

Queering heteronormativity in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*

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The music is his blood. His cells. But the odd bit is that down at the bottom, the blood doesn't matter after all. None of the particulars count for much. True, they are instrumental in getting there in the first place, but after that they become incidental. All his self collapses ó his idiosyncrasies, his personality, his ego, his sexuality, even, finally, his memory. All of it falls away like layers of skin unwrapping. He unwraps himself with his trumpet. Down at the bottom, face to face with the fact that he is nobody. (Jackie Kay ó *Trumpet*)

RESUMO: Em *Trumpet*, da autoria da escritora negra, escocesa e lésbica Jackie Kay (2000), a estabilidade de gênero é desafiada através da estória de Joss Moody, um famoso trompetista de jazz que se fez de homem, casou-se, adotou um filho e tornou-se uma celebridade no mundo masculino do jazz dos anos 1950. A morte de Joss traz a revelação pública de seu sexo biológico e provoca distintas e conflituosas reações entre aqueles que o sobreviveram. Inspirada na vida de Billy Tipton, um pianista legendário de jazz que viveu por mais de cinquenta anos como homem e cuja biografia é apresentada por Diane Wood Middlebrook (1999) em *Suits me: the double life of Billy Tipton*, a narrativa de Kay enfatiza o aspecto de construção do gênero ao passo que a identidade do protagonista é construída discursivamente e revisada, especialmente através das reminiscências dos demais personagens: a esposa de Joss, Millie; seu filho adotivo Coleman; colegas e amigos do meio musical; assim como a ambiciosa jornalista Sophie Stones, que pretende escrever a biografia do artista. A presente análise, que pretende demonstrar como o gênero é òqueerizadoò na narrativa de Kay, recorre ao conceito de performatividade de Judith Butler (1990; 1999), segundo o qual o gênero é um constructo resultante de atos reiterados que produzem sua percepção enquanto categoria aparentemente essencial, estável e não problemática.

Palavras-chave: gênero; performatividade ; *Trumpet* ; Jackie Kay.

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ABSTRACT: In *Trumpet*, written by black Scottish lesbian writer Jackie Kay (2000), gender stability is challenged through the story of Joss Moody, a famous black trumpet player who

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passed as a male, got married, adopted a son, and became a celebrity in the masculine jazz scene of the fifties. Joss's death brings about the public revelation of his biological sex and elicits distinct and conflicting reactions among those who outlived him. Inspired in the life of Billy Tipton, a legendary jazz pianist who lived for over fifty years as a man and whose biography is presented in *Suits me: the double life of Billy Tipton*, by Diane Wood Middlebrook (1999), Kay's narrative emphasizes the socially constructed aspect of gender as the main character's identity is built discursively and reviewed, specially through the reminiscences of the other characters: Joss's wife Millie, his adopted son Coleman, colleagues and friends from the music world, as well as the ambitious journalist Sophie Stones, who intends to ghost-write a book on the artist's life. The present analysis, which shows how gender is "queered" in Kay's narrative, relies on Judith Butler's (1990; 1999) concept of performativity as it characterizes gender as a construct resulting from repeated acts that render its perception as an apparently essential, stable, and non-problematic category.

Key words: gender ó performativity ó *Trumpet* ó Jackie Kay

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary poststructuralist theories view sexual identity not as a given fact of nature, but as a discursively inscribed reality subjected to a wide range of ideological principles that categorize or organize it through a number of disciplinary apparatuses and control mechanism. Concerned with the pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory, Judith Butler wrote *Gender Trouble* (1990) to counters the views that restricted the meaning of gender to consensual notions of masculinity and femininity, to the exclusion of minority gender manifestations and sexual practices. Butler observes that certain sexual practices have the power to destabilize gender and that a dominant heterosexual framework functions to establish heterosexuality as normative. Her work, therefore, seeks to expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as a specific formation of power. Her genealogical critique, inspired in Foucault and Nietzsche, refuses to search for "the origins of gender or the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view" (1990, p. xxix), demonstrating instead that gender is a social construct whose "reality" results from repeated acts, what she calls "performativity":

(í) performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act" but, rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. (í) [T]he regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more

specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative. (BUTLER, 1999, p. 236)

Butler's interest is thus directed not at the causes of gender, but at its 'effects', since it is constructed and not, by any means, 'naturally' attached to one's sex, an 'artifice' that cannot be distinguished from sex (1990).

Bearing the above considerations in mind, this paper examines the issue of transgender performativity as it is addressed in a narrated female-to-male experience so as to show how gender dualities and normative heterosexuality are challenged. In *Trumpet*, first published in 1998, black lesbian Scottish writer Jackie Kay builds a retrospective of Joss Moody's life, a legendary jazz trumpeter and his long and fiercely private marriage with Millie, a white woman with whom he had an adopted interracial son named Coleman. The plot centers on Joss's death, upon which he is found to have the body of a woman, and the effects of this disclosure especially on his son's life, as he struggles to come to terms with his father's gender. It also describes the attempted exploitation of Joss's intimate secret by an ambitious journalist named Sophie Stones. By analyzing how Joss's transgenderism is regarded by the different characters in the story as well as how the other characters' gender identities are constructed I demonstrate how the text 'queers' heteronormative paradigms as it defies the usual fixity and stability that permeates dominant views of masculinity and femininity.

For Sandy Stone (2006), the disruptions of the old models of desire produced by the multiple dissonances of the transsexual and transgender bodies produce not just one but a variety of alterities whose juxtapositions hold what Donna Haraway has called 'the promises of monsters: 'physicalities of constantly shifting figure and ground that exceed the frame of any possible representation' (p. 32). In *Trumpet*, the author takes advantage of the body dissonances to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected forms.

Alena Hairston (2006) points out the relevance of narratives such as *Trumpet*: it is a narrative which on one level speaks about the otherness of those who dare to live transgendered and transsexual lives: 'an otherness which has yet to find a proper and substantial home in the mainstream currents of literature and life' (p. 691). Otherness is

perceived as one reads of Jossø struggle to live a transgendered life ó in the daily rituals of bandaging his breasts and covering his body with layers of T-shirts, shirts, ties and suits; in his avoidance of sports, in his fear of using public urinals, in his fatal avoidance of doctors, as well as in his effort to lead a gendered life of masculinity ó as a husband to his wife, a father to his son and a trumpeter in a band. Narrated from several points of view, including those of his wife, his son, the doctor, the funeral director, the registrar, his mother, a tabloid journalist, among others, the novel acquires a polyphonous quality that resembles the structure of jazz as a musical style in its profuse exploration of thematic variations and polyrhythm.

Jackie Kayø narrative is loosely based on the real story of Billy Tipton, an American jazz pianist of regional renown in the 1930s and 1940s, who married many times, had three adopted sons and was found to be anatomically a woman when he died in 1989. The case received wide coverage by the press across the US and was compiled into a biography by Diane Wood Middlebrook in 1998². As in Billy Tiptonø story, Jossø òrealö sex was revealed to his son by the funeral director. Kay also incorporates, though in a different context, the statement made on television by one of Tiptonø sons: òHeøll always be Dad to meö. However, her text is not always faithful to this original script. Whereas Middlebrook treated Billy Tiptonø cross-dressing as a mask or a lie that concealed the òtruthö of his identity, Kay interrogates the very existence of an identity behind passing (JONES, 2009). Set in the present context, Kayø story permits a reexamination of the controversy, thus updating the debate on transgendered identities. She also reconfigures some of the facts from the original reports so as to accommodate them to her imaginative and political purposes ó especially by recreating the main character as a black Scottish man who migrated from Glasgow to London as he assumed a transgendered identity. Therefore, as Jones remarks: ò(í) the text itself appropriates a middle space, somewhere between reality and fiction, documentary and storytelling, an appropriate gesture for a protagonist who puts into question the boundaries between identitiesö (op.cit., p. 96). As such, Kayø text acquires the quality of a òthird termö, as described by Marjorie Garber:

² Cf. Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Suits Me: the double life of Billy Tipton*, 1998.

The third is that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis ó a crisis which is symptomatized by both the overestimation and the underestimation of cross-dressing. (í) The õthirdö is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility. Three puts in question the idea of one: identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledgeö. (GARBER, 1993, p. 11)

QUEERING HETERONORMATITY

As Joss leads a double life that includes cross-dressing, he embodies the qualities of the transvestite as described by Marjorie Garber (1993): õtransvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itselfö (p. 17). As he simultaneously occupies the positions of male and female, is capable of being a father and a husband though not being anatomically a male, or crosses from one gender to the other, his identity testifies to the limitations of each of these categories to fully describe him while undermining the idea that they constitute separate entities.

Joss's transgenderism is revealed to the reader from the outset, while for the other characters this fact is only disclosed after his death. Jones (op.cit.) argues that this authorial strategy permits the reader to assess the relative success of passing as well as the reactions of those who must come to terms with Joss's gender ambivalence. While he leads a double life, his in-between condition goes unnoticed by all those living around him. He is thus situated exclusively as a õnormalö, respectable, talented and apparently heterosexual person while he is alive. It is only by dying that Joss's identity acquires its subversive quality. However, as Jones (op.cit.) points out, his death disrupts the stability and exposes the instability of masculinity.

Kay's queering heteronormativity results in part from the ways she builds the characters in the story. When depicting masculine or feminine identities, the author focuses mainly on the subject's surface, showing how performance contradicts the idea of an inner core. By privileging the character's superficial aspects Kay dismantles the traditional views that associate masculinity with male bodies. The passage below illustrates how Joss's masculinity is built as his wife Millie describes his daily ritual of dressing:

I wrapped two cream bandages around his breasts every morning, early. I wrapped them round and round, tight. I didn't think about anything except doing it well. Doing it well meant wrapping tight. The tighter I wrapped, the flatter his breasts. That was all he was concerned about [í]. He put on his boxer shorts and I turned away whilst he stuffed them with a pair of socks. He pulled on his trousers, constantly adjusting his shirts and the stuffing. He was always more comfortable once he was dressed. More secure somehow. My handsome tall man. (KAY, 1999, p. 238)³

Masculinity is shown in the passage as a superficial construction and something to be put on, which contradicts the idea of interiority. Therefore, clothes play an important role in the narrative. This is particularly noted as the characters seem constantly aware of the significance of their image and are always attentive to what they wear.

Joss's masculine model is also asserted in the passages where he is shown playing the role of a man to his son. Coleman remembers the rituals of masculinity performed with his father, as they went together to the barber's shop or stood in front of the shaving mirror, where the boy felt the excitement of that first shaving set, the honour, the coming into manhood (p. 123). His childhood memories also register the impressions of the father role Moody played so well:

He is sitting on the edge of my bed, my daddy. He pulls my yellow blanket back. I am too hot. I am too hot and it is too early for bed. He gives me a spoon of medicine. I open my mouth wide and wait for the spoon to be put in my mouth and wait for my daddy to say, Brave boy. (í) My daddy smells of his trumpet club. He takes my hand and sings, Dreams to sell / Fine dreams to sell / (í) He pats my head. Strokes my head. Hair just like mine, he says. (KAY, 1999, p. 68)

Joss's strictly masculine portrayal is counterbalanced by feminine attributes that frequently go unnoticed by those around him. The drummer Big Red McCall for example affirms he never once doubted his friend's masculinity, though a lot of people said Moody had a baby face (p. 148). However, in a dream, Moody tells him he knew it all along. Jones (op.cit.) correctly observes that, although the protagonist always dresses a suit, behaves like a man and plays his trumpet like a man, this is often qualified with reference to his gentleness. His voice is also described as being high like a woman's (p. 144). All these instances, as they are displayed to the reader after the *post-mortem*

³ Henceforth, citations from *Trumpet* will contain only the page number.

disclosure of Moody's female anatomy, point out gender as a construct, a citational practice or a reiterative act as suggested by Judith Butler (1990), produced through an array of bodily acts, gestures and desires that "create the illusion of an interior and gender organized core" (BUTLER, 1999, p. 136).

Joss's corpse, as it is placed in the center of the controversy that generates countless reflections and memories in the text, proves that the body, though passive, is never merely material, but a surface that generates speech, something systematically signified by taboos, fears, anxieties and anticipated transgressions. As an instance of this the author examines the idea of gender as a category constructed by scientific discourse. This is found when Doctor Krishnamurty shows doubts about Moody's gender as she issues his death certificate. At first, she conceives of gender as a natural reflection of genital sex or something derived only from the *facts* provided by biology – in this case, the breasts. However, after examining the corpse and deciding it was definitely female, the doctor thinks how strangely "preserved" Moody's breasts looked, until she is led to admit "they weren't real breasts at all" (p. 43). The gradual erasure of the breasts in the narrative signals the fragility of bodily marks as pure materiality, while pointing out how it is invested with symbolic value, this way suggesting that our very perception of our bodies parts may be disturbed by cultural contradictions, especially those that undermine the fixed dualities of nature vs culture or male vs female.

Like the doctor's view, Coleman's gender reading reflects common sense notions based on the phallogocentric binary discourse. Consequently, his father's transgenderism acquires for him the aspect of abjection: "It has stayed in my head – the image of my father in a woman's body. Like some pervert. Some psycho" (p. 63). Coleman is at first unable to assimilate the contradictions inherent in his conventional cultural script, which is predicated upon fixed dualities: "My father had tits. My father didn't have a dick. My father had tits. My father had a pussy. How many people had fathers like mine?" (p. 61). His perception of his father's gender is further problematized as he recollects how strong a masculine reference, as well as a tender paternal figure his father was, as he "never raised hand or fist" (p. 45) or "[h]ardly ever raised his voice." (p. 45).

Coleman's gradual coming to terms with his father's identity occurs when he travels to his father's homeland in Scotland to meet his grandmother. There he finally

questions the journalist who is pushing him into publishing his father's biography: "Who do you think I am? I am Coleman Moody, the son of Joss Moody, the famous trumpet player. He'll always be daddy to me" (p. 259). The young man's statement demonstrates what Garber considers as "an admirable sense of the constructed rather than essential nature of gender categories" (1993, p. 67).

As an opportunistic journalist, Sophie Stone is ready to sacrifice ethical and moral values in order to profit from ghost-writing a sensational biography of the dead jazz performer. Her biased perspective reproduces gender ideologies that strongly support the heterosexual paradigm and its homophobic connotations. Speaking from a self-confident and self-righteous position, she strategically chooses to refer to Moody as a *she* in order to expose his transgenderism as a farse and an aberration. However, as she does so she cannot escape the constraints of her own femininity, which is also depicted in the text as a masquerade. While Joss's gender dissonance is predicated on "the music in his blood", Sophie's gender conformity is shown to be a function of shopping as "a blood sport" (p. 232). Instead of blooming, gender in her case is depicted as a state that *immobilizes* identity through power fantasies fed by obsessive compulsive drives translated in consumerism. Though it gives woman the illusion of change, as a token for her lack of transcendence, consumerism does nothing but keep her locked into "the changing rooms of boutiques" (p. 232). Above all, it is a cosmetic that proves the artificiality of femininity while nurturing the appearance of woman's agency, as suggested by Sophie's own words: "You have to be somebody to wear somebody" (p. 233). Again, identity is here depicted as a void, something characterized by incompleteness, deprived of an inner core, and built from surface elements.

Kay's depiction of Sophie's compulsive femininity, though not strictly false, relies heavily on common stereotypes of feminine frivolity. As such her construction of the woman's identity betrays its limitations. However, this strategy acquires a political dimension as it permits the author to depict femininity as resulting not from natural givens, not from instinct or biological marks, but from cultural inscriptions and economic determinants that petrify and ultimately thwart woman's potentialities. Sat in front of the TV with her hair gel, the blush and make up on as she flicks through the channels of the remote control, Sophie's femininity is made to resemble that of a doll, this way testifying

to the fragile and reversible status of the subject/object duality that often haunts conventional constructions of femininity. Seen as a surface upon which identity is built, Sophie's femininity is no less artificial than Joss's constructed masculinity.

May Hart, with whom Joss had had a schoolgirl crush as Josephine Moore, is also depicted as a woman who is led to conform to the heteronormative paradigm, though by denying her early homoerotic desires, putting on femininity, and marrying a man she didn't love. The rituals performed by May in front of the mirror as she tries to disguise her imperfections, the correct body rituals she performs to ensure she looked good for her age, all consist in acts that suggest that her feminine subjectivity is a fantasy disguise for her dissonant desire.

Billy Tipton's transgenderism was normalized when it was explained by his biographer and the press as a financial necessity, a strategy he adopted in order to survive as a musician in a male dominated environment that eluded the perception of the subject's desire. In contrast, a queer reading of Kay's text reveals Joss's transgenderism as proof of the constructedness of bodies and the divergent alignment of gender to the body as postulated by the heteronormative paradigm. Joss's masculine gender contradicts heterosexual normativity not only by disturbing the dualities of gender as discrete entities that are best kept separate but also by displaying dissonant combination possibilities of sex and gender. This is made particularly evident as the author explores jazz as a principle of identity organization that dismantles all coherent subjectivity claims. Though admitting that "music is in his blood", Moody feels it like a "whirlwind" that throws him "screwballing in musical circles" (p. 131). In the present reading Joss's music is viewed as that which allows him to keep moving ahead as he transcends borders and defies definitions.

If music constituted a means of survival for Billy Tipton, it acquires a distinct role for Joss Moody. His musical talent may be a cultural heritage, something he learned from his black father, who loved singing Scottish ballads – thus a patriarchal heritage. But music is also the very medium through which he can revive the first bodily sensations associated with his white mother. It brings back the early feelings of death in life, the unsettling, paradoxical experience of dispersion present at the moment of his birth:

The music has no breath, no air. The cord wound right round. Right round the baby's neck (. . .) He gulps on the trumpet. The music has no breath, no air. Small ghost notes sob from his trumpet. Down there at the bottom he can see himself when he was a tiny baby, blue in the face. The trumpet takes him back to the blue birth. (KAY, 1999, p. 132)

Music in his blood refers to the experience of unpredictability and uncertainty, the dream and the pain of moving and changing that reverberate in the rhythms of jazz and its principle of variety and instability, which in turn echo the baby's struggle to breathe life, inhale it and fight the immobility of death. As Joss's subjectivity incarnates the principles of jazz, all other subjective possibilities remain open, since he is not inhabited by any fixed category:

Running changes. Changes running. He is changing all the time. It all falls off ó bandages, braces, cufflinks, watches, hair grease, suits, buttons, ties. He is himself again, years ago, skipping along the railway line with a long cord his mother had made into a rope. In a red dress. It is liberating. To be a girl. To be a man. (KAY, 1999, p. 135)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The polyphonic arrangement of voices and perspectives interrogating the identity of Joss Moody reveals the complexity of the main character as well as of transgendered living and at the same time questions the very foundations on which mainstream assumptions about sex and gender are based. The constructedness of Joss's identity, as it becomes evident through these multiple perspectives, is shown to be a function not only of performativity but also of narrativity.

The exploration of dissonant gender in the novel, far from being an authorial deflation of heteronormativity in favor of divergent gender as a more truthful manifestation of identity, functions mainly as an exercise of denaturalizing the reader's perception of gender as the unproblematic result of an individual's perceived sex.

As the text finally suggests, performances, when ruled by choice, are directed at building the anthropocentric fantasy of *being someone*. Similarly, the rituals of getting

dressed/undressed, of doing things with one's body or one's gender, are seen as artifices that do not explain or exhaust one's subjective potentials. Through his music Joss's identity as a girl, a man or a jazz player do not seem to be relevant after all, because he is none of them or all of them at different moments, as suggested by the epigraph that opens this paper. This post-subjective position also challenges the subject/object dualities, as it dismantles the dilemmas of gender as personal choice in favor of a new grammar, in which "the body needs the suit to wear the horn" (p. 136). The prevalent idea of a rational subject that acts upon the world and its objects is dismantled by this metaphor, as much the idea of a subject predicated on "particulars" such as one's ego, sexuality or memory. From this post-subjective position, which is made possible as Joss "unwraps himself with his trumpet" and lets it all "fall away like skin unwrapping" (p. 135), the body forgets itself for a moment and is converted into an instrument of brief, fluid and vibrant identity possibilities.

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