**Beyond the Multicultural: Queer Community in Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet***

**Introduction**

This chapter situates the work of Jackie Kay alongside the development of ‘multicultural nationalism’ in Britain during the 1990s under the Labour government led by Tony Blair. Drawing attention to the ways in which an optimistic, broadly Liberal consensus was built during the Blair years, where plurality, diversity and hybridity were proposed as progressive emblems of a new political future for Britain beyond the divisiveness of class-politics and ethnonationalism, close attention to the rhetoric of New Labour reveals an enduring nationalist strand. Multiculturalism was aligned with figures of national unity, security and neoliberal economic policy in ways that had significant consequences for community, reimagining the bonds of social solidarity in ‘cultural’ terms that diminished their political potential (Bewes and Gilbert 2000: 7). If some commentators have argued British politics has exhibited since 2016 a ‘nationalist turn’, where more strident, overt and confident forms of nationalist rhetoric have been mobilized in political culture, it is instructive to trace a longer nationalist undercurrent which has developed since the 1980s (Valluvan and Kalra 2019: 2394). Neoliberalism has been engaged in a concerted project of producing a society where community is increasingly depoliticized and subordinated to ‘competitive’ and atomistic logics of free-market economics (Gilbert 2013: 9). Society is construed primarily as constructed of self-contained individuals and families, where community is increasingly understood only as homogenous cultural group formations based in race, ethnicity, or religion, which combine in a vision of unified national community.

This process offers an important context for understanding the work of Jackie Kay, whose writing has been aligned with the multicultural national project with striking regularity. Identification of her work through reference to her biography has often restricted readings of her work, highlighting their compatibility with multicultural focus on plurality and hybridity at the expense of more disruptive and intransigent influences and orientations in her work. Kay’s reference to the Black radical tradition, which was built through internationalist affinities in a postcolonial context, indicates a political orientation that was often critical of the European and American national projects. Likewise, her interest in figures of queer community that are incommensurable with state-sanctioned norms of kinship offer alternative directions for thinking the role of community in her work which exceed investment in the multicultural nation-state. This aligns Kay’s work with thinkers who have sought to imagine community beyond its identification with nationalism and multiculturalism, unearthing more radical possibilities in its social function. For philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, the task of thinking community in this context is to fundamentally ‘dissociate the idea of “community” from all projection into a work that is made or to be made - a State, a Nation, a People, or The People’ (Nancy 2016: 72). Disentangling community from its instrumentalization in the neoliberal nation-state requires attention to forms of life which have been historically excluded by it, which existing outside its ‘operativity’, inhabit modes of disruptive relationality which offer new ways of thinking about community (Nancy 1991).

Daniel Loick has termed these disruptive communities ‘counter-communities’, which he argues can be found in ‘queer and feminist movements that pose a fundamental challenge to the traditional family form, contesting the exclusivity and the conformism of conventional models of kinship’ (Loick 2021: 16). Queer community is often compelled to guard its marginal forms of association and community against erasure in the wider social landscape, and queer literature can therefore have a vital role in preserving such possibilities for reimagining community. The final section of the chapter addresses how Kay’s novel *Trumpet* (1998) offers in its depiction of a trans trumpeter and his relationship with wife, a small but potent instance of ‘counter-community’, producing a fragile vision of relationality beyond its use by the capitalist state. Foregrounding the symbolic illegibility of this relationship and its apparent incommensurability with the exclusionary function of the nation-state and its normative kinship apparatus, the chapter ends by arguing Kay’s text is exploring transformative possibilities in communal possibility, gesturing to forms of human association beyond the historical limits of the neoliberal project.

**Between the National and the Multicultural**

In May 2015, less than a year before then Prime Minister David Cameron officially announced a referendum on the United Kingdom’s membership to the European Union, Jackie Kay’s poem ‘Extinction’ was published in the *Guardian*. Part of a series of original poems curated by Carol-Ann Duffy on the theme of climate change, Kay’s text, originally titled ‘Planet Farage’, nevertheless combined its attention to ecology with more sustained attention to a growing component of British political discourse during this period (Varty 2018: 137).The voice of Kay’s poem animates a growing trend toward xenophobic nationalism, which takes climate change activism among many other subjects as enemies of its own imagined, national community. Articulated through the tone of a triumphant ‘we’ which constitutes itself through variously stated exclusions: ‘We closed the borders, folks, we nailed it./ No trees, no plants, no immigrants./No foreign nurses, no Doctors; we smashed it’ (Kay 2015: np) these repeated negations effectively dramatize the rise of a powerful structure of feeling in Britain against signifiers of otherness which it celebrates having successfully excluded: ‘We shut it down! No immigrants, no immigrants.’ No sniveling-recycling-global-warming nutters’ (2015: np).

The poem was publicly read by Kay as part of a poetry tour of Britain called ‘Shore to Shore’ that overlapped with the political campaigns which led up to the referendum itself. Its tone was intended to be largely satirical, dramatizing a comic incoherence and exclusionary fervour designed to produce criticism, but also enjoyment, in its expected reader. During this time, Kay’s text would take on an altered significance however. Anne Varty tracks how during the course of the tour Kay noted how reactions to the poem changed: ‘[n]ow that satire has become a reality, it suddenly isn’t funny any more (Varty 2018: 140).The triumphal tone of the piece began to lose its parodic hubris, rather tapping into a very real and newly bolstered ‘nationalist turn’ in political culture that would see its successful campaign to bind Britain to leaving the EU as its crowning achievement (Valluvan and Kalra 2019: 2394). In this context, the poem arguably takes on a more bitter, even abrasive style, channelling an emerging public confrontation around British identity encapsulated in its menacing final lines: ‘Now, pour me a pint, dear. Get out of my fracking face.’ Shifting its poetic voice from a nationally constituted ‘we’ to a more intimate, personalized scene of individual confrontation, the final lines resonate uncomfortably with a political situation where reports of threatening encounters with open misogyny, homophobia, racism and anti-European xenophobia were increasing (Albornoz et al. 2020).

This shift in reception around Kay’s poem registers an important moment in recent British history that appeared to reignite nationalism as political force. In this moment, what is experienced is arguably the breaking of a political consensus: an ‘interregnum’ between one hegemonic way of understanding British society toward another.[[1]](#footnote-1) Various names are attributed to this previous consensus: ‘late liberalism’, which combines ‘the twined formations of neoliberalism and liberal cultural recognition’ (Povinelli 2013: 30-31); ‘neoliberal cosmopolitanism’, where ‘neoliberal values […] undergird […] metropolitan diversity’ (Johansen 2015: 296); and, more generally, ‘multiculturalism’, which Nathan Glazer notably declared in 1997 to have established hegemonic status across most political camps (1997:3). Each term describes a similar conjuncture whereby the exclusionary nationalism associated with the first iterations of neoliberalism in Chile, America and Britain in the 1970s and 1980s gives way to a political culture which accept some aspects of plurality and diversity as part of a well-functioning neoliberal society. For Tony Blair in the 1990s, this would be expressed through reference to the new and exciting opportunities afforded by ‘globalization’: ‘the driving force of economic change’, necessitating that each ‘country […] dismantle barriers to competition and accept the disciples of the international economy’ (Blair 196.118-9). The reward for this supplication to global capitalist forces is the ability to take part in an ‘internationalization of culture’ where freer movement of capital, consumers goods, and labour, allows for a dynamic and visibly diverse national culture. New Labour advisor and director of Labour-aligned thinktank *Demos* Geoff Mulgan similarly argues that:

as globalization dramatically recasts the landscape of the world’s power, for the first time bringing billions into an open global market and rupturing and recasting traditionally enclosed cultures, it may well be that politics becomes far more, not less, important, as a way to solve problems and as a means of providing security and a stable sense of belonging. (p.xii)

Engaged in a project to think ‘after’ or even ‘beyond’ the political, Mulgan echoes Blair’s rhetoric on the exigencies of neoliberalism, arguing politics should be rethought in the wake the establishment of a globalized, free-market consensus as the predicate, not subject of political discussion. For cultural commentators of the time, not only did this economic ideology ‘decimate[.] the capacity of government and other democratic institutions to act upon the world’, but effectively produced a radically new political culture, where the British national project would be rethought in implicitly depoliticized and increasingly cultural terms (Gilbert 2000:233). This new political language can be captured by the term ‘multiculturalism’ but it is also characterized in its repeated and firm investment in building a unified, sense of national community. This process of globalisation is understood, as Mulgan notes, as ‘rupturing and recasting traditionally enclosed cultures’, indicating the way that communities might be radically displaced and transformed through their increased integration into the world economy. A language of multiculturalism therefore serves as a way of remaking such cultural and communal alliances, orientating them toward ‘security and a stable sense of belonging’ in a process invested in sustaining this new market-driven, globalized network of neoliberal nations. If neoliberalism has often been framed as a globalist project, working beyond the nation state in ways that were seen to weaken the latter’s power and significance, recent scholarship has demonstrated how in many cases the powers of the state, and a concomitant political nationalism, has grown since the late 1970s (Berger 2001). The history of neoliberalism has involved nationalism as a consistent, systemic factor in its political development, with Blairite multiculturalism arguably emerging as one of its most palatable iterations.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The shift in political culture heralded by the New Labour years may be productively termed ‘multicultural nationalism’: the deployment of an optimistic investment in the neoliberal economy and the dynamism of its global consumer markets as the model for a new, reinvigorated, and visibly diverse national identity. If some critics have argued that nationalism during the EU referendum regained a formerly diminished political confidence, many commentators have pointed out how this nationalism is not simply a novel or opportunistic ‘attempt to fill the political void that a capitalist crisis engenders’, but rather an ‘amplification of the nationalism […] already […]deeply threaded through the capitalist restructuring’ that has taken place through the last four decades (Valluvan 2019: 2404). New Labour’s use of multicultural nationalism was electorally successful in its ability to build constituencies across different social backgrounds, appealing to those with more conservative views, whilst also packaging this alongside a more socially progressive agenda, embracing (limited) support for cultural plurality, feminism, and support for LGBTQIA\* rights such as in new legislation for civil partnerships (Jessop 2013). Nonetheless, Labour’s military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq, growing hostility to asylum seekers, Islamophobia and lukewarm if not hostile attitudes to immigration reveal the limits to multicultural nationalism, demonstrating its function to subtly normalize nationalist ideologies in general political discourse (Moosavi 2015).

In her poem “Extinction”, we may find Kay referencing this longer history of nationalism, combining growing concern over anti-European xenophobia and the demonization of immigrants with a wider perspective on the evolution of nationalist sentiment. Noting denunciations of ‘lesbians’, ‘vegetarians’ and ‘HIV’ as well as ‘politically correct classes’ and ‘classes’ as a concept at all, Kay’s poem indexes a wide range of historical references (Kay 2015: np). This exposes a deep vein of nationalist investments, encompassing the demonization of the gay community during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, antifeminism and homophobia, the denigration of anti-discrimination legalisation from the 1960s onwards, as well as the fate of ‘class’ in the Marxist tradition of understanding capitalist society. In so doing, Kay’s poem combines xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny with climate change scepticism within a broad cultural nexus of ‘otherness’, demonstrating the way in which nationalist investment in traditional values of the family, social hierarchies, and continuity has long identified a wide range of ‘others’ to its project of national unity. If the 1990s were seen to have eclipsed some of the most overt symptoms of the nationalist tendency through an ideology of multiculturalism, Kay’s reference to the denying of ‘class’ is highly instructive, indicating broader shifts in political ideology away from class-based analyses of capitalist society. Class was not only disdained in the political rhetoric of the Thatcherite government, but was renounced with renewed rigour by the New Labour governments led by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

New Labour marked a distinct move away from a politics based in worker solidarity, with Blair using an imaginary drawn from the corporate environment as a model for imagining a new, post-class society:

The successful firm today works through partnership. Class distinctions are unhelpful and divisive. The good company invests in its people and takes them seriously. This is not kindness: this is good business. A country is not that different (1996:121).

The designation of class as ‘divisive’ is key to Blair’s ideological investment is reorientating the political discourse of the Labour Party, admonishing the class-based notion of social antagonism between distinct economic classes toward a practical unity that is simply ‘good business’. Reimagining the nation state as a corporation accords with Blair’s belief in the subordinate role states should play in relation to the global finance economy, but also serves as a wider template through which he seeks to radically reimagine the political function of the national community itself. Through eschewing solidarities, affinities or communities based in shared class or political interests, Blair proposes a vision of national unity which necessitates a new basis for communal bonds. If a business is ultimately held together by a (usually highly hierarchical) investment in shared financial prosperity, this would serve as practical logic for society itself. This new vision of community is therefore effectively denuded of substantial political content, construing societal bonds through a purely practical, economic logic which deems class politics as an unnecessary and deleterious disruption of an otherwise unified and prosperous national destiny.

In 1997, Labour-aligned thinktank *Demos* published an influential document which would take Blair’s vision of a nation as a corporation to its limit, explicitly rethinking British national identity through an exercise in brand marketing. *BritainTM: Renewing our Identity* heralds a new multicultural identity that will indicate to the world that Britain is open for business, deploying language derived from the world of the burgeoning consultancy sector to reimagine politics with an optimistic, multicultural vision of national unity:

Britain has always been open to immigration, more at ease with inward investment by German or Korean companies and open to cultural influences ranging from Indian food to Japanese manufacturing. The rich imagery of the sea has always been central to national identity – from the white cliffs of Dover to the great ports of Liverpool and Glasgow, from ‘Heart of Oak’ to Paul McCartney’s folksy ‘The Mull of Kintyre’ or the imperial ‘Rule Britannia’ (Leonard 1997: 44).

For Leonard it is Britain’s identity as a ‘hybrid nation’ and as a ‘silent revolutionary creating new models of organisation’ that should demonstrate to the world ‘our readiness to do business’ (3). In this way, the performative ‘we’ of Leonard’s experiment in reinventing the nation as a corporation, implicitly aligns the social body with this singular market goal, cultivating and maintaining its successful financial outlook through proposing plural society as a unique, global brand. Different ethnic and cultural communities, queers and non-queers, immigrants and non-immigrants are integrated into a putatively harmonious history of integration, hospitality and unity, free from the divisive language of class, sexuality or race, or reference to colonialism, racism or homophobia. This imagined unity is for theorists of nationalism Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, the kernel of nationalist ideology, positing a highly selective, or fictionalized account of history in order to cultivate nationalist investment in a population, where nationalism plays a distinctive role in building consent for prevailing economic systems and ideologies (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1990).

The community that emerges in the New Labour vision of the nation is, in the words of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, *put to work*: aggregating its members, construed either as individuals or as limited communities of identity, through the shared national project of fulfilling market goals. For Nancy, capitalism ‘negates community because it places above it the identity and the generality of production and products: the operative communion and general communication of works’ (1991: 75). When community is made operative in this way, and where human relationality works through a logic determined by an external force, Nancy claims we are not experiencing community but ‘communion’*,* a unity maintained through violent exclusions which ultimately destroy the community itself (1991: 12). In order for community to resist its reduction to a single work, something which Nancy sees as inevitably tied to authoritarianism, it is necessary to ‘dissociate the idea of “community” from all projection into a work that is made or to be made - a State, a Nation, a People, or The People’ (2016:72). Community is greatly undermined by its identification with a nation or a state, and so too with its construal through self-contained cultural categories of ethnicity, religion, or ‘race’. Against New Labour’s redefining of community toward to such restrictive goals, the task of many philosophers and writers has been to unearth and maintain alternative trajectories for community, imagining forms of association which exist outside or beyond imagined unities such as nations, states, or bounded identity.

**The Multicultural Author and the International**

The rest of this chapter will focus on the work of Jackie Kay, a poet, novelist, and playwright whose early career overlapped with Blair’s premiership, becoming emblematic for many of the multicultural vision that emerged during this period. Despite this identification, Kay’s work exceeds this frame in its exploration of community, often implicitly questioning the way that nation-states contain or limit our understanding of human affinities and solidarities. Kay also explores how people living outside of norms of gender and sexuality who have been historically outlawed, punished or made invisible by the state, have produced ‘counter-communities’ which call into question national community, whilst offering models for new ways of understanding and structuring sociality (Loick 2021). If Kay’s use of biographical and autobiographical forms of writing in relation to questions of race, ethnicity, culture, and sexuality have for many critics identified her work with multiculturalism, it is instructive to investigate the ways in which her work has been influenced by more radical ways of imagining community.

The critical reception of Kay exhibits a consistent trait. Introductions to chapters or articles on Kay almost invariably introduce her through presentation of her heritage, foregrounding her cultural persona and racial background before detailing her work or any cultural, literary, or political framing device that might more ordinarily attend literary scholarship.[[3]](#footnote-3) The primacy of the biographical in Kay’s literary reception indicates a discursive matrix which always appear prior to it, where Kay’s work is taken in a specific social context which inevitably orientates it to the multi-ethnic, the multicultural and the hybrid. The effect of this is twofold: first the literary status of Kay is iteratively diminished, subtly subordinated to a social significance of her background, and secondly this multicultural framing is rarely itself given adequate critical attention, assumed as a consensus which does not itself require thorough interrogation or justification. Kay’s compatibility with critical investments in the plural, hybrid and post-racial in this way have often obscured the heterogenous political trajectories contained in her work, which in many ways exceed the broad investment in the multicultural across a wide range of sectors and political factions of British cultural life. Most noticeably, there are representations of queer life in Kay’s work which draw attention to the exclusionary function of the nation-state and its investment in normative forms of kinship, which bring into question its compatibility with a radically queer or liberatory politics.

This tendency to identify Kay not primarily as a writer but as a social figure representing multicultural phenomena is expressed clearly in newspaper articles which frame Kay, who is Black, as having her adoption by two white Scottish parents to ‘thank for her success’ (Warwick 2015: np). If Kay’s own adoption is a complex subject in her literary works, here biographical details about her life overtake her status as author, stripping her of the cultural currency and autonomy most public literary figures take for granted. Likewise, literary critics such as John McLeod demonstrate a similar tendency to foreground Kay’s biographical status over the literary significance of her work, where her engagement with the poetic and semi-fictionalised personae in autobiographical texts are conflated directly with her own personhood. In his book *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption,* McLeod abstains from any close reading of texts by Kay, simply referring to her poem ‘The Adoption Papers’ as ‘d[oing] much to bring into literature the post-war phenomenon of transcultural adoption’(McLeod 210). Drafting Kay into his proposal of ‘transcultural adoption’ as a beneficial function of the multicultural state that gestures beyond the restrictive category of ‘race’ itself, McLeod replicates a tendency of criticism to situate Kay as a manifestation of a social phenomenon, whilst uncritically investing in the nation-state as a site of reconciliation and benevolence.

McLeod’s text elides direct questions of ‘race’ by euphemistically collecting them within the term ‘transcultural’ but this pivot to the cultural nonetheless entails no close attention to cultural concerns of sexuality or reference to Queer Theory and leaves the structural function of the multicultural nation-state largely uninterrogated. This is despite a long tradition of queer Black thought that has located the liberal state as ‘a domain determined by racial difference and gender and sexual conformity’ (Ferguson 2004:3). In *Aberrations in Black; Towards a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson points out that the reduction of political vectors such as race to issues of ‘culture’ ‘compels identifications with […]the normative ideals promoted by state and capital’, demonstrating how a multicultural ideology can tacitly erode more radical trajectories in marginal communities (3). If ‘liberal pluralism has traditionally constructed the home as the obvious site of accommodation and confirmation’, Ferguson compiles a history of the capitalist state which demonstrates how it ‘occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class in forming social practices’ (3).

Kay’s work references a similar Black tradition to that of Ferguson’s account, where cultural and political affiliations necessarily exceed the nation-state, moving between global geographies still determined by colonialism, slavery and enduring asymmetries in global capitalism (Kay 2008; 2017). Kay’s status as a Black author of Nigerian descent, brought up by white Scottish parents, has been amenable to a multicultural framing, fitting her into the neat category of ‘national poet’ due to her tenure as Scottish Makar (Varty 2018). This has, however, often belied a wider set of political commitments and influences, not least her adoptive parent’s Communist convictions: a political tradition which has largely privileged an internationalist politics of class solidarity and criticized nationalist ideology.Kay’s oeuvre demonstrates deep indebtedness to a wider range of radical political traditions, linking the black Marxist tradition with the Highland clearances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

I am learning about the Black Jacobins

From CLR James and the memories of the

Cheviot and the stag and the Highlanders

Being forced oot of their crofts

Came flooding back (Kay 1988: 92).

Drawing on the Marxist anti-colonial work of CLR James, whose influential 1938 book *Black Jacobins* detailed the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804, where former slaves drew on the principles of the French Revolution to overthrow French colonial rule, Kay puts this in dialogue with the broadly contemporaneous Highland clearances in Scotland. Refencing John McGrath’s play on the topic, Kay combines two unexpected traditions, linking parallel processes of dispossession of African slaves, and Scottish peasants in the Highlands, whilst also invoking their respective resistance to this. In McGrath’s play we see how in the Scottish context, colonialism was understood not simply as a process that took place overseas, in Africa, Asia and the Americas, but which developed practices of control and exploitation which were also deployed in the British mainland. The British Empire was not beneficial to the national community as a whole as it practiced techniques of exploitation and extraction against members of its lower social classes, regardless of their nationality, indicating bonds of potential ‘anticolonial solidarity’ between the oppressed peoples in England, Scotland and across the Empire (Gopal 2019: 23):

The highland exploitation chain-reacted around the world; in Australia the aborigines were hunted like animals; in Tasmania not one aborigine was left alive; all over Africa, black men were massacred and brought to heel. In America the plains were emptied of men and buffalo, and the seeds of the next century’s imperialist power were firmly planted and at home the word went round that over there, things were getting better (McGrath [1974] 2013: 29).

Likewise, Jackie Kay’s 2017 text *Bantam,* herfirst poetry collection as Scottish Makar, indicates an internationalist tradition which exceeds any easy identification of her work with a nationally framed multicultural project. Invoking her adopted parents John and Helen Kay, who are the main objects of address in the collection’s repeated use of the second person, Kay recalls their involvement in historical political demonstrations based in internationalist networks of solidarity:

Nobody knew you greeted Madame Allende

Or sang the songs of Victor Jara

Or loved Big Arthur’s bravura ‘Bandiera Rossa’

Or heard Paul Robeson at the May Day rally’ (Kay 2017: 11).

Madame Allende was the wife of Chilean President Salvador Allende, who killed himself during the 1973 Chilean coup d'état when General Pinchot, with the backing of the Richard Nixon-led American administration, implemented the first neoliberal economic project after ousting Allende’s democratically elected Socialist government (Taylor 2006). In exile, Madame Allende travelled the world building international opposition to Pinchot’s brutal rule, becoming Rector of the University of Glasgow in 1977 and returning to Chile in 1988. Kay also references Paul Robeson, who was also an important internationalist figure, whose political activism in support of antifascist Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War, and support for the Soviet Union, saw the American government deny him a passport during the McCarthyite era (Goodman 2013). Such historical references foreground the internationalist anti-colonial struggles of the time, which often saw oppression as intrinsic to the nation-states which they opposed, building forms of political solidarity and community which sought to dislodge such structures. Based in scenes such as the ‘May Day rally’, spaces of communal joy in protest, song and political education, the basis of such collectivities is firmly rooted in an international outlook and shared political perspectives which defy containment within a national context. Writing that ‘nobody knew’ about her parent’s political activities, something which ‘The Adoption Papers’ also confirms when her parents have to hide copies of Marxist literature as well as a ‘poster of Paul Robeson’ in order to be accepted as legal adopters, Kay notes how such political convictions and internationalist solidarities have often had to guard such allegiances from exposure in the state (Kay 1991: 15).

**Queer Counter-Community in *Trumpet***

As this chapter has already noted, philosophers such as Nancy have argued how within the nation-state social relations are consistently ‘put to work’ and subordinated to the status of reproducing a single, national community. Modes of affinity that exceed or resist this are therefore often possible only in a context of relative secrecy. As Jackie Kay’s account of her parents’ concealing of their Communist politics demonstrates, communities which develop modes of solidarity or relationality which are incompatible with the state’s projection of legitimate community must often guard themselves from exposure in a hostile or even dangerous sociality. Daniel Loick theorizes such communities through the paradigm of the ‘counter-community’, taking queer, migrant and feminist social movements as exemplary of this trend. Counter-communities are composed of ‘subjugated’ populations which exists at a necessary ‘distance[e] from dominant social structure’ such as in ‘oppositional subcultures and scenes, political movements and parties’ or as alternative modes of ‘kinship’ (23). Despite their marginal status and fragility as communities, Loick draws on the work of queer theorists Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant to demonstrate how such communities are able to imaginatively recreate social bonds beyond was Nancy calls their ‘operative’ function which subordinates them to the logic of the state (Nancy 1991). Counter-communities can also, for Loick, engage in a form of ‘world-making’ that works beyond ‘all forms of familial or national identity formation’ (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558; Loick: 19). This process of world-making is marked by ‘an irreducible openness and a becoming’, inventing alternative modes of sociality beyond the exclusions and normativity of the nation-state (Loick: 19). Crucially, such inventive forms of community are ‘neither compensatory nor deficient, but antagonistic and thus transcendent’ in relation to the dominant mode of national community. They do not ask for ‘integration to the existing order but its abolition’ (Loick: 4).

Although this chapter has thus drawn on Kay’s poetry to unearth tendencies in her work which are critical of the restrictions of a nationalist, state multiculturalism, it is her novels, most notably *Trumpet,* which offer her most incisive reimagining of community. Fiction is well suited to the process of radical world-making, offering a generative space where marginal forms of community can be explored and new modes of affinity can be captured. *Trumpet* is a fictional rewriting of the life of jazz trumpeter Billy Tipton, who, upon his death, was revealed to have been born a woman. Likewise, this is the situation for the protagonist of Kay’s novelJoss Moody*,* who is reimagined as a black man living in Scotland, with the narrative told from the perspective of his ex-wife, son, mother, various officials (a registrar, doctor and funeral director), old friends and band members, as well as an unauthorized biographer and reporter named Sophie Stones. The novel navigates a social landscape where trans identities are not only unintelligible to many, but provoke hostility, prejudice and misrecognition from the institutions of the state, necessitating retreat and secrecy in relation to broader sociality.

The starting passage is told from the perspective of Millie Moody, the wife of the recently departed Joss, who is hiding from reporters and photographer outside her window. Throughout the novel, an insidious ‘they’ of intrusive sociality are spectrally present, consistently confronting Millie with the difficulty of recognition in a landscape which wishes to instrumentalize her life with Joss Moody through sensationalist exposure: ‘No doubt they will call me a lesbian. They will find words to fit onto me. Words that don’t fit me. Words that don’t fit Joss’ (Kay 2008: 154). Millie’s relationship with Joss in the novel is unintelligible for most people she encounters, rendered ‘unreal’ in the symbolic landscape of state kinship which does not recognize trans identities, and in so doing construes her relationship as ‘lesbian’ and therefore illegal and illegitimate: ‘Each time I look at the photographs in the papers, I look unreal. I look unlike the memory of myself (1). These ‘photographs’ are the visual markers of a general social misrecognition, circulated in an outside environment from which Millie can only retreat behind her ‘curtain’. Subject to prurient investigation from reporters, and prejudice from many around her, it is only in her remembered relationship with Joss where she can understand her reality: ‘It was real. We just got on and lived it’ (125).

As we see in Loick, the ‘counter-community’ is constituted in its distance from the norms of the state to which they are sometimes illegible, producing modes of life and affinity which are incommensurable with its basic structure. The nation-state relies on its ability to ‘reproduc[e] the dominant family ideology’ where the domestic sphere serves the vital function of creating and sustaining new workers for the economy (Loick: 10). Queer life therefore offers a vital repository for understanding ways of organizing and sustaining communities, relationships and affinities which exist outside of this. In their inability to be fully integrated with the nation-state, they are necessarily constituted as outside and beyond it, overlapping with Nancy’s desire for a community that is ‘inoperative’ through being unbound by the work of the nation-state to reproduce itself as an identity (Nancy 1991: 72). Although Joss and Millie’s relationship is barely itself a community, it is what Bataille terms a ‘community of lovers’ which functions as a ‘closed community’ where lovers share in a bond which is forged through the exclusion of the community in general (Bataille: 2009: 7). For Maurice Blanchot, who draws on Bataille, the community of lovers is constituted through the ‘oblivion of the world: the affirmation of a relationship so singular’ that it exceeds all social bonds as they are currently configured (Blanchot 1988: 34). If perhaps overstated and overly romantic in their articulation, Bataille and Blanchot’s conception of love as a disruptive and transformative force takes on greater significance in the space of the counter-community, where marginal relationships disrupt the dominant order of relation, gesturing to potentially novel forms of relationality.

The representation of Joss and Millie’s intimate closed community is presented by Kay as the only space in which the fragile and socially misrecognized category of the ‘trans’ can be authentically understood. Only Millie has been present to Joss Moody’s willed exposure as his body, the revelation of which on his death begins a process of violent social misrecognition. In an early scene of intimacy between the couple, Joss hesitates before exposing his body, faced with the possibility of misrecognition or rejection. Seeing the ‘bandages’ binding his chest, Millie at first assumes Joss is injured: ‘to think all he is worried about is some scar he has. He should know my love goes deeper than a wound,’ but as Joss ‘keeps unwrapping endless rolls of bandage’, Millie realizes the real reason for Joss’s apprehension: ‘I am still holding out my hands when the first of his breasts reveals itself to me. Small, firm’ (21). Throughout the chapter, Kay engages in a careful pacing, slowly developing a compact prose of erotic tension produced through unexpected commas and short sentences: ‘His breath is fast, excited’ (19). Ending the chapter with the revelation of Joss’s status as ‘trans’, Kay crucially curtails the development of the scene, leaving the couple’s negotiation of Joss’s trans identity suggested, but unrepresented. Evoking the structure of the counter-community which is liable to misrecognition and erasure in the national community, Kay replicates this at the level of her prose itself. The counter-community of Joss and Millie is here rendered through it’s a constitutive unrepresentability, guarding its relationality from exposure. The scene is not fully developed because, in some crucial way, it is not representable. What ensues is the possibility of a relation which in many ways is utopian: unimaginable in the operative logics of relation and identity in which most of us live.

By foregrounding the community of lovers, who are closed off from wider society, Kay circumvents dominant conventions in categorizing and taxonomizing the gendered body. Essentialist constructions of the biological are entirely ignored by Millie, who does not dwell on the figure of the ‘trans’, a word which is not used in the novel, rather simply foregrounding his male identity as a given component of their shared lives. If state-sanctioned accounts of gender demand a stability and unity to gender identity, tying it to an origin-myth of biology and sex ‘assignment’ at birth, Moody’s being as a man*,* is nonetheless absolutely affirmed by Millie, who refuses any taxonomy but her own:

I can’t stare at these pictures and force myself to see ‘*this person who is obviously a woman, once you know’ -* according to some reports. I can’t see her. I don’t know if I’ll ever see her. The photographs of Joss on his album covers are the same to me. I can’t change him. I can see his lips. His lips pursed when he played the trumpet. His lips open to talk. Him leaning over me, kissing me softly with his lips. All over my face. His dark full lips (100).

In this passage, Kay subtly asserts gender identity not as part of social logic of enforced biological binarism, but as the revelation of intimates. If ‘some reports’ wish to categorize Moody’s gender, to assert its origin through reference to common recognition, where he is said to be ‘*obviously a woman once you know’*, it is clear that many people, including all of Moody’s close relations, experienced something very different to this. Rather than mirror the category prescription of the ‘reports’, we are offered the evocative memory of ‘[h]is dark lips’, with the rhythmic repetition of short sentences preceded by masculine pronouns: ‘[h]is lips’, ‘him leaning’, not asserting masculinity as a category to be stated as social reality, but rather as a relation to be simply experienced. The careful pacing of the prose, which builds an almost poetic intensity with its short lines and repetitions, evokes the passionate rhythms of kissing, love-making, and caress, where it is the meeting of skin: here, of ‘lips’, which produces the repeated affirmation of masculinity. In this sense gender is produced not through social categorisation but through consistent uses of the masculine pronoun, denoting not ‘man’, but ‘this man’, ‘here’, whose meaning is not dependent on state-sanctioned structures of dominant sense, but on a specific sensual encounter.

In this way, Kay engages in a process of ‘disidentification’, eschewing any attempt to reconcile her account with the dominant terms of gender as proposed by the state which regulates ‘gender and sexuality’ through its ‘periodic reinvention of the family as an instrument for distributing wealth and income (Cooper 2017: 17). Following Jose Esteban Muñoz, queer counter-communities must engage in a form of ‘disidentification’ which distances itself from normative identity categories so they can be rethought and retooled toward their own purpose. This allows for dominant modes of kinship and operative norms to be to be exposed in their exclusionary function whilst also utilizing the ‘code of the majority’ ‘as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture’ (Muñoz 1999: 5). To expose the ‘unthinkable’ is therefore to carve a place for a transformational politics that is not yet in existence, allowing forms of life which are not recognized by the state to exist at its margins, rerouting and transforming norms of kinship, community, and sexuality. For trans theorist Gayle Salamon, ‘trans’ is a vital placeholder for a multiplicity of non-normative subject positions, and as such it must be asserted as a way of demanding recognition and rights at the same time as being understood as open to change and ‘undecidability’ (Salamon 2010: 143). If forms of state-recognition ultimately underpin the ability of people to gain access to political rights, those communities who cannot receive this risk being ‘condemn[ed]to placelessness’ (Salamon: 144).

Muñoz and Salamon are interested in the ways in which queer and trans life has historically been condemned to a marginality, excluded from representations of the world, and barred from proper legal or political recognition. Counter-communities of queer life which survive despite such erasures must work with current conceptions of gender, sexuality and community at the same time as reinventing them in creative ways, anticipating the possibility of alternative modes of community and kinship. Such possible futures are, necessarily defined by an ‘unrealizability’ for Loick, who points out that counter-communities are not engaged simply in proposing concrete forms of community, but in radically transforming the modes of power in the nation-state which define and regulate them toward their own ends (Loick: 19). Similarly, in Salamon’s account of ‘trans’, what is proposed is not simply reconciliation with the current system of gender-binarism, a desire for integration through the production of a new category, or even the altering of existing ones. Trans life can also refuse inclusion, demanding a restructuring of society itself, calling into question the power of the state to regulate and determine our intimate lives, identities and communities at all. Trans is therefore orientated toward an ‘undecidability’ which keeps the question of community and identity radically open (Salamon: 144). If the multicultural state has been situated as the benevolent, hospitable, and mutable grounds for such possibilities, the continuing history of exclusion and regulation also opens the possibility of rethinking such structures on a more fundamental level.

Kay points to this specific mode of ‘undecidability’ in the only section of the novel that focuses on Joss Moody’s lived life, which she encapsulates through an evocative and experimental chapter centred on a description of his jazz improvisation. In this section, Joss inhabits an ambiguous relation to his body and gender norms, appearing to transcend in some ways social logics which confine and misrepresent them. For trans theorist Jay Prosser, the relation between the *actual* gendered body of trans people and the social logic which precedes and orders them, is necessarily vexed. It demands understanding the potential ‘fluidity’ a trans body can have in relation to norms at the same time asserting the absolute importance of their sexed embodiment as not only characterized by the fluid, but also the ‘flesh’, and what Prosser privileges in terms of the body’s ‘materiality’ (Prosser 1998: 62). As we have seen with Muñoz, the process of ‘disidentification’ demanded by social marginalization and misrecognition demands not only distancing oneself from norms, but also retooling and reclaiming their operative terms. In this section, music allows for Moody’s body to retreat from the social landscape, taking on an embodied position of masculinity which is also elastic, experimental and fundamentally ‘undecidable’ (Salamon: 143).

When he gets down, and he doesn’t always get down deep enough, he loses his sex, his race, his memory. He strips himself bare, takes everything off, till he’s barely human. Then he brings himself back, out of this world. Back, from way. Getting there is painful. He has to get to the centre of the whirlwind, screwbaling in musical circles till he is very nearly out of his mind (131).

In this intimate space of jazz improvisation, Joss ‘loses his sex, his race’ disidentifying with social norms to find a liberated territory beyond them. Mirroring the music enveloping him, Joss appears fluid, disruptive and rhythmic in his own embodied being: ‘he is bending in the wind, scooping pitch, growling’, and if the music is ‘fast’ and ‘speeding, crashing’, this temporality proceeds from his ‘fingers going like hammers, frenzied’ and ‘[h]is leather lips. His satchelmouth’ (131). The constantly shifting terms of this music moves through and with his body in a manner akin to but ‘[b]etter than sex’ (135). If music appears to ‘transcend’ the body, as some commentaries suggest, it is nonetheless located precisely within his body: ‘There is music in his blood’ and music proceeds from his bodily extremes: his ‘leather lips’ and his ‘skin’ (Byrne and Allen 2014: 94; Kay 1998: 134). Music does not simply transcend but presses at the limit of the possible: opening social categories of sex, gender and race to radical transformation. Moving freely through categories of gender and race: ‘He is a girl. A man […] Black, white’ (136), Moody embodies the power of the counter-community to reorganize and reimagine dominant structures of sociality. Rendering the gendered and raced body as a space of undecidable and indefinite experimentation, Kay locates this rare liberatory moment in the novel through indifference to social norms, and the possibility of radically transforming them. A world beyond restrictive and state-sanctioned gender roles, racism and exclusion may be imaginable in many ways, but by holding onto this potential, *Trumpet* insists on community as a project open to infinite, and even utopian possibilities

**Conclusion**

If the 2016 EU referendum effected a shift in political culture toward a more confident and emboldened nationalism, attention to the history of neoliberalism indicates a longer nationalist strand which worked in continuity with a multicultural nationalism which preceded it. In fact, nationalism has been a consistent and enduring function in the history of nations as they have co-evolved with capitalism, where nationalist sentiment has long been utilized to build consent and shared identity within class society (Valluvan and Kalra: 2394). If the Britain was reimagined by Tony Blair as an administrator of a globalized, neoliberal economy, the multicultural identity of this vision nonetheless tacitly aligned with a strong investment in national community, subordinating communal bonds to a projected unity. Enduring modes of exclusion in relation to immigrants, asylum seekers and Islamophobia demonstrate that even a state invested in multiculturalism cannot serve as a purely benevolent site for negotiating and resolving inequality and difference. By attending to the history of New Labour, it is possible to trace how multiculturism was a mode of political rhetoric tasked with repackaging neoliberalism as plural, dynamic and diverse, whilst redefining social solidarities and community in cultural terms, eschewing explicitly class-based modes of political affinity. The legacy of this depoliticized and reductively cultural way of understanding community has been longstanding and influential, posing a pressing question for thinkers today to imagine community beyond this restrictive framing.

Jackie Kay’s critical reception is marked by a close identification of her work and biography with the multicultural, replicating forms of categorization which denude her work of its more disruptive and radical orientations. Early in her career, Kay was influenced not only by the Marxist thought, but also the Black radical tradition, both of which have a long tradition of building political community, solidarity and affiliation beyond and against the structure of the nation-state. Internationalist solidarity, as evoked by Kay’s referencing of figures such as Paul Robeson and Madame Allende, indicates a tradition of political thinking which highlights the enduring colonial legacy of Britain, as well as the importance of anti-colonial solidarity. Writing that if he was ‘in Britain’ he would ‘feel a sense of oneness with the white working people’, Robeson offers a vision of international community where ‘common people are all nations are truly brothers in the great family of mankind’ (Robeson 1958: 48). A common reference point for Kay throughout her career, Kay’s own evocation of community is influenced by Robeson’s internationalist vision, imagining modes of community and affinity which are at times indifferent, antagonistic or transcendent of the nation-state itself.

This vision arguably finds its strongest articulation in Kay’s attention to queer history of Billy Tipton, which she reinvents in the Scottish context in her novel *Trumpet.* Through its evocation of Joss and Millie Moody, the novel foregrounds the role the capitalist state can play in determining legitimate and illegitimate gender roles. This exposes how the state’s promotion of the traditional nuclear family, which is the site where labour-power is reproduced, plays an exclusionary role for populations and kinship arrangements which do not conform to its structure. The figure of the ‘trans’ and its historical marginality demonstrates the ways in which queer communities and relationalities have long existed through modes of secrecy and social retreat, guarding communal arrangements unintelligible to the wider political landscape. Invoking Loick’s recent proposal of the term ‘counter-communities’ to capture the political function of such communities, Kay’s attention to the disruptive and unrepresentable function of the queer relationship at the heart of *Trumpet* demonstrates the possibility in her text of anticipating radical rearrangements of community and sociality beyond their restriction in the capitalist nation-state. If the articulation of such communities is marked by an indeterminacy and ‘undecidability’ that invokes a utopian register, such ‘word-making’ tendencies in imaginative fiction are arguably necessary to address the political challenges of the present (Berlant and Warner: 558). As the nationalist tendency in British society continues to grow apace, internationalist movements which attempted to reinvent political community beyond the nation-state and capitalism offer vital and still unrealized paths for political renewal.

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1. It has become common to use this Gramscian terminology to periodize Neoliberalism’s apparent demise since the financial crisis of 2008. For example, see (Peck and Dawes 2020: 289-309). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Recent scholarship has decisively argued that far from abandoning the state, neoliberalism relied on nationalist support from a bolstered state for its survival. See (Slobodian 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A short review of recent articles on Kay confirms this. For example (Williams 2020; Elgezeery 2015; Szuba 2017 article. Bettina Jansen’s 2018 chapter on Jackie Kay in *Narratives of Community in the Black British Short Story* marks a refreshing departure from this trend. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)