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(4th CELLTTS)

Re-Examining Gender Concepts and Identities in Discourse(s) and Practice(s) Across Periods and Disciplines

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Reminiscences of Home in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*[1]

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Abstract

Jackie Kay's first novel, *Trumpet*, centres around Joss Moody, a Black jazz trumpeter, whose life is intensely scrutinized once the reporting of his death reveals he was born a woman. What makes this novel a fruitful site of investigation into how identities and identifications forming a sense of self (gender, sexuality, and race) are imagined, perceived, acquired, expressed, challenged, dissolved, and performed is the fact that Joss's identity is filtered through multiple perspectives. His wife Millie and adopted son Colman initiate a memory discourse to discover ways to exist after Joss's death (Lumsden, 2000, as cited in Hartner, 2015, p. 52). As they attempt to reconstruct Joss as a husband, lover, father, and famous trumpeter, they 'de and re-construct themselves' (Lumsden, 2000, as cited in Hartner, 2015, p. 52), questioning the relationship between home, gender, and sexuality in the process. *Trumpet* adapts, challenges, and reshapes the conventions of homemaking. It shows that the concept of home expands to encompass everything from a physical place, a site of hybridization and improvisation, to a point from which to re-examine, negotiate and critique feelings, practices, and states of being generally associated with traditional narratives of home.

Keywords: gender, heteronormativity, home, music, Jackie Kay

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In the Introduction to the 2021 edition of her book about Bessie Smith, originally published in 1997, Jackie Kay reveals what helped her set and adequately convey the tone of her novel about Black jazz trumpeter Joss Moody, who was born a woman but spent his adult life living as a man:

> [S]trangely, returning to the blues and immersing myself in Bessie and in her contemporaries clarified the voice of *Trumpet*. I started to see the style of the book as a piece of music. The whole chapter called "Music" in *Trumpet* was directly inspired by thinking about how the blues journeyed into jazz. I was trying to find a metaphor for that fluidity in our own gendered identities. I was thinking about how we imagine states of identity to be static when they are in fact fluid [...] Writing about Bessie and her blues, about her very fluid identity, how she was as at home in pearls and plumes as in a man's suit, allowed me to create Joss Moody. The two books seem twinned. (Kay, 2021, pp. 3–4)

The act of returning to the rhythms and stories of Bessie's music also meant a journey back to the days when Kay, as a mixed-race child adopted by a White couple and living in a predominantly White environment, struggled to make sense of her difference. Kay's sense of identity and belonging progressed with her first double album. Namely, when she was 12, her adoptive father, who loved the blues, bought her an album, *Bessie Smith: Any Woman's Blues*. Bessie's Black face featured on the record cover, her voice, and her rich and resonant narratives (Kay, 2021, p. 1) changed, as Kay expresses in her poem "The Red Graveyard", "the shape of my [Kay's] silence": she could recognize herself in the features of Bessie Smith, which enabled her to perceive and give voice to the other side of herself. For Kay, who "grew up in a house of jazz and blues" (Smith, 2016a), the blues became life's way of talking – all clashes and fusions, collapses, ins and outs, and ups and downs in the blues narratives "sprang from life's source [... and ...] allowed for a kind of transformation, a becoming" (Kay,

2021, p. 5). In the words of one of Kay's lodestars, Black feminist and civil rights activist Angela Davis, the blues "was aesthetic evidence of new psychosocial realities within the black population" in the postemancipation period (Davis, 1998, p. 5). As Davies's analysis of the blues tradition demonstrates, the blues women – Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Billie Holiday – challenged, with their lyrics, performances, lifestyles, and sexual proclivities, the dominant discourses of the time concerning gender, sexuality, race, and class. Based on this, the blues realm can be considered a counter-narrative – a space of resistance to the fixed models and dominant narratives of identity – that made Joss Moody live and breathe.

Kay wanted the novel's structure to reflect the flux of jazz: "I liked the idea that *Trumpet* would have [...] riffs and solos, and that some characters would appear and let rip and then disappear coming in and out of the focus like jazz" (Smith, 2016a). She also wanted to tell the same story from different viewpoints (Kay, 1999, as cited in Hartner, 2015, p. 51). The story centres around Joss Moody, whose life undergoes intense scrutiny once the reporting of his death reveals his biological sex. What makes this novel a fruitful site of investigation into how identities and identifications forming a sense of self (gender, sexuality, and race) are imagined, perceived, acquired, expressed, challenged, dissolved, and performed is the fact that Joss's identity is filtered through multiple perspectives. Voices the author employs to restore parts of Joss's existence come from a range of characters. Repetition and sequences of ideas elaborated by characters who had an intimate relationship with Joss (his wife Millie and adopted son Colman) and those who tend to acquire details of his intimate life (the journalist Sophie Stones) are the glue holding solos – carriers of legal, administrative, and medical discourses of sex, sexuality, and gender (the doctor, the registrar, and the funeral director) – together.

As Ali Smith observes, *Trumpet* begins with a "forced unhoming, from both the house and the self" (Smith, 2016b). To escape the blinding white light of the press cameras seeking to illuminate her, Millie leaves her house in London for a secluded place in Scotland. Torr, as this place is called, provides a safe refuge not only from the media, since Joss and

Millie kept it private through the years, but also from the prying eyes of the locals who are "oblivious to the happenings in the jazz world" (Kay, 2011, p. 6). However, the recesses, free from the pressure and noise of the outside world, soon become a site of a different type of invasion: "[t]he past had been here all the time, waiting" (Kay, 2011, p. 7). The house at Torr evokes the memory of times past when Millie felt being herself was certain, easy, and painless (Kay, 2011, p. 1). Now, when she views the photographs in the papers, she appears unlike the memory of herself:

> I don't know what feeling like myself is any more. Who is Millicent Moody? Joss Moody is dead. Joss Moody is not Joss Moody. Joss Moody was really somebody else. Am I somebody else too. But who else was Joss? Who was this somebody else? I don't understand it. Have I been a good mother, a good wife, or have I not been anything at all? (Kay, 2011, p. 98)

Millie's idea of home as a source of relaxation, comfort, familiarity, and security is not associated with physical places such as the site of the house, region, or even country but stems from Joss's presence and the construction of his identity. Joss Moody no longer exists, and the image of that significant other – to whom she was glued, to borrow Roland Barthes's (2001, p. 11) phrase, and on whom she relied for support in the evolution of her sense of self – has been reduced to a lie and deception by the media. Destabilized by both the loss and the aspect of Joss that loss unveils, Colman also struggles to regain himself: "it [the life] has only become eventful now; after his death. Then the life, the one I thought I knew I'd lived, changed. Now I don't know what I lived" (Kay, 2011, p. 46). Millie and Colman adopt a memory discourse to find "ways to exist after his [Joss's] death" (Lumsden, 2000, as cited in Hartner, 2015, p. 52). As they attempt to reconstruct Joss as a husband, lover, father, and famous trumpeter, they "de and re-construct themselves" (Lumsden, 2000, as cited in Hartner, 2015, p. 52), questioning the relationship between home, gender, and sexuality in the process.

The novel's opening section, entitled "House and Home", signals a relationship that provokes thinking around the outside and inside, unsafe and safe, others and self. Interpreted by Ali Smith as a clash between the public and private worlds, the relationship between house and home raises questions about the various ways people "calculate what's real and what's imagined [...] and what's allowed and forbidden" (Smith, 2016b). Joss and Millie's house is a public version of their home (domestic sphere of family and marriage), which is, as Allison James argues, both a conceptual and physical space: "[i]t is an idea that guides our actions and, at the same time, a spatial context where identities are worked on" (James, 1998, p. 144). Although Joss did not seek to confirm his chosen gender legally, Millie officially became Mrs Moody in 1955: "Joss and I have done it. We are married. A few guests at the registry office this afternoon [...] And that was it" (Kay, 2011, p. 30). No forged documents or fraudulent wedding officiants are mentioned as being involved, as was the case with jazz musician Billy Tipton (see Devor, 2003, p. 193), whose life inspired Kay to write the novel. From the moment Joss, several months into their courtship, unwrapped his bandages to reveal the material fact of his female body, Millie accepted his love and his way of taking her to their other world – which would remain, at least until his death, just his and hers and nobody else's (Kay, 2011, p. 198). Towards the end of the novel, Millie regains the feeling of being Joss's wife and, by extension, a widow by reminding herself that she was fully capable of giving herself up and over to love:

> I managed to love my husband from the moment I clapped eyes on him till the moment he died. I managed to desire him all of our married life. I managed to respect and love his music [...] I managed to be loyal, to keep our private life private where it belonged. To not tell a single soul including my own son about our private life. (Kay, 2011, p. 206)

Joss feels he owes his identity primarily to Millie and his music: "He has a wife and he has an album. He can't contain his excitement at his own success [...] He tells me [Millie] it is all down to me, that I have created him, that I am responsible for his success" (Kay, 2011, p. 36). As a White fe-

male-Black male pairing, Millie and Joss are "a find" for an adoption agency to find a home for a child of colour, so they adopt Colman and complete their idea of family life and home. Now they are a married couple with a child, they fit into a more desirable model of a stable, nuclear family, reducing the possibility of being under surveillance. As Sarah Igo (2018) notes, "owning a home, making a comfortable living, and conforming to dominant norms of respectability all decidedly increased one's chances of evading society's gaze" (p. 9). The institutions of marriage, employment, and adoption rights are material practices that, along with other structures of understanding and practical orientations, reinforce and privilege heterosexuality (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548). Millie's ambivalent attitude towards their home's presentation in the print media evokes the complexity of Joss within what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner term the project of heteronormativity:

> I used to find the amount of publicity that Joss created terrifying. I hated the constant interviews, the articles about his life and music in the newspapers and magazines. The description of our house always incensed me. It was their myth of our house. (Kay, 2011, p. 154)

Joss's publicity simultaneously perpetuates and threatens a "tacit sense of rightness and normalcy" embedded in aspects other than sex, that is, in the whole field of social forms and arrangements such as nationality, the state, the law, commerce, medicine, education, the conventions of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture (Berlant & Warner, 1998, pp. 554–555). The concept of home appears contradictory as Vider demonstrates in *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II* (2021): it is "a site of constraint and a site of self-expression, a site of isolation and a site of deep connection, a site of secrecy and a site of recognition" (p. 7).

Recalling his childhood, Colman identifies as a traditional boy growing up in a nontraditional house (Kay, 2011, pp. 46–47). Compared with

other children's parents, Millie and Joss "stuck out like a sore thumb" with their unconventional mode of living. Colman wanted parents who appeared less glamorous and more like those who worked a nine-to-five job; he also longed for a more regulated and stationary lifestyle since his father wanted his family with him while touring. For an adopted mixed-race child, born in Edinburgh but living in London and following his parents from one dingy old jazz club to another, the homeplace was consistently elsewhere, provided it was a place of fixity and stability, which, in Colman's case, meant having a square meal and a bath every night in the same house in the same town. Joss challenged Colman's generic and reductive understanding of "home" as well as his need to restrict a sense of belonging to a home as a physical place:

> 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 – what's the matter with you? Haven't you got an imagination? (Kay, 2011, p. 58)

The concept of home can take the form of an alternative to settled places, one encouraging a framework of thinking that Paul Carter (1992) specifies as a migrant perspective: "We need to disarm the genealogical rhetoric of blood, property and frontiers and to substitute for it a lateral account of social relations" (p. 7). By further encouraging Colman to accept the concept of home as a place allowing haphazardness, imagination, improvisation, fabrication, and discontinuity, Joss unsettles heteronormative reproductive logic. Therefore, homes can be metaphorical centrings of movement which Carter (1992) regards not as an "awkward interval between fixed points of departure" but as a "mode of being in the world" (p. 101). Evidently a dynamic field, home is not what grounds people but what problematizes their identity.

"Home" in the novel is not presented in terms of a Goffmanesque "back region" as exclusively private space but as a site involving "a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery" (Goffman, 1959, p. 8). Working from Susan Gal's premise that the public-private divide reproduces itself within itself and therefore should not be considered a simple binary but a fractal distinction, Stephen Vider (2021, p. 10) concludes that home can be perceived as a space enabling intimacy while simultaneously restricting it. Since his early childhood, Colman has been aware that their house has been composed of several private spheres. It consistently appeared to him that his parents shared a world of their own – they were always "whispering about the house" (Kay, 2011, p. 129) and had a "special air of having something between them" (p. 66). Joss and Millie have full control over the indoor space they all share; within the inner space, insulated from the wider world, they make further divisions and define that space's insiders and outsiders: Millie does not want her mother too close around their house, and she ensures Colman knocks on their bedroom door. Joss and Millie's bedroom is their secret world where they engage in their backstage behaviour, some of which is a preparation for front stage behaviour:

> I wrapped two cream bandages around his breasts every morning, early. [...] The tighter I wrapped, the flatter his breasts. That was all he was concerned about. He didn't care if it was uncomfortable. It probably was a little. [...] I had to help him to get dressed so that he could enjoy his day and be comfortable. [...] 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. (Kay, 2011, p. 238)

Joss determines his gender identity and confirms it through clothing. One recognizes here, and throughout the novel, a mixture of physical cues employed to pass as a man. As Judith Butler (1988) explains, "gender is in-

stituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* [sic]" or "stylization of the body" (p. 519). Therefore, gender, Butler underscores, "must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (ibid.). Such acts belong to the domain of learned behaviour that de-essentializes gender and exposes physical parameters and mannerisms forming gender "standards"; they, in J. Halberstam's view, demonstrate that masculinity is not the property of male bodies but a construction by both female- and male-born people (Halberstam, 1998, p. 13). This type of gender expression allows Joss, like many others for whom changing sex was a fantasy, to create a home for himself in a body that, as Halberstam (2018) expresses it elsewhere, was not comfortable or right in terms of who he understood himself to be (p. 1).

Music and motion are central to Joss's self-conception. He feels at home in the music environment that refuses categorization, boxes, and artificiality of genres. Stages and small clubs can be viewed as homes to a hybrid and erratic scene that takes him up and down and creates a holy-like atmosphere. Millie feels as if she is losing Joss to the music's rhythms until she, led by the syncopated movements, stomping, and cheering of people around her, experiences that strange feeling of going inside the music (Kay, 2011, p. 18). Joss is his music, and the logic of his embodiment is encoded in his name, Moody Trumpet – when he plays the trumpet, he "can't stop himself changing. Running changes. Changes running. He is changing all the time" (Kay, 2011, p. 135). His playing is an endorsement of difference, a live process of responding to his dual heritage and resolving an either/or logic in favour of an impulse – a strong one in all of us, Kay believes (Kay & Tournay-Theodotou, 2014, p. 92) – to put seeming opposites together: "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. Not the past or the future" (Kay, 2011, p. 136). It has been pointed out that music and musicality are used in the novel to raise a universal question of how to be in the world, where world means a complex relationship between race, gender, and sexuality (see Carroll, 2018, p. 172; Fong, 2011, p. 244; Hartner, 2015, p. 51).

Trumpet adapts, challenges, and reshapes the conventions of homemaking. It shows that the concept of home expands to encompass everything from a physical place, a site of hybridization and improvisation, to a point from which to reexamine, negotiate, and critique feelings, practices, and states of being generally associated with traditional narratives of home. Millie and Joss subvert the concept of home resulting from the strict operation of heterosexuality. Joss is an unlikely homemaker in the sense Judith Butler (2004, p. 214) explicates the potential behind drag – he challenges the implicit association between sex and gender. Both concepts, home and gender, are open to a whole range of practices that are culturally determined yet individually enacted; they, as Stephen Vider (2021, p. 7) argues, project stability but are made and remade through 'imperfect, and sometimes subversive, repetition'.

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