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Gender Essentialisms and the Abject: Understanding Transgender Identity in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*

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*This article focuses on the tensions between essentialist and fluid conceptions of gender identity in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998). Joss Moody, a Black Scottish jazz trumpeter who is posthumously revealed to have been biologically female, is constructed largely through external characterisations. The most significant of these narratives are his wife Millie's and his son Colman's. I first illustrate the importance of performativity in understanding gender identity through the work of Judith Butler. This provides context for my discussion of Millie and Joss, focused on the relationship between the pellicular and the sartorial. The narrative focus on skin and the body versus clothing serves to illustrate Millie's understanding of gender as fluid and performative. In the second section of the essay, I outline the abject and address Colman's expulsion of that which threatens his sense of self. Positing that his perception of Joss as a representative of the maternal that must be expelled in order to enter the Symbolic and constitute a self, his understanding of gender on binary terms is the key element in his internal struggle. Embarking on a journey to learn about his father's life, Colman's refocusing on personal, lived experience allows his views to align with Millie's by the end of the novel. Thereby, Kay illustrates the tension between binary and nuanced understandings of gender in *Trumpet*, and the method by which this can be overcome: an inclusive understanding that undermines notions of a hegemonic masculinity from which non-conformants can be excluded based on bodily attributes.*

Introduction

Trumpet (1998) is former Makar Jackie Kay's first and only novel to date: a polyphonic, musical work that engages in a critical discussion surrounding transgender identity. The central—but mostly absent—character is Joss Moody, a Black Scottish jazz trumpeter who is posthumously revealed to have been biologically female. Unbeknownst to all but his wife Millie, Joss had spent the entirety of his adult life living as a man and, in his absence, his family, friends, and the public engage in an often-exclusionary discourse concerning Joss's gender identity following his death. The ensuing narratives of remembrance and discovery weave a complex discourse that reflects, challenges, and ultimately undermines exclusionary

conceptions of gender, which interpret biological sex as the defining characteristic of gender identity. In the first section of this article, I address contemporary and cultural discourse surrounding gender, performativity, and essentialism in order to illustrate the attitudes to gender identity that Kay's enigmatic lead character refutes throughout the novel. I then investigate how Joss, and his relationship with his wife, achieves this through the use of performativity by addressing the relationship between the pellicular and the sartorial. In the latter section of the essay, I shift to discuss Colman's reaction to the discovery that his father was biologically female through the lens of the abject as he attempts to expel the maternal as a process of re-assembling a disturbed sense of self. Colman is spurred on a journey of discovery which, I argue, ultimately undermines his conception of Joss as someone who has engaged in deception, reconciling the tension between essentialist and fluid conceptions of gender by the end of the novel. This highlights the fragility of a hegemonic masculinity which excludes and marginalises based on physical attributes and biological sex.

Part One: Millie and Joss - Essentialism and Performativity

Trumpet was inspired by the life of White American jazz pianist Billy Tipton. Biologically female, Tipton spent the entirety of his successful career spanning some three decades in the public eye presenting as a man, and Tipton's family asserted that they had no knowledge of his gender identity until after his death. American biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook's account of Tipton's life in *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (1998) frames his gender identity as a deception, a common and insidious perception of transgender individuals that is evident in the title. Similarly, a review of Middlebrook's biography refers to Tipton as a woman and uses his birth name throughout (Brubach), while an obituary of Tipton in the same paper refers to his deception, asserting that "She was (...) a successful mimic" (Smith). Posthumous assertions that Tipton and Joss were really women "suggest that at some level most of us are still essentialists", a suggestion that Kay unpacks in *Trumpet* (King 101). Joss, inspired by Tipton, serves as a counterpoint to the implication that for someone assigned female at birth to present as male is inauthentic. Perhaps the most oft-cited text on gender essentialism and performativity is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), which is indebted to the French feminists. Four of the five epigraphs for the first chapter of Butler's seminal work are attributed to de Beauvoir, Kristeva, Irigaray, and Wittig, contextualising her work within a framework of anti-essentialism (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 3). Butler argues that "Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women*, even in

the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 6). For Butler, the very gender binary that underpins this notion of essentialism isolates the feminine “analytically and politically from the constitution of (...) axes of power relations that both constitute ‘identity’ and make the singular notion of identity a misnomer” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 7). In other words, gender cannot have essential characteristics because, in interacting with other axes of power, it produces varying and dynamic forms of subjectivity. Essentialist concepts of gender can, therefore, said to be produced by a binary, single-issue understanding of the concept, which is unrealistic, and excludes individuals from membership of a given category based on biological characteristics.

Gender performativity is a key critical framework for understanding *Trumpet*, in which membership to binary gender categories is complicated as Joss Moody engages in performative aspects of gender in order to present as a man. The reason for his transition is never explicitly addressed, and probably cannot be assigned to one singular factor. It is postulated throughout the novel that Joss presents as a man because “Dressing up as a bloke and blowing that horn turned her on” or that it was all “for the sake of playing a trumpet”, but these ideas are refuted as Kay asserts that it cannot be assigned to one simple reason, rather that it is a more nuanced, layered expression of his inner self (Kay 263, 127). While Joss's gender identity is presented as a natural expression of who he really is, the act of passing as a man is made as a choice, a method of performing his gender identity. The choice to engage in performativity is indicative that “the active individual [requires] a social audience to give meaning to his or her choice”, a clear implication that gender is constructed and understood socially (Walker 36). This is the point from which ideas of deception and inauthenticity may stem, as being part of the audience is to feel as if you have been duped for many who knew or admired Joss. Everyone with whom Joss engages becomes a member of his audience, except for his loving and devoted wife Millie, who plays the role of behind-the-scenes manager, aware of all the mechanics that go into his performance of masculinity. In this, Millie undermines the very notion of deception and endorses a method of understanding gender fluidly, as her awareness of the performance does not negate its reality.

Millie and Joss first meet in Glasgow in the 1950s, and she is taken aback by his “astonishingly handsome, high cheekbones that gave him a sculpted proud look; his eyes darker than any I’d ever seen. Thick black curly hair, the tightest possible curls, sitting on top of his head, like a bed of springy bracken. Neat nails, beautiful hands. (...) His skin was the colour of Highland toffee. His mouth was a beautiful shape” (Kay 11). When Joss and Millie's eyes

first meet, there is no mention of clothing, and the description of his beauty is distinctly ungendered. High, proud cheekbones, thick curly hair, his neat, cared for hands, and a beautifully shaped mouth are among Millie's first observations, and they induce a "giddy sick excitement" (Kay 11). As their courtship progresses, Millie's focus on the body and skin-to-skin contact remain. Millie notes how gently Joss touches her, how their contact is limited to cheek kisses and handholding, and how his "slow deliberate walk" seems to be practiced (Kay 15). This focus on bodily praxis suddenly shifts on the night that Millie finds out about Joss's biological sex. Millie is newly focused on Joss's "blue serge suit and white shirt and striped tie", every inch the jazzman for a night out on the town (Kay 16). This refocusing from the pellicular to the sartorial marks the moment at which Millie becomes complicit in Joss's performative rituals and designates clothing as a principal element of Joss's performance of gender:

"He takes off his blue jacket and throws it on my floor. He takes off his tie and throws that down too. (...) He is undoing the buttons of his shirt. (...) Underneath the shirt is a T-shirt. (...) He pulls the next T-shirt over his head and throws that away too. He has another layer on underneath, a vest. (...) The vest is stripped off as well. He looks a lot thinner now with all that off him. I'm excited watching this man undress for me. Underneath his vest are lots of bandages wrapped round and round his chest..." (Kay 21).

Joss stripping off layers of his clothing functions similarly to the middle section of the novel, 'Music'. These sections aim to strip Joss down to a core, but then refute the possibility of finding an essence through contradiction and fluidity. Joss takes off his clothes with a view to revealing what is at that core. When he eventually does, Millie does not view it as a constituent part of his self, providing Joss with a social audience that—despite its awareness of the machinations of his performance—validates his gender identity. At the point where Joss bares himself to Millie, and she still accepts him as a man, she refutes any notion of a biological gender essentialism and rejects the notion of exclusion from a gender based on these physical factors. This in itself denies the possibility of gender pertaining to essential characteristics, and therefore undermines exclusionary concepts of gender. Joss may not be biologically male, but this does not warrant his exclusion from maleness for Millie, who recognises the importance of performance in gender. Joss and Millie spend their first night together as a man and a woman; that Joss has breasts and a vagina does not, for Millie, make that any less authentic. The reveal of his anatomy to Millie on their first night together foreshadows in reverse the role Millie will later play in helping him dress in masculine clothing and hiding his body. Every morning

throughout their marriage, Millie binds Joss's breasts, as Joss places a sock in his underwear and carefully dresses in layers of clothing (Kay 238). Outside of this dressing ritual, Millie is firm about never thinking of Joss as anything but her husband. For Joss and Mill Moody, their marriage could not be more simple—they are a straight couple, husband and wife.

Instances of “dressing the body while referencing [Joss's] underlying nakedness” therefore provide a foil to gender essentialisms (Arana 250). This itself undermines any idea of gender having essential biological characteristics, supporting the idea that “gender is drag” (Prosser 28). For Butler, drag is itself evidence that gender is socially constructed, suggesting that drag “effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 174). Joss engages in what could perhaps be compared to the art of the drag king, choosing hyper-masculine forms of clothing and expression in order to perform the male gender. Rather than a woman dressing as a man, however, Millie views Joss as male; the performative aspect of gender becomes, for Millie, the only one that matters. This is proven when, as Joss reveals his breasts to Millie, she thinks of them as “his breasts” (Kay 21). The focus on clothing appears in the narrative only at the point when Millie becomes aware of Joss's biology; her commitment to him as her husband is framed as relying on the sartorial performance of gender and her intimate involvement with this process. Similarly, Colman's revulsion upon seeing Joss's dead body is somewhat counteracted through seeing him dressed in “a blue serge suit and a white shirt and a stripey tie and black shiny shoes” (Kay 72). This, after the shocking revelation triggered by his confrontation with Joss's naked dead body, makes Joss look “normal again. Dead; but normal. Better” (Kay 72).

Part Two: Colman and Joss - The Object

If Millie's lived experience and role in Joss's performative rituals serve to reinforce his maleness on a personal, private level, the voices of state representatives—the doctor, funeral director, and registrar—serve as a rigid counterpoint to the nuanced, fluid experience of gender represented by Joss and Millie's relationship. These representatives rely on binary categorisations of the subject in order to make sense of Joss's identity, much in the model of the medical form upon which the doctor's red pen rudely declares Joss female (Kay 44), excluding Joss from a social understanding of maleness. When Colman sees his father's body, the undertaker asserts that “your father is not a man at all, but a woman” (Kay 114). Similarly, when Millie goes to obtain Joss's death certificate and asks for him to be recorded as male, the registrar is sympathetic, but apologises that he “could not lie on the death certificate” (Kay 80).

This allows Kay to “contrast state regulation of binary gender with the mutability and ambiguity of gender's lived experience”, arguing that a state which only provides the mechanism to officially identify within a binary framework undermines fluid conceptions of identity (Homans 123). The structure of these categorical identities leads further to ideas of inauthenticity; despite Joss living as a man, the registrar still considers putting ‘male’ on his death certificate to be a lie. This sense of biological authenticity problematises medical attention and treatment. Even in the latest stages of his unnamed illness, Joss refuses to see a doctor; as Millie explains, “One doctor's visit could ruin our lives” (Kay 87). The complexities surrounding seeking medical treatment as a transgender individual are being articulated in contemporary academic discourse, as a recent study led by St. Andrews University determined that doctors “often fail to distinguish between [sex and gender], which can make treatment for some patients ineffective or inappropriate” (Maishman). In this, we see an explicit contrast between the performance of gender identity advocated by Joss and Millie and a privileging of the biological supported by the medical profession and the state.

This search for authenticity based on the previously unarticulated assumption that gender is a rigid binary determined by essential characteristics is the source of Colman's mental and emotional anguish as he attempts to reconfigure his identity in relation to Joss's throughout *Trumpet*. In his initial shock regarding his father's body, this essential understanding of identity is articulated through Colman's angry assertion that “No man wants a fucking lesbian for his father” (Kay 66). The undermining of an essentialist view of his gender, due to the female biology of the principal male role model in his life, causes Colman to question the validity of his own status as a man which, in itself, requires the exclusion of the maternal. Because he had learned this model and sought approval “as a man, as a black man” (Kay 49) from someone who was biologically female, Colman's sense of self is shaken. Here, we enter the realm of the abject, a concept first articulated by Julia Kristeva in order to explain how the self forms in relation to the other, how this artificial boundary is breached throughout the subject's life, and how we must jettison that which threatens our sense of self. For Kristeva, the individual starts its life attached to the maternal body; there is no way for a child to distinguish between itself and the mother. This is the realm of the semiotic, which “expresses that original libidinal multiplicity within the very terms of culture (...) in which multiple meanings and semantic non-closure prevail” (Butler, *Body Politics* 105). As the child grows up, it begins to split from the mother, rejecting her in favour of the paternal and the realm of the symbolic.

The Symbolic, for Lacan, is that which “structures all linguistic signification (...) and so becomes a universal organising principle of culture itself” (Butler, *Body Politics* 104). As the paternal symbolic shapes speaking subjectivity, the child is able to perceive itself as a whole, individual being, unconnected to the mother. Anything that poses a threat to these boundaries triggers fascination and disgust. A student of Jacques Lacan, Kristeva's abject can be understood as a necessary precursor to Lacan's Mirror Phase, the point at which a child can look in the mirror and recognise itself as a congruent individual. While Lacan “takes as his basic paradigm for the origin of the ego the infant's positive response to its image in a mirror” (Muller 236), for Kristeva the split from the maternal must occur prior to this (Arya 24). The abject is, then, “the first, and most unstable, event to establish an inside/outside boundary” (Beardsworth 79). This event must be reenacted in order to strengthen and maintain subjectivity and reinforce the boundaries of the self as “the speaking being [must] divide, reject, repeat” that which highlights the arbitrariness of the boundary between self and other (Kristeva 12). This ability to divide relies on a paternally constructed symbolic as the speaking subject is now able to distinguish between the self and other through language; in other words, there is “language instead of the good breast” (Kristeva 45). The distinction between the action of abjection and the condition of being abject is essential. For Rina Arya, while abjection—the action—aims to stabilise the self through the rejection of that which threatens the subject, being abject—the condition—is inherently destabilising because it is a part of the self that constitutes a threat (3).

Colman's relationship with his mother is at times violent. Millie acknowledges that she has “never felt angry towards anyone in my whole life like the anger I can feel towards my son” and admits to hitting and shaking Colman at her angriest moments (Kay 199). As an adult, Colman spirals into a self-destructive streak motivated by his feeling that Joss and Mille have lied to him for his entire life, rendering their relationships disingenuous. Indeed, this feeling of betrayal leads to a split from the maternal as he threatens Millie with the involvement of the press in their private life. Millie notes that “He is too old for me now. His own man. There is nothing I can do”, highlighting the gulf between her and her son (Kay 83). If, then, Colman's subjectivity is defined by his split from the maternal, when he finds out about his father's biology he experiences a state of abjection. Previously his model of masculinity, Joss's body becomes a reminder of that which Colman has had to repeatedly exclude from his self in order to become his own person. The maternal now lies in an uncomfortable proximity to Colman's masculinity, no longer an object in relation to his self. It is, rather, abject, because Colman

cannot fully expel it; it represents the other within himself, unsettling boundaries. The masculinity that Colman has modelled on his father is now threatened by the possibility of the feminine within, and the symbolic structure that differentiates the masculine and feminine collapses. If identity “is established through the process of negation and rejection”, then the presence of what Colman has repeatedly rejected in such close proximity undermines his certainty in his masculinity (Arya 40). Colman's realisation that “My father had tits. My father didn't have a dick. (...) My father had a pussy” represents the unravelling of his certainty about gender essentialisms (Kay 61). This crude focus on Joss's body displays “a terrified recognition of the uncertainty of gender categories and the fragility of black manhood” (Richardson 361). Colman struggles to make space for the apparent contradiction that Joss could be both biologically female and his father, and, newly unable to rely on a stable masculinity, his sense of self is threatened, thereby casting “the assured knowableness of the subject (...) into doubt” (Jones 95).

Seeing his father exposed on the mortuary slab is the pinnacle of the abject for Colman. For Kristeva, cadavers embody the abject as they “show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 3). When presented with his father's corpse in close proximity, Colman is shown that which he cannot escape: the eventual collapse of the boundary between self and other in death. This is layered with yet more crises of identity as Joss's body becomes the site of an inadvertent attachment to the maternal and the semiotic. Colman must again reaffirm his split from the maternal as he simultaneously rejects Millie and reacts to Joss's body with “fury and sickness” (Kay 115) in an essentialist exclusion of what is now perceived as the maternal. This is a painful and uncertain exclusion that occurs as Colman's relationship with his father and the access provided to the symbolic precludes a full split from a new threat to the self. Colman, as a speaking subject, is now bound by the structure of the symbolic. Indeed, for Kristeva, the abject can never be fully expelled, but serves as a “perpetual reminder—and continues to threaten the boundaries of the self” (Arya 4). This is why the subject must make repeated attempts to reject that which threatens, and is the basis of Colman's emotional reckoning throughout *Trumpet*. What he perceives as a lack of separation from the maternal due to Joss's deception is ultimately the cause of Colman's abjected state throughout the novel. He, in the line of Kristeva, is shown what he believes he has excluded in order to constitute the boundaries of the self; and that which he has rejected is in much closer proximity than he once believed.

Conclusion

Work pioneered by R.W. Connell postulates that “masculinities are constituted in relation to other masculinities and to femininities”, and that the cultural hegemon of masculinity is only a narrow representation of maleness (736). In *Trumpet*, Kay represents one of these marginalised masculinities in order to illustrate that biological sex is not a measure of either exclusion from or gatekeeping of a gender identity. This is bolstered through Millie's attitude to gender as her viewpoint throughout the novel “introduces another definition of (...) authenticity that advocates the fluidity of gender identity” (Gonneaud). In contrast, Colman's subjectivity is initially grounded in his perceived relation to his father and an understanding of maleness that relies upon the single-issue, binary, essentialist interpretations of gender addressed at the beginning of this article. This leads to his abjection of what he perceives as feminine due to his binarised understanding of gender identity, in an attempt to maintain the boundaries of the self from which he must, according to Kristeva, expel the maternal in order to reaffirm his autonomy. Joss's previously noted conspicuous absence from the narrative allows the space for those who knew and loved him to voice their interpretations of his identity and his effect on their lives. Similar to the multiple elements of Joss's identity that seem to contradict, the narrative constructs an image of Joss through a chorus of voices, all of which have a different interpretation of his life. Millie's and Colman's, the most intimate and knowledgeable of all the voices throughout *Trumpet*, converge by the end of the novel.

As Millie remembers a life with her husband, Colman seeks information about Joss's life. Indeed, the relation of his grandfather's history through a letter from Joss comes only at the point in the novel when Colman has completed his journey of paternal- and self-discovery, when he feels “up for it” (Kay 270). In this way, Colman is able to overcome the abject state that has been preceded by his abjection of Joss through a more nuanced understanding of his identity in terms of lived experience. At the end of the novel, Colman boards a bus to Torr, finally reconciling with his mother in a symbolic gesture indicating a shift of his understanding to Millie's model of gender fluidity, an acceptance of Joss's own lived experience, and an understanding that Joss being both biologically female and his father is not contradictory. Thereby, Kay illustrates the tension between a binary and a nuanced understanding of gender in *Trumpet*, and the method by which this can be overcome: an inclusive understanding of gender identity, which makes space for contradiction through lived experience, undermining any notions of a hegemonic masculinity from which non-conformants can be excluded based on bodily attributes.

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