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## The world and the “jar”: Jackie Kay and the feminist futures of the black diaspora

Samantha Pinto\*

This article focuses on black Scottish poet and novelist Jackie Kay’s 1997 memoir/biography, *Bessie Smith*, a formally innovative profile of the blues singer mixed with a memoir of the author’s relationship to Smith’s image and recordings. As an amalgam of one of the most recognizable frameworks for black subjectivity – the blues – and the discordant location of 1960s Scotland, this text lays the groundwork for reading diaspora through gender and sexual difference. Kay’s process of reincorporating Smith into Black British experience redefines diaspora studies through feminist concepts of geography and temporality. In moving unevenly across the usual paths of the black Atlantic, the text positions difference rather than continuity as the future of the field.

**Keywords:** Jackie Kay; feminism; diaspora; blues; queer theory; Black British literature

But if we are in a jug it is transparent, not opaque, and one is allowed not only to see outside but to read what is going on out there.<sup>1</sup>

Bessie Smith’s first hit, 1933’s “Downhearted Blues,” tells a familiar blues story of love and loss using the strange and fantastic metaphor of “the world,” “a jug” and “the stopper.” These objects form a complex relationship to one another: on the surface, the lyrics are another performance of a popular heterosexual romance imperative; but, of course, as has been well documented, blues songs’ engagement with “love” often exposes decidedly unpopular narratives of power and loss. In “Downhearted Blues,” the world is both trouble and possibility, the jug is limited from the inside and outside, and the stopper represents control as well as the inability to act. As an image of cultural and self-containment, the verse haunts with its suggestion of the capacity and agency of black subjectivity, the ordinariness of a jug holding the extraordinary body of the world. Ralph Ellison uses a similar conceit in his 1964 essay analyzing the legacy of Richard Wright and of mainstream critical reception of black literature, “The World and the Jug.” For him, the jug of public intellectual and artistic discourse limits how black writing (and black subjects) is held by the outside world to reflections of a particular form of tragic realism. But Ellison is also concerned with how the black imaginary contained inside of this “jug” is similarly shaped by the devaluing of a variety of black aesthetic practices and influences by “sociology-oriented critics.”<sup>2</sup> Ellison’s use of the popular lyric as the metaphor he borrows for his title connects the articulation of romantic desire in a classic blueswoman’s song to the stifling insistence on social realism as the model for

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the reading of black expression and discourse. In this essay, I would like to take Ellison's titular gesture seriously, and further ask what the metaphorical work of gender, desire, and cultural form might have to offer in reframing worldly discourses of the black Atlantic – past, present, and future?

This essay engages *Bessie Smith*, poet and novelist Jackie Kay's 1997 book-length profile of the blues singer, to begin to address this question first and foremost by performing a literal gloss of the "world." I examine how Smith's and Ellison's articulation of the paradoxes of power and black subjectivity relate to Kay's decidedly broad geographical and historical spread – 1960s Scotland, the early twentieth-century American South, 1920s Harlem, contemporary England. This immense and surprising "world" of the black diaspora interacts with the portability of the "jug" as a reference to the quotidian, yet no less fantastic, spheres of gender and sexual desire that also thread through black aesthetic practice and cultural expression. Like her critically acclaimed novel *Trumpet*, *Bessie Smith* trades in the intersections of performance, Black British identity away from the metropole, and queer desire. Linking the popular circulation of black subjectivity to the sphere of high formal literacy through her experimental form in the biography (made up of anecdotal evidence, fictional scenarios, and autobiographical reflection rendered in various typefaces within each chapter), Kay's reevaluation of Bessie Smith's relationship to "the world" through her text exposes the overlaps and incommensurabilities found in various circulating models of black women's identity in Ellison's sense of the "jug"-like lens of critical discourse.

Reading Kay's text as a model of the necessarily uneven transmissions that characterize the black Atlantic lays the historical and intellectual groundwork for locating gender and sexuality within critical formulations of internationalism and diaspora studies. The first part of this article, "Night and Day," traces how critical work on the black diaspora has frequently separated out popular cultural and performative work from self-consciously intellectual and political labor. *Bessie Smith*, I argue, repositions the integral and interruptive presence of black women's popular performances within the genealogy of black internationalism as an intellectual project. The second part, "In Kind," takes on the specific role of difference – sexual, gendered, geographic, and racial – within Kay's work as a critique of totalizing narratives of blackness. The third part, "Harlem to Home," relocates the center of black Atlantic discourse away from the metropolitan and toward what I call a "private genealogy" of reception, one that finds that desire, race, and identification are much more slippery to define across the vast temporal and spatial variety of the black diaspora. The fourth part, "Town and Country," pushes this politics of location further by imagining a methodology for diaspora that traces the circulation of black cultural commodities, rather than the literal travel by black subjects, as a way to incorporate a sustained engagement with difference into the field. The final section, "Keeping Time," pulls together the violations of time, space, and subjectivity that Kay's text foregrounds, shifting how we keep track of the critical timing of black internationalism as a bounded historical moment with a legible intellectual past. Instead, Jackie Kay's work challenges us to perform feminist revisions of the black Atlantic and its critical futures through her geographic, historical, gendered, and queered interruptions of the recognizable routes of the black diaspora. This essay suggests that these expansive modes of discursive circulation that characterize the black diaspora can also be innovative circuits

for critically reading black women's cultural performances and the political desires that connect and ground them to intellectual practice.

### Night and day

It was in New York, February, 1923. Bessie and Jack were staying in Jack's mother's house on 132<sup>nd</sup> Street between Fifth and Lenox Avenues. Above 132<sup>nd</sup> Street was a Harlem full of black people.<sup>3</sup>

A letter full of curses, again in Bessie's handwriting to the manager of the 91 Club in Atlanta. An original record of "Downhearted Blues". A reject selection of the songs that were never released. A giant pot of chicken stew still steaming, its lid tilted to the side. A photograph of Ethel Waters; underneath the sophisticated image Bessie has written: "Northern bitch. Long goody. Sweet Mama String bean. 1922"... A jar of Harlem night air.<sup>4</sup>

In a text that travels incessantly – from Chattanooga to Mississippi; from Philadelphia to Glasgow; from the North to the South of the United States; from the 1920s to the 1930s; from autobiography to biographical fiction – Jackie Kay's profile, *Bessie Smith*, spends very little time in or on Harlem. As the historical center of contemporary African American and black diaspora critical studies, and as the black aesthetic benchmark of the twentieth century, Harlem is more often than not the center of inquiry into the relationship between black literary expression and the diasporic circulation of blackness. It is, at the very least, the cultural and ideological ground from which other critical territories radiate. It is also the resurgent area of critical interest in the past 15 years from diaspora theory, a site of renegotiating the nationalist flow of African American studies post Paul Gilroy's groundbreaking *The Black Atlantic*.<sup>5</sup> The brief moments in *Bessie Smith* spent in this hub of black culture in the 1920s are usually related to the recording industry, as in the first epigraph to this section, where Bessie is staying in Harlem to cut a record. No exception is the "jar of Harlem night air," an item on a lengthy, three-page list imagined by Kay to populate a mythic trunk of Bessie-related materials compiled by her family and friends that "disappeared" in the 1950s, long after Smith's death – an inventory that will figure heavily in my later analysis of the politics of diaspora circulation. The two very differently located references occupy familiar ideological spaces in theories of Harlem's influence: Harlem as the practical and capital center of black artistic production and Harlem as the locale of the black imagination, the generative force of black diasporic performances across the twentieth century and in the critical discourse of African American studies.<sup>6</sup> The "jar," as opposed to the weight of Smith's and Ellison's "jug," is a moment of textual whimsy and license on Kay's part; "a Harlem full of black people" is a concrete, historical mark, a location "full of" racial significance and signification. While the latter has obvious implications for this essay's concern with the consequences of gender and class in the way we conceive of the "space" of black internationalism and the black diaspora, this section will also take up the "notion" of Harlem, its more ethereal strains that circulate with a difference in Kay's work, as well as the way we, as critics, imagine the possibilities and

portability of black diasporic connections beyond social realism or celebratory fetishization.

Claiming a center for black artistic production has practical and symbolic import for Harlem Renaissance intellectuals of the 1920s. Harlem in a jar, then, is a distillation that both carries and contains the ideological and aesthetic freight of “The New Negro,” Alain Locke’s foundational Harlem Renaissance essay:

Take Harlem as an instance of this. Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life. It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast . . . So what began in terms of segregation becomes more and more, as its elements mix and react, the laboratory of a great race-welding . . . In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is – or promises at least to be – a race capital.<sup>7</sup>

Here, Locke is doing the intellectual work of making Harlem a racial symbol, “full of” blackness of a particular kind. Trying to contain Harlem is a difficult business, with rhetorical strategies that claim exceptionality and representativeness at the same time. Harlem as a site is an “instance,” a “first” of potentially many, or, later, a “promise” of the future. As an example or model, Locke’s Harlem wants to be accessible, a representative of pending communities and “New Negro” subjects around the world – a race capital, not *the* only one. But it is also exceptional – the “largest,” the experimental site of *New Negro* formation, the “laboratory.” As both a template and a break from the mold, Locke’s work to rhetorically produce and locate Harlem as “a race capital” also hails a certain elemental population as the representative group. He relies on the word “man” four times in his exhaustive catalogue of Harlem’s new migrant population. It is certainly not new to point out the masculine-humanist subject that sits at the center of the discursive production of the Harlem Renaissance, nor the practical reverberations of who literally can move through the “race capital” with ease in the 1920s. An extension of the masculinized citizen of this emerging Harlem is the site of Harlem itself, its ideological capital or currency that travels, taking on this gendered property.

My concern with the gendering of intellectual space here is partially because the energy of 1920s Harlem, the night air in a jar referenced in Kay’s imagined catalogue, is distinctly about a different set of aesthetic and popular practices – the “nightlife” of Harlem, its clubs and balls and scenes. This “night work” of Harlem is its romantic currency, more what we think of as the substance of Kay’s jar and Smith’s lyrics, and as opposed to the “day work” of intellectually drawing on what is kept in that jar. In other words, Locke’s “Harlem” is the critical work that certifies intellectual and historical significance. But what circulates most prominently as the popular “idea” of Harlem, its source rather than its ideological product or theory, is its night-time identity, its jazz, blues, and sexualized culture.

As the center through which black internationalism is thought or constructed (even if it is to decenter), the Harlem day work of intellectual and literary production and the night work of performance are also sold as separately gendered spheres; the

famous founding fathers of black thought are, overwhelmingly, “fathers,” including Locke, Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Senghor, whereas essayist and author Jessie Fauset is considered a “midwife” to the movement.<sup>8</sup> The night work becomes the root and inspiration for internationalism, the performative call that allows the traveling intellectual and political project of black transnational solidarity. Black women performers like Smith or Josephine Baker, as the most visible signs and stars of the said call, are not easily incorporated into the production of intellectual responses that we locate as the work of the black diaspora – anthologies, print culture, and even reprinted literature.

Developments in US black feminist theory around women’s performances<sup>9</sup> came at a time when a new subfield, that of diaspora studies, had also been emerging out of African American and post-colonial studies.<sup>10</sup> Locke’s gauntlet, his gesture toward the cosmopolitan make-up of Harlem as location and symbol, is one that galvanizes the three major categories of time – the past (“the first concentration in history”), the present (“Negro life is seizing”), and the future (Harlem “promises . . . to be” the center of New Negro citizenship). His challenge to this “new” field, then, is a mark of the complicated temporal territory that emerging critical discourse must occupy. Looking not just across the present cultural world, but to its history and potential, Locke’s challenge has been taken up by critics such as Paul Gilroy, who famously challenged the nationalistic framework of African American studies in *The Black Atlantic*. As critiqued by several critics, Gilroy’s model frequently found it a strain to meaningfully connect gender and sexuality to the intellectual project of diaspora studies.<sup>11</sup> Recent work by Brent Edwards points to a way out of this conundrum. Not just a catalogue of critique, Edwards’ response to Gilroy suggests that a nascent feminism and feminist intellectual project were at the center of black internationalism’s discursive and practical formation.<sup>12</sup> Edwards’ suggestion of a systemic approach to diaspora through feminist thought is one that potentially considers the gendered “practice” of diaspora criticism beyond mere representation of women. I come again to Harlem, and to Bessie Smith, as a possible model for the kind of day and night work that black diaspora studies can account for and model through a feminism that is more than “nascent,” but in fact embedded in a set of practices not recognized as intellectual work.

Returning to Bessie Smith’s significance to the intellectual projects of Ellison and Kay, where can we locate her work in the context of black internationalism? While black women entertainers like Josephine Baker have been taken up as signs and even subjects of 1920s and 1930s black internationalism, they are rarely considered authors, or founders in the vein of Césaire or Senghor or Du Bois, of intellectual and political discourse.<sup>13</sup> This gap points not just to the difficulties of translating gender, class, and genre into the textual analysis that critics work from, but to our static conception of “conscious” political thought and black intellectualism as a whole. While, as aesthetic practices, cultural performances (and performers like Smith) have been represented on the field of transnationalism, it is often only references, subjects or songs that do the direct work of traveling, but not the more substantial critical work of defining diaspora (as opposed to, as well, novel and narrative formations of diaspora of the time such as in Claude McKay’s work).<sup>14</sup> In theorizing the blues, it is key to consider how we think of intellectual traveling as distinct from generic and performative traveling (touring) as “work.” Like the attempt to render Harlem as the portable essence suggested by Kay’s “jar,” the romanticization of blues traveling

becomes reified, located in Harlem but exportable in conceptual work. Kay strategically uses this affective register to imagine not an essence, but a series of lost and impossible connections that productively constitute diaspora through the specter of incommensurable difference.

### In kind

Written in 1997 as part of what was called the “Q series” of queer biographies of prominent cultural figures, Kay’s profile engages those romantic and celebratory modes mentioned above in its construction of Smith as an icon.<sup>15</sup> Kay’s text does not start in Harlem, nor anywhere near a “center” of black culture. Formally, it begins with a poem from Kay’s sequence on Smith in the 1993 *Other Lovers*, “The Red Graveyard.” The poem begins and ends with a four-line standard blues refrain on Bessie Smith’s haunting transatlantic cultural presence. But this frame, like Harlem, contains a surprisingly memoirish center. The substance of the five contained stanzas is the narrator’s personal experience of the blues, of listening to Bessie Smith. At its center lies a stanza ruminating not on Smith’s voice, but on the Scottish lilt of Kay’s mother. The description is comprehensive – another catalogue like Locke’s – and the longest stanza of the poem reads as follows:

My mother’s voice. What was it like?  
 A flat stone for skitting. An old rock.  
 Long long grass. Asphalt. Wind. Hail.  
 Cotton. Linen. Salt. Treacle.  
 I think it was a peach.  
 I heard it down to the ribbed stone.<sup>16</sup>

“Is this the voice of the blues?” we are forced to ask. The description introduces a recognition of radical difference contained within familiar structure. The sharp, consonant texture of each distinct word for the mother’s voice pushes against the lolling resonance of the speaker’s own action in engaging in Bessie Smith’s black image: “I pick up the record cover. And now. This is slow motion. / My hand swoops, glides, swoops again.”<sup>17</sup> Before we learn from the narrative that Kay is the queer black adopted daughter of white Scottish parents in 1960s Scotland, before we necessarily imbue this scene with biographical authority, Kay introduces us to the difficulties of reading diaspora, not the least of which are the operations of memory, desire, culture, familiarity, and genealogy, and their relationship(s) to the construction, recognition, and maintenance of racial identity.<sup>18</sup> Structurally, the book also troubles easy organization. The book’s cover promises biography, yet we are confronted by autobiography, as well as fictional prose, editorial commentary, and non-linear organization.

Kay’s formal and conceptual gestures toward an alternate model of black internationalism extend to the realm of reception, as well. *Bessie Smith* begins not with a story of black tradition, a link through the black community to the individual or a cultural heritage indigenous to a nation or region. Instead, Jackie Kay begins her profile of black American blues performer Bessie Smith with her own anomalous location. Her genealogy itself disrupts any stable conception of a black public sphere; here, there is no urban black community from which to draw culture. Instead, the

“house of the blues” turns out to be both nationally and racially “outside” such a conception. Not “the most likely place to be introduced to the blues,” Kay’s location forces her to foreground her difference in a very specific, localized world, where contact with black culture is always already mediated by a white context – the home of her white, Scottish parents. As an un-“likely place” for the exchange of black music, Kay’s textual home recognizes racially and geographically surprising encounters as meaningful and productive to black subjectivity, even and especially for subjects found at the margins of the black Atlantic.<sup>19</sup>

Taking up the position of blues figures as icons and/or heroes through the medium of transnationalism links back to the romantic narrative of blues traveling, one that matches the “romance” of corresponding diasporas without a call to authenticity. What Kay does differently is to spin that seduction outward, toward surprising sites of identification:

I did not think that Bessie Smith only belonged to African Americans or that Nelson Mandela belonged to South Africans. I could not think like that because I knew then of no black Scottish heroes that I could claim for my own. I reached out and claimed Bessie.<sup>20</sup>

Bessie Smith does a kind of iconic transnational traveling which Kay does not perform physically, instead constructing a mobile identification that is self-consciously non-essentialist even in its romantic call to agency. This call, too, imagines links beyond the literal travel of bodies and bodies of text, linking political, cultural, and intellectual capital to an imaginative diaspora constructed through idiosyncratic experiences of race, nationality, sexuality, and gender. Kay’s bringing of Bessie Smith into a national as well as racial and queer “family,”<sup>21</sup> instead imagines routes of identification in scattered histories, as well as specifically queered roots where bloodlines and national boundaries, though clearly delineated and incredibly present, cannot dictate alliances made across such borders (much like the plot of *Trumpet*).<sup>22</sup> No easy black nation, Kay’s claiming of Smith as icon, hero, and signifier crosses desire with location, blackness with sexual subjectivity, and national belonging with transhistorical imaginative traveling. In other words, Kay instead forges an imaginative exchange sought out precisely because of the challenges of physical space. The black feminist subject “could not think like that” – within the limits of national-racial borders – because she would erase her own subjectivity.<sup>23</sup>

That complex subject formation is sometimes lost in the reinstated split of the “day” and “night” work of intellectual practice and aesthetic culture. Kay re-imagines Smith and other cultural performers into the same space as political leaders, public figures unquestionably linked to the politics of blackness and vice versa; she posits public politics as aesthetic culture by including political figures in the company of artistic icons:

I force myself to imagine her real death . . . It is a peculiar way of getting even closer to her. It is a strange thing to do. Somehow the death of the famous activates the popular imagination. The deaths of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Billie Holiday, Bob Marley are all epic, grand scale deaths. . . . The life of every true hero is bent on ending in tragedy. Heroes can’t help themselves.<sup>24</sup>



Kay's romantic strain pulls her to a conceptual space not unlike Harlem, a space where day and night workers mingle in "the popular imagination," or what Kay herself calls "fantasy relationships."<sup>25</sup> Rescaling Holiday, Marley and Smith as icons in the political company of King and X also reshapes the scope of how we read black culture as a (celebrity) system. The "epic" and classical frame Kay places on Smith et al is, in "Shakespearean dimensions," the space worthy of not *just* political attention, but critical and analytic seriousness, a scale of black cultural production worthy of the most sustained study and significance.<sup>26</sup>

In a representative sense, the black *political* heroes famous enough to circulate for Kay were men – Mandela, X, King. Kay's effect in upsetting distinctions between imported entertainment icons and political leaders is not just to integrate the two kinds of discourse associated with blackness (aesthetic and political), but to make visible a transatlantic subjectivity centered on questions of gender and sexuality. Bringing Smith, or even Holiday, into the fold "adds" women to the genealogy of black politics by shifting the criteria of what constitutes politics as an intellectual category, and by reckoning with the power and complexity of iconographic identification through differential history and geography. Black music coming to Kay cannot follow such a public or racially communal pattern of receiving; there are no dance halls or radio stations to transmit or render coherent Kay's queer desires in listening to Smith. Kay claiming Smith as a "hero" maintains an alignment between her and someone like Nelson Mandela, breaking down the opposition between public and private, day and night work, and between identifications with race and those with gender and sexuality.

### **Harlem to home**

Aligning Smith as a "hero" – national or pan-African – also displaces an even split between public and private spheres of influence. Rather than being publicly and collectively experienced, the blues and recognizably "black" culture privately circulate to Kay through her white home:

My best friend, Gillian Innes, loved Bessie Smith. We spent many hours in Gillian's bedroom, imitating Bessie Smith and Pearl Bailey. Various objects served as microphones from hairbrushes to wooden spoons. At the age of twelve singing . . . was a way of expressing our wild emotions for each other . . . I could barely breathe. The air in her box bedroom was thick with secrets. The door firmly shut. Our own private performance.<sup>27</sup>

Here, the objects of daily life need to be imaginatively transformed (a hairbrush, wooden spoons) in order to "express our wild emotions" or to connect body and desire to everyday life. Such is the importance of the Smith record as an everyday object in Kay's narrative, repeatable and accessible even as it opens up the possibilities of non-local discourses of race and sexuality.<sup>28</sup> In Kay's configuration, the private is not just code for the public and political, but something that is constitutive of the public and the political itself. For Kay, these surprising correspondences, rather than so expansive as to empty out the specificity of "diaspora," play out in an incredibly contained space that performs the difficulty of constraining black identity through identification with urban centers of

(im)migration. Mimicry, here, also becomes a way of accessing and narrating a desire outside of recognizable or popularly circulated black culture.<sup>29</sup> But Kay re-imagines outsidership as literally and conceptually inside, again making the gender and sexual margins of the black Atlantic its constitutive core.

Returning here to Kay's opening poem "The Red Graveyard," I argue that *Bessie Smith* subverts privileged diasporic routes through a private genealogy of being "passed down," rather than the public reception of black cultural production, with Kay asking rhetorically of her white parents: "Did they play anyone else ever?"<sup>30</sup> Neither the public nor the private can be assumed to be homogenous racial spaces for Kay's diaspora. It is this private reception, a reception that happens via a familial "passing down," that Kay identifies as racially – and sexually – meaningful. Her project attempts a queer genealogy beginning with Ma Rainey, who "was also a lesbian,"<sup>31</sup> according to the bold-voiced narrator, as well as imagines a network of black queer women – including Rainey, Smith, Ethel Waters, and a host of chorus girls and dancers at the center of 1920s and 1930s black diaspora cultural production.<sup>32</sup> This queer family tree for black culture, and the Harlem Renaissance period in particular, becomes difficult to squarely fit into legible racial and political discourse. Reconstructed through the text as a site of pleasurable exchange, *Bessie Smith* reorders the genealogy of black culture and black reception, and redesigns a "passing down" that could include the trauma of black diasporic history as well as the silenced desires of black feminist/queer culture and public discourse. Kay's choice to maintain the ideological and aesthetic quandaries of black diaspora identification in their messy interconnectedness reframes our own intellectual practices of internationalism, as well as models of social, aesthetic, and intellectual engagement drawn from the practice of classic blueswomen singers like Smith.

Accessing "home" as a site of disruptions within continuity, the foreign within the familiar, Kay's work represents an impulse to bring discussions of the exterior and the interiority of black subject formation together through black cultural and aesthetic productions.<sup>33</sup> With only partial access to documented history, Kay's text also imagines a certain portability, like the "jar of Harlem night air," to imaginative, interior space, the kind of transnational "flow" usually accorded only to cultural products and political ideas themselves.<sup>34</sup> In other words, I read Kay not as attempting to find the biographical and historical "truth" behind or beyond the icon Smith, but finding in the icon itself a depth of meanings and identifications – an interior, but still non-essentialist "life" of queer, black intellectual purpose. Kay does not just mark her desire to "be" Bessie, but to watch her, to want her, to claim her into her "home":

I remember taking the album off him [Kay's father] and pouring over it, examining it for every detail. Her image on the cover captivated me. She looked so familiar. She looked like somebody I already knew in my heart of hearts. I stared at the image of her, trying to recall who it was she reminded me of . . . I put her down and I picked her up. I stroked her proud, defiant cheeks. I ran my fingers across her angry eyebrows. I soothed her. Sometimes I felt shy staring at her, as if she was somehow able to see me looking . . . I would never forget her.<sup>35</sup>

The romantic, earnest identification with Smith and her blackness is persistently undergirded by the frame of uneasy reception – complications of desire, of race, of historical time, of capital product, and of national allegiance for a young girl who is

the only black person in her entire town. Containing both a feeling of knowing “familiar[ity]” and of voyeuristic “captivat[ion],” Kay’s text reads Smith as an icon and as a body seriously – intimately linking “seeing” her as a desirous encounter with another “vision” of a black woman in Kay’s resolutely white surroundings, as well as with the sexually “captivating” draw of Bessie’s photographic performance on the album cover. Such an incorporation of black music as cultural product into a private discourse of racial and sexual identification challenges any privileging of immediate and live performances. Considering the inaccessibility of live performance for marginal subjects to experience black music, *Bessie Smith* recasts the role of cultural artifacts as meaningful in recovering a lost time of black history – a recovery project at the heart of the explosion of diaspora studies. While there is danger in the fetishization of blackness as a mere series of images without depth, Kay’s text explores how identification with an image can also be valuable in reframing historical “blackness” itself as a legible field.

Of course, the imagined identification between Kay and Smith is also nostalgic – both for Kay’s childhood attachment to Smith and for the romance of blues ideology itself. Bessie is “proud,” “defiant,” and “angry” to Kay’s “shy” subject. The album acts as a type of souvenir of blackness for the text, standing in for the “recognizable” experience of blackness that Kay as an isolated black subject cannot access or approximate. As such, it represents the “extraordinary” experience of that margin as well as the ordinariness or ubiquity of black culture itself, circulated as widely as 1960s Scotland.<sup>36</sup> The experience of the album as an object of desire is almost comic in its excess in *Bessie Smith*, where Kay’s speaker can “put her down” and “pick her up” in the name of race memory – to be “captivated,” “reminded,” already known and never forgotten. If, as Susan Stewart has suggested, the souvenir is a product embodying both “distance and intimacy,” the album as cultural experience and cultural artifact embodies these contradictions of diaspora, which imagines close connection across unfathomable large-scale terrain.<sup>37</sup> But instead of placing “lived” experience with “the nostalgic myth of contact and presence [through] the memory of the object,” there is only the experience of a myth, and the object/souvenir, to begin with.<sup>38</sup> *Bessie Smith* engages in the cultural souvenirs of the public domain – publicity photographs, album covers, birth certificates, headstones, as well as icons like Nelson Mandela – precisely to call attention to a lack of “live” connection to blackness, as well as to call or conjure up some version of that connection. Rather than a referent to a single experience, the album as diasporic souvenir connotes complex cultural memory, taking on not just the “two sides” of Bessie Smith (the front and back of the album cover), but “transport[ing]” Kay to “places, creating scenes and visions” of a variety of unreal and locatable spaces in the black cultural imaginary from “The Haunted House Blues” to being a “St Louis Gal.”<sup>39</sup>

The scene of identification imagines Kay’s close, intimate contact with the image of Smith as having the ability to violate and transform the borders of historical, national, racial, sexual, and geographic space, all within the interiority of a private home. The souvenir as a metaphor for the experience of the black diaspora, then, also embodies the constant “failure” of the object to add up, to fill up or complete the experience of blackness. Instead, Kay narrates the repetitive contact between the subject of black internationalism and her thwarted desire for a more coherent understanding of her diasporic belonging and marginalization at the same time. Kay “desire[s] souvenirs of events that are repeatable,” against Stewart’s reading, in that

the trauma of black transatlantic history embodies exceptional pain and the repetitive infliction of that pain.<sup>40</sup> In other words, Kay fetishizes Smith as a souvenir as much for her exceptionalism as for her representativeness. Kay's engagement with the souvenirs of diasporic legacy posits the simultaneous distance and intimacy of that recurring memory and the aesthetic responses to it that have made up modern black cultural production.

### Town and country

The box bedroom and the grand arc of imaginary diaspora geographies suggested in the above sections begin to expand the ways we might think of space and location in the frame of "black internationalism." The transurban centers that define black Atlantic exchange – Harlem, London, Paris, Port-au-Prince, etc. – remain key destinations, but are decentered as sources in Kay's profile, and as the most meaningful sites of production.<sup>41</sup> But Kay also refuses a retreat to "the local" as characterized by anti-modern, romanticized practices of the folk, on the one hand, in African American criticism, or indigeneity in the case of some transnational feminist constructions. Instead, *Bessie Smith* asks, "What does a girl from Bishopbriggs near Glasgow know about Chattanooga?"<sup>42</sup> and assumes a collection of circulating objects of "research," a popular culture archive, if you will, of songs, an atlas, a biography of Billie Holiday, a bottle of Coca-Cola, which inform that exchange.<sup>43</sup> Her invocation of sources is, as non-fiction goes, uneven at best – but it is not a thoroughness that Kay is after, but rather an ethereal itinerary, with pins stuck in the places – past, present, and future – that diaspora routes might travel, even unexpectedly.

Kay's structural project in *Bessie Smith* destabilizes Harlem as the center of a map of black culture, aesthetics, and intellectual practice, but more importantly re-imagines what it could mean to evoke diaspora as a method and as an analytical category founded on the notion of large mass migration of peoples from one place to another. On a critical scale, diaspora studies has privileged travel as perhaps the defining characteristic of subaltern subjectivity, of the post-national, post-colonial condition. If space is usually centered in such discourses in terms of geography and borders, Kay takes up the mobile *object* as center instead – not just the live body, but also the image, the circulation which extends past that body but is no less material than Harlem itself, or her metaphorical "jar." The key to such alternate figurations of objects and difference lies partially in Fred Moten's provocative statement that "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist."<sup>44</sup> Whether it is the found album or the recovered stories of Bessie Smith as a cultural icon, Kay's text emphasizes the possibility of the object in resisting master narratives of meaning and capitalist value.<sup>45</sup> The key to alternate readings lies in the object's frame. For Kay, the trope of the unusual frame, or the black cultural object showing up in a variety of variously racially coded locations, including her own text, points not to the resistant object itself as much as to how it can be read differently as it migrates, as its frame takes both Kay and the reader out of the assumed circuits of black internationalism.

First and foremost, Kay's unusual frame is Black British, or Scottish, to be exact, in comparison to the (African) American South. Claiming only the refrain from a popular song as reference, Kay vividly imagines a fairly stock vision/version of the

South. Touching the atlas, her narrator starts with negation: “Well, it wasn’t like Glasgow. It wouldn’t be like anywhere I had been.”<sup>46</sup> Blackness, for Kay’s exceptional Scottish black diaspora experience, is a series of external, Americanized references – a “Western,” multiple song lyrics, an atlas. That blackness registers as paradigmatically American, rooted in the folk of the South at the cusp of the Great Migration, is not surprising given the late-capital centrality of that narrative’s dispersal in cultural flows. It is also not surprising for the Black British context, where “black” as an identity and a community struggles to find visibility in the multicultural state – a difficulty most famously reported by Gilroy’s infamous title, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*. As citizens who do not discursively figure in the national imaginary, Black British cultural production signals not just to nostalgic home communities, but to global connections to the most powerfully identified community of black creative and intellectual production in African American culture.

But even as large portions of *Bessie Smith* traffic in this seemingly one-way global economy, Kay’s text interrupts the process by figuring American blacks as curious and creative about places outside of that “river” of American black folk culture. Kay constructs this through imagined contact with the aforementioned lost trunk, negotiated through Bessie’s sisters: “Before they died, Tillie and Viola sent it on a ship headed for Scotland. They had seen pictures of Scotland and liked the look of the country, those big goddam mountains.”<sup>47</sup> Shipping the archive away from recognizable blackness, Kay imagines that infamous trunk filled with three-and-a-half pages’ worth of black commodity culture, from “Ma Rainey’s gold fillings,” to a Cadillac steering wheel, to documentation of death and marriage.<sup>48</sup> The search for black history is material and embodied (as in baby teeth) as much as it is ephemeral (the air in the jar) – and the inorganic sits next to the assumed, much as the radical break of emigration leaves Black British identity uneasily and unevenly in proximity to British colonial ideology. Kay’s injection of Scotland into the imaginary of the black South, the reverse route, and her desire to locate the archive of the blues outside of the major ports of the black Atlantic, is also her bid to map black international and intellectual practice, as well as history, as an unpredictable geography, where the territory of black women’s imaginary practices creates material futures unaccounted for in the obsessive focus on official documents of print and state culture.

Kay does not recenter the margin as much as she converts location into an object – the transurban commodity of the black site becomes mobile, a cite and a cipher. Less invocation than circulation, these objects do not stand in for but *are* the black diaspora – counted along with the archive, print culture, and the lingering effects of the past. Alongside this are the affective resonances of these diaspora objects and their surprising present meanings – hurtling even sooner toward unsettling and unpredictable future uses. Kay’s text makes use not just of the past for the present, but for the radical potentiality of diaspora circulation and (dis)connection – tracing what gets “lost,” not to be lamented, but to be made up wholesale, again, made to awkwardly fit into a black international future that it never imagined as its domain, in order to highlight the “disjuncture and difference” that characterize black experiences of modernity, and of diaspora.<sup>49</sup> Incommensurable loss and incompatible knowledges are the base of Kay’s black world, where even when “found,” the “lost” blackness does not come from or mean what it should – even as *Bessie Smith*

tries to break Bessie-as-icon's story, break the truly queer time and space of even those black objects we may read as clear, contextualized, familiar – the blues, for instance. Black international practice, despite the text's longing for recognizable narrative and troping, is far stranger to account for in a diaspora studies conceived of solely as a historically and geographically boundaried discipline. Kay finds herself bleeding genres, blending history into myth, authenticity into self-conscious construction, pattern into innovation, imagination into tradition. Within the limits of who and what we might recognize as “Bessie Smith,” Kay finds room for the world and the jar, the universal and the particular, difference and detail.

To say in spite of its longing for recognition, then, is misleading of me, for Kay's text sees and seeks difference because of that drive toward definition, toward the object of “knowing” Bessie Smith, the blues, or black internationalism. That play between lost and found is the play between desire and innovation. Out of a wish to belong or to speak to community also comes a desire for distinction, or rather a claim to it – Bessie is representative and exceptional, as is Kay's approach. Glasgow, Harlem, Chattanooga – they are worlds and jars each, available in their material and historic specificity as well as their more portable, metaphoric resonances. In fact, *Bessie Smith* suggests, what is lost in diaspora scholarship that attempts to lock down, intentionally or not, more singular strains/routes of black internationalism is that which we, as critics and readers of the black Atlantic, have “lost” – our sense of the necessary simultaneity of the world and the jar, of how even radical specificity can translate and transport to the unpredictable time of critical futures.

The order of things, then, is the order of diaspora – which is still, for Kay, the order of location. In the economy of travel, the thing is always already a souvenir, a memory/metonym of the Other. In the economy of emigration, the thing is either a reminder or imperial commodity, the play between local and global. Both are locked in the thinking of late capital, where history is marked by the consumption of metonymic things and their transport. For Kay, this logic of enchantment/disenchantment both holds firm and is violated by turning both travel and emigratory space into the contact and scope of what Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert calls “transit” – evoking less definite yet more repetitive routes to the diasporic practices of black women subjects.<sup>50</sup> This circulation suggests a different order, timing, and geography of distribution in Kay's text, where Bessie Smith as a historical figure can travel from tent shows to Harlem, to Mississippi, to Chattanooga (“down and out” to “down” and “out”), while her anecdotal and iconic presence registers her in publicly and privately consumed narratives and objects to be collected from the geography of Glasgow to the print culture artifact of a British queer profiles series. While Kay may still rely on the trope of haunting that seems to follow black women subjects, her form and structure insists on location and material – Chattanooga, trunks, wax – the constant transit between “lost” and “found” object, between the archive and the imaginary, public and private space, and the relationship between object and context, or, for Kay's text, object and collection.

*Bessie Smith*, as a print culture document, projects itself into the act of collection, even as it stands as one profile in a series of queer recoveries of creative icons, from David Hockney to Benjamin Britten. Her “Outline,” as the series is titled, of Bessie's queer history takes travel and, more particularly, transit as its structure in an attempt to collect the disparate references and evidence of black women's subjective and

sexual desires, many of which cannot register without the intellectual weight of archival narratives to infuse them with singular meaning. Kay's focus on travel in her profile of Bessie Smith, indeed, has much to do with this traveling desire for identification and black women's particular inability to locate a documented home in diaspora studies and late-capital discourse, where: "Even later in her life when she could have afforded not to travel all over the place, she continued to do so."<sup>51</sup> Kay goes on to label Bessie a "travel addict"<sup>52</sup>; claiming that she compulsively toured not just out of a romanticization of live performance (which is frequently coupled with a reviling of the recorded commodity, which is impossible for Kay as it is her only available narrative record and "encounter" with Smith), but as the ability to act out queer desire outside of the constructs of domestic geography. Kay ultimately sees the reperformance and recirculation of Bessie Smith's music – as well as the performer's iconography in the form of stories which the speaker resituates to literally create a system of exchanges – as a process of traveling queerness, or what transnational feminist theorist Maria Lugones calls "world traveling," pushing into what queer theorist José Muñoz calls an act of "world-making."<sup>53</sup> These worlds stand in excess of the question of capital, of what Smith, or Kay, "could," conditionally tensed, "afford." Jackie Kay identifies Bessie Smith as creating her own world, a network or genealogy of queer black women, but it is through the mark of performance that this network becomes visible and articulated, as well as how it "transports" to other imaginary and material worlds.<sup>54</sup> Performance makes visible (both in myth and text) a world for Kay, even if she has to reconstruct that text in order to "see." Her goal is a traveling reception that establishes a collectivity of racial identity through what is unspeakable, and unspeakably different, in the cultures of black internationalism, rather than through similarity or authenticity.

Travel itself, then, is different for black women's intellectual and performative practices in the diaspora. It is, as a model, a fabulous, and fabulist, performance of the diasporic subject. Like the world and the jar, or the global and the local, it is the relationship between paradigmatic African American and even black Atlantic subjectivity (in the bluesman and the sailor) and that of black women which is at stake:

The image of the blueswoman is the exact opposite of the bluesmen. There they are in all their splendour and finery, their feathers and ostrich plumes and pearls, theatrical smiles, theatrical shawls, dressed up to the nines and singing about the jailhouse. The blueswomen are never seen wearing white vests or poor dresses, sitting on a porch in some small Southern town. No, they are right out there on that big stage, prima donnas, their get-ups more lavish than a transvestite's, barrelhousing, shouting, strutting their stuff. They are all theatre. . . . It is all there in the blues: believable and theatrical at the same time. The opposite of social realism. Realism with a string of pearls thrown in.<sup>55</sup>

Like the day and night work of Harlem, genre does not lose its significance in circulation, critical or otherwise. This passage from the chapter "Wax" points back to the paradox of serious black international work, of wanting "authentic" documentation to bolster ideological worlds, passing up the jars that do not match up with our sense of authentic black experience – in content or in form. Whether it is the heaviness of the trunk or the shallow groove of wax, the record of black international practice is lost and found in any number of locations off the map of

either “Bessie’s blues tour,” as documented in the text’s appendix, or the typical routes of the black Atlantic. Black women’s innovative writing and intellectual practice is the territory of diaspora, realism, and visionary romance imagined “at the same time.”

### Keeping time

Harlem, I grant you, isn’t typical – but it is significant, it is prophetic.<sup>56</sup>

Both accidental and calculated, timing is everything in considering the blues. As the world and the jug, the possibilities and limits of Harlem as a geographic and ideological space shift over time and space, and black diaspora studies has been eager to map their transit, through and outside of Harlem, as a vexed site of critical productivity, in particular the “day work” of “night work” – the recording of blues records themselves. In the middle of *Bessie Smith* comes a chapter entitled “Wax,” which focuses on the making of blues songs as well as blueswomen as black cultural icons. Jackie Kay lets us know early that “the first blues recording was an accident,” even as she documents the racial-sexual exploitation that accompanied subsequent industry decisions regarding the genre.<sup>57</sup> Like the souvenir that wraps both the intimacy and distance of diaspora, “time,” even more than space, can signify both linearity and interruption.<sup>58</sup> Rather than look for a discreet “unit” to think of diaspora’s unique relationship between time and space, I would like to consider time itself as a useful analytic tool. Time adds the element of difference within tradition, holds the orderly and disorderly as well as the continuity and breaks mapped earlier in thinking about Kay’s unusual relationship to location and specific diaspora cultures.<sup>59</sup>

This scale extends to models of constantly moving, “migratory subjects,” which threaten to keep diaspora constantly on the move, the haunt but never the territory of established critical practices.<sup>60</sup> Thinking qualitatively about time’s relationship to diaspora suggests a new and refocused, if still capacious, organizing system for diaspora studies. “Time” can serve as a differential category in our analysis of the black diaspora’s cultural flows, with its modes of tracking and structuring rhythms, as well as being able to hold the long term and the immediate. Time is a measurement, a way of gauging the expense and profit of history and culture. If the imaginary takes on propertied significance for Kay’s positioning of surprising diasporic connections, then time offers us a system, not just a haunt, to speak critically about their significance. Gender, and sexual and formal variety meaningfully change the way we conceive of the timing of black internationalism and, in turn, transform diaspora, an analytical and critical category usually based on geography.

*Bessie Smith* violates “time and place” just as surely as Kay’s own engagement with the black diaspora. The larger question looms of how we are to chart, preserve, or even create narratives of these new and “difficult” black internationalisms. If these “tales” are circulating outside of Harlem’s scope, can we imagine a looser archive, one not so tightly bound to an exact time and space? Kay finds just that in her constant use of an imaginary black cultural past not completely wed to historical or national correspondences. The “jar of Harlem night air” that emblemizes Bessie



Smith's legacy, the container for the floating remains of these tales, can, for Kay, maintain diasporic connections as material and as intimate as the traveling done by Harlem artists and intellectuals themselves.

What draws Kay's text to the blues is their ability to imaginatively travel, but also to trace alternate genealogies for diaspora; to link the reader and listener to the documented history of slavery and colonialism, but also to the silences and desires created and sustained culturally through repeated aesthetic performances. To start with time, then, we need to think of the past, or how Kay imagines black diaspora's aesthetic relationship to the past. She says of Smith's performative style:

She knows the timing. She's got the timing just right. Doesn't need to articulate it or even to think about it. It's all in the length of her pause. It's the way she hangs on to those notes when they are gone. . . . She is full of longing, full of trouble, restless, wandering up and down the long arms of the clock. When she sings on stage, part of her is traveling, reaching back into every hurt that's ever happened.<sup>61</sup>

Like the "jar of Harlem night air," Smith's voice and her subjectivity ("She *is* full"), as signs, are "full of" the stuff of the blues – equal parts "longing" and "trouble," desire and conflict. Smith is now located not just on the space of the "stage," but inside the "clock," pacing time itself. Aesthetic practice and product, for Kay, are what "travels," not just across space but through time, speaking to a range of desires never imagined by more traditional definitions of black diaspora identity. It is a singing "back" into that violent history of colonization and chattel slavery that produces the pleasures of the text, the central contradiction held by diaspora cultural production.

Returning to the lyric which opens this essay, Kay wonders in print at the literal meaning of the abstract "world" and "jug" metaphor, eventually settling on the unsettled aesthetic meaning of the blues, perpetually "open to interpretation" for Kay.<sup>62</sup> But the complicated legacy of the blues rides on more than just a temporal and textual openness. Their timing is instead participatory and contingent upon that participation: "[T]hey let you enter with your imagination and participate in the conflict."<sup>63</sup> More than just time-traveling to the past and back, Kay imagines diasporic reception as the hang, the pause, the repetition of lyrics in a single song, again and again – the repeat of the same route, but also of the form of the cultural artifact that can be passed and repeated at will, like the Smith record in Kay's house.

The politics of Bessie Smith, as both a sign and practitioner of black internationalism in Kay's formulation, are as much past- as future-oriented. Locke's own formulation of Harlem as "prophetic" suggests that the future is never far from the surface of many of our formulations of race, gender, and diaspora politics, building "temples for tomorrow," establishing ritual and repetition for a time that has yet to come.<sup>64</sup> Even as it is not new to think of the future of a field at the concluding moments of an essay, I would like to consider "futurity" as a principal construction of diaspora and its imaginative possibilities in the critical work of black internationalism. In addition to the persistent and thoughtful examination of the past, Kay's text consistently imagines a world of meaning beyond historical and national time, and even beyond death. It is in this time, finally, that the significance

of the jar as a different kind of signifier for diaspora circulation comes into its own, specific power. Kay evokes the jar as one in a long list of significant artifacts that she imagines populating that lost “trunk” of Bessie Smith’s personal and professional effects. As one possibility among many, including documentary and material evidence such as photographs, diaries, and even fashion, the jar stands out as a strictly romantic gesture; its very impossibility as a proper vessel of preservation is, in fact, what characterizes it as noteworthy. In its failure to actually contain “Harlem” as a historical moment, the “jar of Harlem night air” still seeks to give shape to the imaginary legacy of Harlem’s night work. For *Bessie Smith*, the “world” is no doubt an enormous, impersonal reference. The jar, though, occupies the space of the everyday. It stands as delicate and, compared to the weight of “the jug,” suggests an intimacy between the critical world and the unpredictable resonances of cultural production that the past alone cannot account for in total. Both typical and prophetic, ordinary and exceptional, the jar allows experience at the margins of the black diaspora to be transported across surprising times and spaces. The “stopper” – here the lid – keys us into uneven practices of use, the aesthetic and intellectual choices we make (and that have been made for us) of when and how much to dispense the imaginary properties of gender and sexual “difference” when confronting black internationalism.

This critical timing is more than just representative, more than letting women, working-class and queer voices into our construction of black internationalism from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It fundamentally alters our conception of intellectual practice and genealogy through its difference, its chronology. Kay, with her anecdotal relationship to world history and through her private circulation and reception of black cultures, offers a differential time scale against the epic historicity of public discourse. But it is also a decidedly different performance of internationalism, where the time is, to put it bluntly, messy. Containing not just surprising geographic movement but a disturbed chronology of black reception, Kay’s profile suggests a repetitive, looped version of black internationalism in the form of “wax,” in the traveling images and sounds of Bessie Smith that become unaccounted for in archives. These gendered traces are more than exceptional, as they permeate the interior of cultural life more than perhaps any other intellectual form. There they threaten to linger in the space of the private, on a turntable or moved from house to house. This is a difficult diaspora, one that asks us to rethink our scale of significance and our lingering attachments to origin and traceability. But the trade-off does not have to lose specificity as much as it critically asks us for more of it. To read Jackie Kay’s *Bessie Smith* as a diasporic intellectual profile, a document that characterizes black diasporic reception at its center rather than its margin, is to recognize the lack of spatial and temporal uniformity that goes unacknowledged in much of our quest for history. Black internationalism is more radical, and more tenacious, than we ever thought it could be in this formulation, where the timing of the jar contains the possibility to alter the knowable vision and future of diaspora studies’ critical world.

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### Notes on contributor

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### Notes

1. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 116.
2. *Ibid.*, 108.
3. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 80.
4. *Ibid.*, 58.
5. In the case of diaspora studies' work on Harlem, the site's significance was both the springboard and the problem of making black diasporic connections more visible and complicated within African American studies, which Gilroy was clearly critiquing from a nineteenth-century perspective. For black feminist criticism, the Harlem Renaissance was a fruitful site for the recovery of earlier black women's texts and contributions to black literary and intellectual tradition, a move to substantiate critical and commercial acclaim for post-affirmative action on black women writers.
6. The Harlem Renaissance went out of favor in the 1960s and 1970s during the Black Arts Movement, as it largely embraced more didactic political and "separatist" aesthetics. Of course, individual authors and, in particular, black women writers at the margins of the movement, such as Audre Lorde, broke ranks with a dismissal of Harlem Renaissance literature as assimilationist.
7. Locke, "New Negro," 7.
8. See Johnson, "Literary Midwife." Black feminist critics such as Deborah McDowell later critique this reading of Fauset's work as an editor and author (see "Neglected Dimension").
9. Two sets of criticism in the past 20 years have addressed this complex dynamic between the simultaneous presence and absence of black women's various aesthetic performances: black feminist literary criticism has worked hard on the project of recovery, finding lost and forgotten Harlem Renaissance texts by women authors and meaningfully attempting to incorporate them into the canon and critical legacy of the Harlem Renaissance phenomenon. As a subset of this body of work, critics like Angela Davis (*Blues Legacies*) and Hazel Carby (*Cultures in Babylon*) have also sought to take seriously the intellectual work and legacies of blueswomen performers. While sometimes pitched as additions and celebrations, this significant body of work has undoubtedly changed the landscape of what (and who) it is possible to study, literally, in the Harlem Renaissance. Cheryl Wall (*Changing Our Own Words*), Deborah McDowell (*Changing Same*), Claudia Tate (*Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*), Nellie McKay ("Black Women's Literary Scholarship") and Hazel Carby (*Reconstructing Womanhood*) are probably the most well known, though there are many, many more who could be cited. While Carby works on black British literature and culture, she does not usually combine regions within the bounds of a single article. It is interesting, though, to think of Carby's *Cultures in Babylon*, where British- and American-centered essays are collected, as a diaspora critique within its own textual borders.
10. We should not, perhaps, see the simultaneous movements as coincidental. Like Edwards' inquiry in *The Practice of Diaspora* into whether emerging public feminist discourses are constitutive of the rise in internationalist thought and organizing, we should think about how feminist theory acts as one of the critical forces compelling post-colonial studies into a field and how the serious consideration of women as subjects, even in a representational frame, necessarily shifts the ground on which we consider field formation and constitution. Challenging national boundaries in critical fields and disciplines, then, could be considered a product of incorporating difference into methodological practice.

11. Some of the most interesting feminist critiques in the arena include Elizabeth DeLoughrey's "Gendering the Oceanic Voyage," Madhu Dubey's "The 'True Lie,'" and Maryse Condé's "Order, Disorder, Freedom."
12. Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 119–88.
13. Daphne Brooks' *Bodies of Dissent* stands as another recent critical turn that attempts to consider black performance – both idiosyncratic and exploited – as political thought/intellectual work.
14. McKay's major fictional works, *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1930), and *Banana Bottom* (1933), all address the African diaspora experience and have been the subject(s) of much critical attention in diaspora studies.
15. Patrick Williams' provocative essay, "Significant Corporeality," on Kay's *Trumpet* suggests that in that text, as well, Kay both exposes the performative aspects of gender and sexuality (and to a lesser degree race) and insists on an authentic experience of the body. In other words, Kay has it "both ways" when it comes to deconstructing identity.
16. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 7.
17. *Ibid.*, 8.
18. Yogita Goyal suggestively theorizes romance as the genre of diaspora and realism as that of nation in her book *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*.
19. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 9.
20. *Ibid.*, 15.
21. She talks about her relationship to Bessie Smith as one where the singer "became a part of my family," in a sense (Jaggi, "Jackie Kay in Conversation," 55).
22. I use "queer" here in the political sense, as same-sex desire which alters heteronormative standards, as well as in a more suggestive theoretical sense. "Queer diaspora" has the potential to disrupt the expected flows of knowledge and culture in overlapping ways. In another project on Kay's text, I explore queer identification's specific challenge to the black Atlantic model.
23. This sentiment is mimicked, albeit in a more traditional "diaspora story," in Kay's short story "Out of Hand," where the protagonist reflects on nearly 50 years of living in the United Kingdom after emigrating from the Caribbean. The narrative enforces a disassociation with the racism Rose experiences that corresponds to her ability to continue her day-to-day life in the United Kingdom.
24. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 140.
25. Jaggi, "Jackie Kay in Conversation," 55.
26. *Ibid.*, 54.
27. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 79.
28. This emphasis on the possibilities of the everyday resonates with Bruce Robbins' theorization of a new internationalism where "global culture is ordinary" in scale, rather than only existing on a massive economic-political plane of time and space (*Feeling Global*, 16).
29. In a perversion of Homi Bhabha's analysis of post-colonial subjectivity (*Location of Culture*, 85–92), the mimicry of blackness becomes "almost the same but not black" for Kay, an approximation and hyper-identification with the signs and codes of black identity that she cannot readily access due to her location.
30. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 7.
31. *Ibid.*, 36.
32. The other locus of Kay criticism focuses on her novel *Trumpet*, centered on a transgendered blues figure dislocated to rural Scotland. Irene Rose, for instance, focuses on Kay's restaging of Judith Halberstam's "female masculinity," rather than the category of "lesbian," to rethink performative identity and self-fashioning in Kay's work in "Heralding New Possibilities"; Patrick Williams, in "Significant Corporeality," suggests that bodies themselves are rendered flexible in Kay's fiction. Several critics take up the role of Scottishness in particular as a way to "queer" blackness, including Peter Clandfield ("What Is In My Blood?") and Carole Jones ("An Imaginary Black Family").
33. Thinking about "transformation" within a more continuous pattern is one method of analyzing difference without necessarily fetishizing it as the only productive category in identity-based scholarship. For a compelling discussion of continuity in the context of

- women's studies, see Judith M. Bennett's "Confronting Continuity." In "Curious Rarities?" Joanne Winning's discussion of Kay's work, in particular her poetry's relationship to theories of "home," also touches on the relationship between the foreign and the familiar in Kay's work.
34. Arjun Appadurai thinks of cultural flow across diasporas as productive of collective "social imagination," which certainly applies to Bessie Smith's engagement with mass-produced black American culture (see Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 3). The "imaginative" my reading is invested in, though, is more again an aesthetic cultural imaginary, one that is not necessarily dictated by large-scale movement of information. Similarly, Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" rely on the official and regimented circulation of print culture to bond peoples and nations (see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*).
  35. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 9–10.
  36. Stewart, *On Longing*, 135.
  37. *Ibid.*, 137.
  38. *Ibid.*, 133.
  39. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 10.
  40. Stewart, *On Longing*, 135. The "ineffable pain" of black Atlantic history is a major repetition in black critical discourse, from Gilroy (*Black Atlantic*) back to Ellison (*Shadow and Act*), who suggests that the blues themselves exhibit the "impulse . . . to finger the jagged grain" of physical and psychic pain (90).
  41. Transnational feminist analysis has done much to think about the significance of gender in the global–local splits of globalization. Perhaps even more useful is the gendering of the rural and the urban, as discussed by Jenny Sharpe in "Cartographies of Globalisation."
  42. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 17.
  43. *Ibid.*, 17–9.
  44. Moten, *In the Break*, 1.
  45. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
  46. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 16.
  47. *Ibid.*, 57.
  48. *Ibid.*, 60.
  49. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 27.
  50. Paravisini-Gebert, "Mrs. Seacole's Wonderful Adventures." See also Chakrabarty, "Time of History."
  51. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 30.
  52. *Ibid.*, 31.
  53. Lugones, "Playfulness"; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.
  54. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 195.
  55. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 64.
  56. Locke, "New Negro", 7.
  57. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 63.
  58. Elizabeth Grosz, in her scholarship on time and social formation, suggests that time is the ultimate category that can include and in some way demands inclusion of "difference" (Grosz, *Becomings*).
  59. Gilroy's ship, as the critical "chronotope" in Mikhail Bakhtin's formation of the term, also takes into account spatial and historical movement. But the timing of diaspora outside of the historical chronology is not his goal, and the time *inside* the ship itself, in the interior, is often overwhelmed by its relationship to more "epic" historical events. Perhaps it is fairer to say that Gilroy does not extend his own chronotope far enough, especially in the recent work done on maritime laws and the non-national temporalities that ships occasionally offered (see Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*).
  60. Carol Boyce Davies (*Black Women, Writing, and Identity*) coins this term to think of black women's writing and texts across various critical and canonical terrains. Rachel Lee, in "Notes From the (Non)Field," maps this trend of disembodied margins and questions the political and theoretical expediency of such a move.
  61. Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 43.

62. Ibid., 49.
63. Ibid., 119.
64. “Temples for Tomorrow” references the Claude McKay poem “If We Must Die,” as well as the 2001 collection *Temples for Tomorrow*, edited by Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith, which comprehensively rethinks Harlem’s role in the past and future of diasporic black cultural studies. Considerations of futurity and feminism have been undertaken by Elizabeth Grosz and Robyn Wiegman, both of whom question the progress narratives which so often undergird academic undertakings in the name of feminism, in “Feminist Futures?” and “Feminism’s Apocalyptic Futures,” respectively.

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