in society at large is countered by the warmth and love of her family and the homely microcosm also strengthens Jackie’s Scottish identity. In Gupta’s adaptation this is conveyed through frequent insertion of songs and poetry belonging to Scottish folklore and literary tradition and culminates in a humorous rendition of Robert Burns’s *Address to a Haggis* (1786), “Great chieftain o the puddin’-race”, jointly delivered by Jackie and her father John (Gupta 2019: n. p.).

Additionally, the supportive role assigned to the family, especially in the earlier stages of Jackie’s life, extends to the community she becomes part of when she starts attending university in the late 1970s. Even if violent and discriminatory racist acts continue to haunt her, the communal context is conducive to gradually build resistance, as this scene shows:

JACKIE finally feels part of the group. She sits with two black women, AJ and CLAIRE. AJ: Black women are not just oppressed because we are women, we are oppressed because we are black women. White women on the other hand, continue to be complicit in racism. CLAIRE: They put up posters of you around the university? JACKIE: Mine and Alastair’s. He was called a ‘poof’ and I was called an Irish Catholic wog and a degenerate ugly feminist. [...] They even put razor blades behind the posters for anyone who tried to rip them down (Gupta 2019: n. p.).

The formative years at university also signal Jackie’s gradual exploration of identity politics, facilitated by fledgling black feminist collectives, that encouraged women of colour to fight oppression through activism and community organizing, while also playing a key role in the setting up of black women’s writing collectives in the 1980s:

RHONA enters and hands a leaflet to JACKIE. RHONA: There’s going to be a meeting in London of a group called OWAAD. You should go. You’d get a lot out of it. JACKIE: OWAAD? RHONA: Organisation of Women of African and Asian descent. JACKIE: You think I should go? RHONA: Er...yes! (Gupta 2019: n.p.).

Jackie’s need to trace her ancestry is then also linked to her ongoing fight against both casual and systemic racism and her determination to counter stereotyping in order to acquire a more rounded sense of herself, as the following extract suggests:

JACKIE: I want to know what makes me who I am – nature, nurture, genes, porridge...

CLAIRE: And your black Nigerian side that no one ever talked to you about. AJ: I get that. We're constantly having to come up with versions of ourselves to fit in with our environment. CLAIRE: We are all children of empire. (Gupta 2019: n.p.).

Consequently, Kay's appropriation of her African heritage is part of a personal trajectory that intersects with British colonial and postcolonial history and is gradually woven into the adaptation: walking the red dust road enhances the play's polyvocal quality and infuses it with a ritualistic mode. If, on the one hand, the Scottish context is constantly evoked as a homely setting and conveys the idea of nuclear family unit, the Nigerian lineage is polyphonic and plural and places Jackie in a large web of familial relations, also revealed through chants and ceremonies, as in one of the final scenes of the play which is set in her father's village:

A very old woman – NWANYIAFOR OSHIEKWE – sits on a chair. JACKIE and KACHI bend down as she blesses her. Another man enters with the Kola nuts and the blessing takes place. NWANYIAFOR: I will bless you and welcome you to this land. Onye wetara Oji Wetara Ndu (He who brings Kola brings life) She sprinkles some dust on JACKIE's head. KACHI: She is blessing you with clay dust from the river. The blessing is long and elaborate and ends with 'Ise' Amen. JACKIE takes the Kola nut. JACKIE: Ise. NWANYIAFOR: Isaayyy... God the Creator of the earth and everything there. [...]. We welcome Jackie Kay to Nigeria. Thank you, O God Almighty, Chukwu Okike, for bringing her here safely. She has crossed the waters (Gupta 2019: n.p.).

The theatre production of the play, directed by Dawn Walton, enriched the script with music that effectively rendered Jackie's multiple cultural influences: as one reviewer suggested, "the use of authentic African instruments and traditional Scottish lullabies" succeeded in conveying "the deeply rich and cultured life of Jackie Kay" (Kanjira 2019). Similarly, the stage design suggestively visualised the play's overarching concern with finding one's roots, as an imposing golden-brown frame "morphing into a knotty trunk" (Fisher 2019) created a family tree that "was symbolic of Jackie's mixed heritage – which is one of western influences and one of tribal and traditional cultures" (Kanjira 2019).

The National Theatre of Scotland produced the play in co-production with Manchester HOME, Manchester's centre for international contemporary culture and the show, after its premiere at the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2019, toured Glasgow and Manchester. This choice of venues further exemplifies the significance of the adaptation as a tribute to Kay's luminous career, given the centrality of both cities in Kay's life, who was the Scottish *Makar*, the national poet laureate of Scotland from 2016 to 2021 and also a long-time resident in Manchester.

5. Conclusion

The play's final scene is set in the Scottish family home, as Jackie shares with her parents and her brother her new knowledge of her African lineage, after she has been to Africa, "a million miles away from Glasgow, from my lovely Fintry Hills", where she had equally

felt “at home” (Gupta 2019: n.p.). Her African journeys have expanded her biological and transcultural roots, but the end of the play brings her back home to Scotland, in a final feisty moment of songs and dance where the adoptive family movingly celebrates their daughter’s appropriation of her biological roots.

In conclusion, Gupta’s adaptation has provided a theatrical afterlife to Kay’s memoir, thus significantly contributing to consolidating a Black and Asian British women’s writing tradition, that through transmedial and intertextual strategies favours legacy and canon formation (Buonanno 2022: 355). The intertextual strategies deployed by Gupta have reinforced the poetic quality of the text and enhanced the discursive value of life-writing, ultimately producing a moving tribute to Kay’s powerful poetic voice, while also indicating the potential of drama and theatre in unleashing the performative quality of narratives of identity. The poetic interludes interspersed in the scenes confer a lyrical quality to the memoir, whereas the women’s genealogies foregrounded in the adaptation bring numerous affiliative connections into focus. The play is a web of voices including Gupta’s own voice, who through the juxtaposition of both *Red Dust Road* and *The Adoption Papers*, has created an intimate connection between the two texts, thus making Kay’s tracing of her origins more incisive in the target text, a play that speaks to and celebrates Kay’s *oeuvre* as a whole.

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Giovanna Buonanno is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. She is the author of the monograph *International Actresses on the Victorian Stage* (Modena 2002) and co-editor, among others, of *Remediating Imagination: Literatures and Cultures in English from the Renaissance to the Postcolonial* (Carocci 2016) and of a monographic issue on playwright Tanika Gupta (2022). She has published numerous journal articles and book chapters on intercultural drama, transnational Shakespeare, Black and Asian British literature and theatre, refugee writing, transnational women's writing. giovanna.buonanno@unimore.it