

“The way you wear your hat”: Performativity and self-invention in Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* and Duncan Tucker’s *Transamerica*

Carolina Sánchez-Palencia Carazo
Universidad de Sevilla

Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* and Duncan Tucker’s *Transamerica* make explicit use of transgender subjects to deal with the intricate and hybrid nature of identity. Functioning as destabilizing agents, these characters dismantle their surrounding universe where family choices and social identifications can be no longer fixed and predetermined. Likewise, as paradigmatic queer texts, both stories transgress conventional categories and paradoxically, their epistemological collapse turns into a powerful source of meaning, inasmuch as those categories –sex, gender, nationality, race, family, genealogy-- that so strongly determine the subject’s identity and his/her sense of belonging are eventually confronted with their own contingency and their openness for new meanings. Through the exploration of overt themes as adoption, jazz, nomadism and transsexuality –which work also as powerful metaphors for the fluidity and precariousness of the Self-- these authors align themselves with the performativity paradigm of Judith Butler’s and other queer theorists in their assumption that identity –more an imaginary construction of desire and fantasy than an essential or empirical given-- must be invented and reinvented. In this context, the transgender subject becomes the epitome of instability and diasporic meaning, and like a sort of “strange attractor” generates a scenario of ambiguity which invites alternative ways of coping with subjectivity and its social perception.

Trumpet, Jackie Kay’s first novel is loosely inspired in the true story of the American Jazz musician Billy Tipton who lived and worked as a man during the 40’s and 50’s and, upon his death, was discovered to be a woman, causing a tremendous shock among his children, ex-wives, band-mates, friends and audience. Kay moves this episode to contemporary Britain and makes it intersect with questions of race and nationality thus creating a fictional mosaic of non-essential identities that became so successful in the so-called “queer 90’s” that it was awarded with the 1998 Guardian Fiction Prize.

Her novel starts with the death of Joss Moody, a Scots black jazz trumpeter, and articulates the different reactions to the doctor’s and registrar’s revelation, after their routine inspection of the corpse, that he is (or rather was) a woman. Then the narrative unfolds polyphonically into the three major testimonies constituting the central melody of the story: those of Millie, his widow; Colman, his adopted son, and Sophie, a tabloid journalist eager to publish a sensationalist biography of Joss (born Josephine). Apart from these major contributions, the narrative includes the voices of other people, some of them only tangentially related to the deceased: like the funeral director, the registrar, the doctor, a drummer, the cleaner, and a school friend.

Like in a jazz performance, where scripts are displaced by improvisation, the posthumous story of this cross-dresser is organized around different combinations,

additions, and versions of a “truth” that in the end remains elusive, and almost irrelevant. Since this is a post-mortem account we never hear Joss’s own voice and we get to know him only through others’ oblique versions of him, the result being a plural, fragmentary and jazz-like composition.

Jackie Kay has declared in several interviews how deeply jazz and blues rhythms have gone into her writing (Severin 2002; Gish 2004); and one can indeed trace that music in *Trumpet*: through its flexible style, its hybrid quality and its improvised variations in the guise of overlapping voices and testimonies. As Louis Armstrong said, “Jazz is music that’s never played the same way once”, which gives authors and performers occasions for endless reinvention. That is why, when playing his trumpet, Joss “looked real and unreal like a fantasy of himself. All jazz men are fantasies of themselves, reinventing the Counts and Dukes and Armstrongs, imitating them” (190). Jazz, then, is a theme in the novel but also a metaphor for the instability and precariousness of identity, inasmuch as it offers a liberating space of in-definition where Joss can strip off any normative categories:

When he gets down, and he doesn’t always get down deep enough, he loses his sex, his race, his memory. He strips himself bare, takes everything off, till he’s barely human...All his self collapses –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. (131)

When playing his trumpet he seems to have arrived at “the unbearable lightness of being”, that in which the self (the phantasmatic self) explodes into million selves dismantling any notion of a unitary identity and emerging instead only as simulacra: “Scotland. Africa. Slavery. Freedom. He is a girl. A man. Everything, nothing. He is sickness, health. The sun, the moon. Black, white. Nothing weighs him down.”(136)

The allusion to the unwrapping of the self evokes that touching recurrent image of the unravelling of the bandages wrapped around Joss’s chest that he had to change every day of his adult life with the silent complicity of his wife Millie. It has the solemnity of a ritual, the sensuality of a strip-tease that, far from being obscene, resembles the reader’s act of unravelling her/his story. A story where the echoes of queer theory resonate through the delineation of this de-identified, de-specified subject inhabiting a sort of no-man/no-woman’s land.

If “being nobody” is the best expression of a queer and non-essentialist postmodern self, “being someone else” (a recurrent motif in the story and in some of Kay’s poems) is also indicative of the protean and contingent nature of identity. As Joss remarks in his will, everyone bears a false name or would have liked to be someone else (276). It is not only his own case, that of a woman passing as a man; actually most characters in the novel undergo a similar process of impersonation, which suggests that perhaps it might not be such an aberrant act, but something inherent to our versatile human condition. Thus, for instance, Millie, in her mourning, wishes she were a girl again and, in a passage full of Lacanian overtones, hardly recognizes her own reflection in the mirror; Edith, Joss’s elderly mother, complains that her daughter has not visited her for a long time and fears that, as a consequence, she might lose her own identity, the one that is given to us by our “significant others”: “Nobody knows her like Josephine knew her. And if nobody knows you, how can you be yourself? Edith could be somebody different every day and most probably nobody would notice” (221); or Colman’s girlfriend, who is called Melanie after a dead sister, “although it wasn’t nowhere on her birth certificate” (117); and most important, Colman himself, whose adopted condition (like that of Kay’s herself) forces him into an endless imaginary cross-casting: “[Y]ou could have been brought up in another part of the world, with rich parents, poor parents, Mormons, communists, fascists, bankers, Catholics, Methodists, zoo-keepers, serial killers. You could have gone straight to a cold orphanage” (46). As Colman suggests, the adoptees’s identity is necessarily fluid as their past is constantly reinvented and their birth parents always fantasized.

Adoption, like jazz, is a central theme in Kay’s novel, but also a metaphor for the multiplicity and instability of the self, and has been deeply explored in her famous three-voice poem *The Adoption Papers*, which articulates in a very unsentimental rhetoric the experiences of the adopted daughter, her adoptive mother and her birth mother.

I do not quite agree with Kay that there aren’t many adopted people in literature, only in soap operas (Gish 172). There is a long tradition of adoption in English literature. Orphans, adoptees, foster parents and misplaced children are commonplace in Victorian novel and melodrama, a literary and historical context which tried to stress the role nurture (versus nature) plays in shaping individual identity. These narratives are strongly inflected by class and heredity, as adoption always implies

social, moral and economic mobility for the adoptees. George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and *Daniel Deronda* constitute well-known examples of this tradition.

Yet, Kay makes major departures from that canon as her story revolves not around the conventional revelation and recovery of biological origins, but around the acceptance of the Father (male or female) the son temporarily denies or “kills” after feeling he has been betrayed by a “fake” father, who is also a “fake man”. Thus what makes her approach a fresh one is the way she addresses issues of fatherhood and masculinity within the adoption plot. So if, in the patrilineal economy, the father is supposed to provide the son with a social name and place and to transfer him his malehood legacy, here we observe a double subversion of this “universally acknowledged truth”, because it is not only that Joss is not Colman’s “real” (biological) father, but he is not even a “man”. Colman’s brutal and obscene language reflects these masculinist anxieties created by his father’s trespassing gender boundaries and his threatening male hegemonic identity. His homophobic reaction reveals a deep fear of castration after his father’s example, as when he says “My father didn’t have a prick” (66). And he is right, “his father didn’t have a prick”, but he did have a trumpet, which stands as a substitute of the paternal phallus, a powerful signifier of talent, prestige, privilege and public recognition. As any reader can perceive in Colman’s childhood recollections, his fetishistic relation with “this object of desire” (and the erotic connotations in its description should not go unnoticed) motivates an oedipal rivalry with his mother:

I goes in my father’s bedroom. I am six years old. I opens their wardrobe. My daddy keeps his trumpet in here. I opens the big silver box, and there it is, all shiny inside. I touched it...Then I strokes it like I’ve seen my father do and it purrs. I runs my fingers over the keys then along the fur, at the purple fur in the box...Then my mom finded me. I can’t make anything up. She says, Colman, what are you doing? Get out of your father’s trumpet. So I close the silver lid and push it back into the wardrobe. Daddy must have forgotten to take his trumpet, I says. I hope it doesn’t make him bad luck, I says. (49)

Let me notice that, in the context of Colman’s conflict with Joss’s emasculation (i.e., with “his not having a prick”), the son’s infatuation with his father’s “instrument”, becomes quite ironic.

Another difference with traditional approaches to adoption lies in the fact that Kay introduces race issues in her attempt at naturalizing British blackness. She succeeds

in placing her novel in the context of the 70's and 80's debate over transracial adoption, when placement of black children in white homes was considered by many as "unnatural", "artificial" and contrary to the welfare of children who would feel uncomfortable growing in a disapproving surrounding community. Contrastingly, in choosing a mix-up family (with interracial marriage and adoption) Kay hints that racial matching ends up reinforcing racialism and the dogmatic belief that colour determines destiny. In this sense, Colman's unease about his being imposed a normative black identity becomes very significant: "Doesn't feel comfortable with mates of his that go on and on about Africa. It feels false to him, mates that get dressed up in African gear, wank on about being African with a fucking cockney accent, man. Back to Africa is just unreal as far as Colman is concerned. He's never been to Africa, so how can he go back?" (191). A feeling of alienation that could be compensated by Joss's "Fantasy Africa" (the title of his first great hit), a strongly emotional recreation of a utopian nation.¹

Complicated by both issues of gender and race, Kay's ideas about adoption invite a reconceptualization of the Cartesian self. In surpassing the logic of the biological and an Enlightenment belief in identity as conferred by blood and genealogy, she suggests alternative models of kinship, and, as Joss explains to his son, the possibility to create one's own ancestry (ethnic, national and/or generic): "My father always told me he and I were related the way it mattered. He felt that way too about the guys in his bands, that they were all part of some big family. Some of them were white, some black. He said they didn't belong anywhere but to each other. He said you make up your own bloodline, Colman. Make it up and trace it back. Design your own family tree." (58)

It is in this light that we could understand Joss's final letter where he reveals his son neither the "name of the father", which would have provided the orthodox closure to the narrative of masculinity, nor the motives of his sexual passing (which would have traced Colman back to an utopian "origin" too). This unconventional testament ("Last Word") revolves instead around a story (the story of Joss's own father) of destabilization, transformation, "queer" lack of origins and diasporic meaning: "Even the name he was given, John Moore, was not his original name" (276); "his story could be the story of any black man who came from Africa to Scotland" (271) In the end, the

¹ A notion equivalent to Salman Rushdie's "Imaginary Homelands" or "Indias of the Mind" and many other postcolonial figurations of home and place as contradictory experiences for the migrant subject.

only explanation is that they are all part of the story of diaspora: “That’s the thing with us: we keep changing names. We’ve all got that in common. We’ve all changed names, you, me and my father. All for different reasons. May be one day you’ll understand mine.”(276) In the absence of a blood lineage Joss appeals to that other kind of ancestry and affinity, and to the right to re-invent ourselves out of an equally invented past. Although he leaves Colman the documentary evidence about his own past (letters, photos, certificates), this factual material is displaced by the nostalgia of emotional memory where everything, names, dates, origin is dissolved in the Scottish fog, adding further confusion and ambiguity to a story that deliberately avoids a fixed version of truth. Similarly, the cold facticity of the doctor’s and registrar’s reports and the scandalous story designed by the journalist seem to be obscured by the fluidity and indeterminacy of the prevailing sentimental testimonies. Thus, for instance, Millie loved him as a husband, and his wifely attitudes reinforced Joss’s self-invented masculinity; Colman, after coming to terms with his oedipal conflict, will end up accepting that “he’ll always be a daddy to [him]” (259); and even Edith, the only one who loved her (her Josephine) as a woman, confesses she misses her daughter.

The choice of the performativity paradigm aligns Kay with Judith Butler’s well-known theories, where identity is only the effect of the subject’s social representations that constitute him/her through the very act of their repetition (1993a: 311-13) The lines that she selected as the preface of *Trumpet* anticipate this specific view of gender (and by extension of any identity) as a set of learned roles: “The way you wave your hat/The way you sip your tea/ The memory of all that/No, no! They can’t take that away from me!” (George Gershwin).

This constructivist perspective invites a brief comparative analysis with Duncan Tucker’s film *Transamerica* (2005), another story of transgender fatherhood, otherness, and ultimately acceptance. This independent road-movie narrates the adventures and misadventures of Bree (born Stanley) a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual who discovers she has a rebellious teenage son with whom she has to come to terms before her sexual re-assignment surgery. Here the play with gender achieves a tour-de-force quality, as the film features a woman (Felicity Huffman) acting as a man trying to become a woman. Thus, the movie starts with the protagonist trying to find the right speaking pitch, as one of the many challenges faced by a pre-op transvestite, because, like Joss Moody, Bree has to learn how to build gender cues, both physical –in her body, hair, clothing, voice or movement—and behavioural –concerning her manners,

language, decorum or protocol, the result being an awkward mix of male/female mannerisms. Yet, in *Transamerica*, it is not only gender that becomes versatile, but above all, sex, which is thus presented as likely to be deconstructed and reconstructed. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) Judith Butler radicalizes the inquiries she began in *Gender Trouble* (1990) offering a refiguration of the materiality of bodies and of the power of heterosexual normativity to constitute the 'matter' of bodies, sex and gender. In this light, transsexuality, as it is depicted in Tucker's film, denaturalizes the biological sexed body and redefines its materiality in terms of the cultural and social contours delimiting it. Thus, Bree declares that her body is a "work-in-progress" and in a memorable conversation with her/his menopausal mother, they will have to accept that femininity is, to a great extent, prosthetic, as for both of them it is a matter of hormone supply:

Bree Osbourne: God, my cycle's all out of whack.

Elizabeth Osbourne: You don't have cycles!

Bree Osbourne: Hormones are hormones. Yours and mine just happen to come in purple little pills.

For many, sexual re-assignment surgery would end up reinforcing a sort of body fascism, and to a great extent, that would be the case of Bree, for whom anatomy can determine who she is, or at least how others see her, which amounts to much the same thing if you are inclined to want approval or feel desired or even just to get a life of your own. But this is only partially true in a story that avoids grappling with the interrelations of gender and sex and proposes instead an investment in artifice, that is, in all the performative gestures that constitute subjectivity and its social perception.

As it is the case with most transsexuals in their search for a new identity, Bree tries to devise for herself not only a future but also a past, because, as Kate Bornstein argues, "transsexuality is the only condition in Western culture for which the therapy is to lie".² The protagonist has spent her entire life coping with gender dysphoria and finally, when she is about to get rid of the one thing that prevents her from being a real woman, she finds that, much as she wants to put that old self behind her, her past cannot be entirely swept off. Her therapist Margaret advises that Bree should come to terms with who she was when she was Stanley, and that includes the son she fathered out of

² Kate Bornstein is a drag performer (a "Transgender Transsexual Postmodern Tiresias") and gender educator who led one of the first Cross-Gender Workshops aimed at deconstructing gender. She is also the author and performer in whose works she presents a typology of difference and ambiguity occupied by transgenderists, transvestites, transsexuals, cross-dressers and all those gender outlaws in-between one thing and the other.

her only sexual experience as a man 17 years ago: "This is a part of your body that cannot be discarded." It seems that for her being a father is the ironic pre-requisite to become a woman.

Tobby ignores that this conservative-looking lady and Christian missionary of the "Church of the Potential Father" is in fact his sperm donor, and his ignorance is the story's main source of humour. Having grown up as an orphan –and having thus experienced the precarious status of bastards who lack the filiation or social name conferred by the Father-- he reproduces the conflict that Freud defined as part of the "Family Romance", that is, the son's unconscious need to idealize his father in order to partake of his omnipotence (74-78). Hence, in a compensatory strategy, Tobby tends to believe his father is an American Indian and the owner of a big house, and the distance between the Real and the Imagined father is ironically enlarged when he discovers that he is only "half-Jewish" and "half-man". His aggressive reaction resembles that of Colman Moody's after the crucial revelation of his father's identity, but here it is aggravated by the frustrating realization that the father figure (aggrandized within the son's imagination) is only an unglamorous masquerade with whom Tobby cannot identify nor derive the necessary nourishment and reparation. As if in an ironic twist of the Freudian model the return to the homeland –"nostalgia" is one of the meanings of the mythic journey across America the embark upon—does not imply here a desire to return to the body of the mother (*semper certissima*), but the encounter with the father (*semper incertus*) incarnated in an instable, effeminate and fragmented self. Tobby has no home –nor mother because she is dead—to return to, "what places him always and inevitably abroad, in a foreign country"; neither has he got a father with whom to establish a phallic (af)filiation. Bree's "vanishing male body" –a body in transition, a phantasmatic body—evokes the Lacanian notions of desire inasmuch as it stands as the "object of desire" that is literally irretrievable and indefinable (Gallop148).

This nostalgic attempt at turning to a past more authentic (and palatable) than the present also affects Bree's mother who, repelled by her son's choice to become a woman, tries to idealize and re-invent her child by accommodating him to heterosexual normativity, as when she begs "Don't do this awful thing to yourself, please. I miss my son", and Bree answers: "Mom, you never had a son."

As in *Trumpet*, characters in *Transamerica* will have to assume alternatives to normative parenthood as the transgender subject becomes the destabilizing agent that dismantles its surrounding universe where family choices and identifications can be no

longer fixed and predetermined. Likewise, it could be argued that queer texts transgress conventional categories (not only gender binaries), but, paradoxically, their epistemological collapse is a powerful source of meaning, inasmuch as those categories –sex, nationality, race, family, genealogy-- that so strongly determine the subject's identity and his/her sense of belonging are eventually confronted with their own contingency and their openness for new meanings.

Works cited

- Abelove, Henry, Michèle A. Barale and David Halperin, eds. 1993. *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Alderson, David, and Linda Anderson. 2001. *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture : Refiguring the Contemporary Boundaries*. Manchester: Manchester U P.
- Anderson, Linda. 2001. "Autobiographical travesties: the nostalgic self in queer writing". Alderson & Anderson, eds.: 68-81.
- Bornstein, Kate. 1994. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge
- . 1998. *My Gender Workbook : How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You, or Something Else Entirely*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge,.
- . 1993a. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination". Abelove: 307-20.
- . 1993b. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1959. *Collected Papers 5*, ed. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books: 74-78.
- Gallop, Jane. 1985. *Reading Lacan*. Ithaca & London: Cornell U P: 148.
- Gish, Nancy. 2004. "Adoption, Identity and Voice: Jackie Kay's Inventions of Self." Novy, ed.: 171-192.
- Kay, Jackie. 1991. *The Adoption Papers*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books.
- . 1998. *Trumpet*. London: Picador.
- King, Jeanette. 2001 "A Woman's a Man for A' That': Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*". *Scottish Studies Review* 2:1. Spring 2001: 101-108.

- Novy, Marianne. 2004. *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: U of Michigan P.
- Severin, Laura. 2002. "Interview with Jackie Kay". *Free Verse: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poets*. Spring 2002: online ed. n.p.
- Tucker, Duncan. 2005. *Transamerica*. USA: Belladonna Productions.