

As You Wear: Cross-dressing and Identity Politics in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*

By Alice Walker¹

Abstract

This paper explores the theories and practices of cross-dressing through the lens of Jackie Kay's novel, *Trumpet* (1998). In the course of *Trumpet*, Kay explores the life of a fictional protagonist, 'Joss Moody', who was born a woman but lived as a man. With close reference to recent critiques of cross-dressing, this paper conducts a detailed analysis of identity, gender, and personal autonomy as they are constructed within the terms of Kay's text. Furthermore, it works to illustrate the complex ways in which gender and individuality intersect in contemporary cultures, while exposing the logic of gender binarism to intense critical scrutiny.

Keywords: Identity, cross-dressing, choice.

You are what you wear. You are what you were. Within the space between these two sentences—almost identical, yet utterly different—lies the disputed territory of cross-dressing. As a practice, cross-dressing destabilises the system of binary oppositions that structure Western metaphysical space: the cross-dresser, after all, falls between the marker poles of male/female, masculine/feminine, cultural/biological, conformist/unconventional. In a society that is obsessed by the question “What are you?”—a question that speaks to a deep need to categorise and authenticate individual identities—the cross-dresser functions as a disorderly and subversive presence: by resisting assimilation within a system of binary oppositions, he or she reveals the inadequacy of this system, and, furthermore, questions the extent to which appearance and identity are coextensive.

If we expect to be able to ‘read’ indicators of sex, gender and sexuality, and if we expect certain things to appear certain ways, then cross-dressing works by reversing these expectations. Given that the practice of cross-dressing can take a variety of different forms, it cannot be conceptualised in accordance with any singular logic. As Marjorie Garber explains in *Vested Interests* (1992), ‘to restrict cross-dressing to the context of an emerging gay and lesbian identity is to risk ignoring, or setting aside, elements and incidents that seem to belong to quite different lexicons of self-definition and political and cultural display’ (5). Using Garber's statement as a point of departure, I would like to argue that cross-dressing—or ‘crossing’, as it is otherwise known—is synonymous with choosing.² The process of developing an individual identity is, after all, a dynamic one: identity is not, as Garber argues, singular and inflexible, but plural, fluid, and often contradictory. Read within this context, Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998) offers a valuable

¹ Alice Walker is currently studying for a Master's in Women Studies (part-time) at the University of York. She completed her undergraduate studies in English Literature (1999-2002) as a mature student at York and worked as a Policy Officer at the Scottish Executive before returning to academia.

² Although this essay deals primarily with the issues raised by cross-dressing, I acknowledge the common ground that crossing can share with the questions of transgender. I believe that much of the existing scholarship on transgender is pertinent to analyses of cross-dressing, but while I do make reference to this scholarship, it is not my intention to equate ‘crossing’ identities to transgender identities.

illustration of the problematic nature of identity. Through the freedom offered by fiction, Kay explores the issue of cross-dressing and, relatedly, the difficulty of gaining insight into identities that are not our own.

It is my conviction in this article that cross-dressing is a choice; it is a dynamic process that is governed by the individual. Without the individual, there is only a pile of clothes; the accessories that facilitate, but which do not constitute, the act of cross-dressing: clothes may make the man, but only when they are *worn*. To attempt to impose a singular significance onto an act of individual choice is undoubtedly glib and prescriptive, but it also threatens to ignore the potential complexity and multiplicity of that act's meaning. If cross-dressing exposes the rigidity, and consequent inadequacy, of binary modes of thought, then it must also, to some extent, reveal the fluid and multifaceted nature of the 'other'. For Kate Bornstein in *Gender Outlaw* (2004):

All the categories of transgender find a common ground in that they break one or more of the rules of gender: what we have in common is that we are gender outlaws, every one of us. To attempt to divide us into rigid categories (You're a transvestite, and **you're** a drag queen, and **you're** a she-male, and on and on and on) is like trying to apply the laws of solids to the state of fluids (69).

If, as Bornstein suggests, cross-dressing is an act that relies on socially-defined 'rules of gender', then to what extent does the cross-dresser, the active individual, require a social audience to give meaning to his or her choice to defy these rules? In other words, does cross-dressing take place – is it even possible – if no-one sees it? Can it be said to occur if there are no witnesses around to interpret it? Asking these questions is, of course, problematic as it requires us to interpret the act of crossing through reference to binary logic; we must establish a meaning for the act that is drawn from the limited lexicon of male/female, masculine/feminine, gay/straight. In existing criticism, the concept of cross-dressing has been eclipsed by a host of theoretical models that are predicated on a rigid system of binary logic. As such, it has been assimilated into a theoretical discourse that claims to valorise 'otherness', but which is limited in its explorative scope by its reliance on the terms of binarism. How, then, can these discourses expand their parameters to account for experiences of gender and identity that are not clearly defined, and which are not, moreover, the experiences of the mainstream? Queer theory may *claim* to address the 'other', but as Stephen Whittle points out, this is itself limited:

It could be argued that because of the gay, lesbian and bisexual history of queer theory itself, it can currently do nothing more than expound and further delineate these boundaries. The crossing of them still belongs to the world of "vogue-ing" and the destruction of them must belong to those for whom they have always been unreal because of their inherent personal incongruity within a gender-specific world (22-23).

As a term, then, and as a choice, cross-dressing can only ever exist within a society that dichotomizes and genders particular modes of dress. After all, how can you cross from masculine to feminine, or 'male' to 'female', if such distinctions are not already in place?

If society does spot the individual's (mis)appropriation of gender-specific markers, if he or she is able to 'pass' convincingly as the gender they perform, then does that not place him or her in the same category as the individual who cross-dresses in private, without the presence of a social audience to acknowledge and/or interpret the act? If cross-dressing were to be positioned within the context of an emerging group identity, then it would seem to follow that some kind of recognition would be required; to equate it with 'an emerging gay and lesbian identity' would be to equate it a degree of 'outness', which would by necessity fracture any possibility of 'passing'. The question would seem to be one of intent. Is the intention of the cross-dresser to signal an affiliation to a gay or lesbian identity through recourse to a system of gender-resonant markers, or is it his or her intention to inhabit what appears to be a heteronormative gender identity?

Cross-dressing can, of course, play an important role within gay and lesbian culture, but, as Garber argues, it would be foolish to restrict its influence and significance to this sphere. To do so would be to deny the role of individual choice: the individual may cross-dress to subvert sexual norms and expectations, and he or she might do so as part of a gay or lesbian identity, but the cross-dresser might just as easily seek to operate as an unquestioned insider within heteronormative society. In a letter to Kate Bornstein, David Harrison attempts to draw a valuable distinction between the practice of cross-dressing and gay and lesbian identity:

Someone asked me if the transgendered community is like the gay/lesbian communities. I said no, because the gay/lesbian communities are based on who one relates to, whereas the transgendered experience is different: it's about identity-relating to oneself. It's a more inward thing (qtd. in Bornstein 67).

To attempt to tether a practice that is as fluid and multifaceted as cross-dressing to a particular identity or sexuality is, in Harrison's view, restrictive and futile. At the level of the individual, cross-dressing seems to be more about interrogating expectations and signs: it subverts norms by conforming, often in an extreme sense, to the dictates of a gendered dress code. As we have seen, cross-dressing is wholly contingent on the logic of binarism – it could not exist without the poles of "normal" and 'other' to cross between. Cross-dressing can be queer and, indeed, queer can find itself in crossing: both exist in the space between norms, expectations, and binary oppositions. According to Jean-Ulrick Desert in his essay 'Queer Space' (1997):

"Queer" is [...] consciously active and aggressive towards its detractors. Queer culture would not be queer if there were no other culture from which to establish its difference... Queer culture exists because of the dominant normative culture. And in many instances the fluidity and blur between the cultures are the very richness and contradictions that should be embraced (19).

Intention, then, might be what distinguishes cross-dressing from the gay and lesbian use of drag. While clothing may have a role to play in signifying a queer identity, it is often

used as a way of parodying social norms and values. As Judith Butler contends in *Gender Trouble* (1990), drag and parody are not always what they seem:

Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities. But the relationship between the “imitation” and the “original” is, I think, more complicated than that critique generally allows (137).

As I have already indicated, individual cases of cross-dressing differ substantially from parodic cross-dressing, as well as from drag: at its most successful, after all, cross-dressing obscures its own status as an act of imitation, and becomes, rather, an act of assimilation. The appropriation of dress codes within the context of butch/femme lesbian identity is distinct again, as it is enacted within a female/female context and is not motivated by the desire to imitate a male, heterosexual identity. As butch/femme is about the proclamation and enactment of a lesbian sexuality – and not about the imitation of a heterosexual identity – its objectives are not involved with the idea of ‘passing’. Rather, butch/femme is a form of gender-fucking that places a heavy emphasis on the fucking. ‘Lesbian play with “butch”/“femme”, “active”/“passive”, “s/m” imagery’, Lynne Segal argues, might ‘portray lesbian desire and experience through old heterosexual codes’, but it also imbues these codes with ‘new meaning’ (219).

It would seem, then, that the distinction between drag, queer and parodic forms of cross-dressing, and instances of cross-dressing in which the aim is to ‘pass’ as the gender that one performs, is a crucial one. This distinction describes the space between the statements ‘you are what you wear’ and ‘you are what you were’ – the distance, that is, between biological sex and the gender identity that one presents. To cross, if the intention is passing and not parody, is to offer the following equation: ‘If I am “x” but I present as “y”, and you see “y” and don’t allow for “x”, then which is the truth and what do we do with it?’

The relationship between gender and ‘truth’ lies at the heart of Kay’s *Trumpet*. The novel tells the story of Joss Moody, an acclaimed jazz musician, diligent husband, and adoptive father who has ‘passed’ successfully as a man for the majority of ‘his’³ life. With his death, however, and the ensuing intervention of medical, and bureaucratic agencies, the “truth” of the situation is revealed: what he *is* is very different from what he wore.

While Joss is a fictional character, his story is based loosely on the life of Billy Tipton, ‘a jazz musician who lived as a man from the time she was nineteen until “he” died at age seventy-four and was discovered to be female’. As Diane Wood Middlebrook explains in *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (1998), Tipton’s ‘death in the provincial western city of Spokane, Washington, made news all over the world, not because Billy was a well-known musician, but because the scale of the deception and the scarcity of explanations endowed the skimpy available facts with the aura of myth’ (xiii).

³ I shall be using male pronoun to refer to Joss Moody as I believe it is the most appropriate and convenient method to encapsulate his identity, although I appreciate that it does not necessarily encapsulate the complexity of his identity.

It is perhaps worth noting here that the language Middlebrook uses in this preface is, for the most part, the language of judgement. She refers, in the first instance, to ‘the scale of the deception’—a phrase that is suggestive of a criminal fraud or scam. To define Tipton’s life as an exercise in ‘deception’ at such an early stage of the narrative seems likely to prejudice the reader’s approach to the events the biography describes. Furthermore, when followed by a reference to the ‘scarcity’ of available ‘explanations’, the reader is led to assume that such explanations are possible and/or welcome; that a transgression has occurred and requires judgement. This is not to say, however, that Middlebrook reads Tipton’s choice to cross-dress in negative terms: she does not. Rather, what Middlebrook’s statements serve to illuminate is how difficult it is to read the lives of successful cross-dressers in ways that are not reductive, and which do not posit deception or homosexuality as a primary causative. Middlebrook’s book is, we are told by the publisher on the back cover, classified as “Biography/Gay-Lesbian.” I am not entirely convinced that Billy Tipton would be happy with that classification. Would he have chosen to identify himself or his story as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’? Would he have chosen those terms, that vocabulary, to describe who he was?

In *Trumpet* Kay transplants Tipton’s story to Britain, and recasts its protagonist as Joss Moody, a black Scottish trumpet player. By producing a fictionalised account of a life cross-dressed, Kay does not have to adhere to any particular version of the truth. Rather, she is free to create a narrative in which the issues that are raised by cross-dressing can be productively re-examined. In order to reflect the transient and fluid nature of cross-dressing, Kay makes use of a variety of literary strategies. Most strikingly, perhaps, she develops a multiple, intertwining narrative structure through which various narrators, at various degrees of removal from Joss, present various accounts of themselves and, of course, of Joss. This pluralisation of perspective allows the reader, the ultimate outsider, to establish a strong, multifaceted impression of the central character—an impression which is simultaneously intimate and removed. We can know only what we are told by the various narrators, and must fill in the ensuing gaps with our own beliefs and assumptions.

For the most part, *Trumpet* is a novel in which the reader is encouraged to read against the grain of mainstream social judgements, and singular or authoritative accounts of ‘truth’. In the absence of Joss, the reader is left with three basic strands of narration: that of his widow Millie; that of his adopted son, Colman; and that of Sophie Stones, a tabloid journalist who wants to ghost-write a book about Joss. As well as these principal characters, various secondary figures, including the doctor who examined Joss’s body, and the registrar who ‘married’ Joss and Millie, are given the opportunity to explain their involvement with the absent protagonist. If, however, we are seeking to interpret Joss’s cross-dressing as the signal of an ‘emerging gay [or] lesbian identity’, then it is to Millie’s narrative that we must turn our attentions. Millie is the only character in the novel who knew Joss as a cross-dresser throughout his life. Although her voice cannot substitute for his, she provides a valuable insight into Joss’s existence as a cross-dresser and into her own relationship with him—a relationship that was, apparently, founded on truth, support, and personal autonomy. While the other narrators are able to offer alternative interpretations of Joss’s cross-dressing, they can only do so after the fact of his death.

Broadly speaking, *Trumpet* traces a series of events that are sparked by Joss's death and the subsequent revelation of his biological identity. The first narrator that the reader encounters is Millie, who, as Joss's widow, is hiding from the press and worrying that her son will never speak to her again. Her words are sharp with shock and fear and grief. What has she done to warrant such public approbation? The first hint comes in the opening pages of the novel, when Millie is discussing her son's refusal to converse with the press: 'He told me he was too ashamed to go out. I never imagined that people could make such a fuss. I now know why they call reporters hounds. I feel hounded, hunted. Pity the fox' (5). While the reader has been told that Joss and Millie were a 'normal' husband and wife, father and mother to Colman, it is clear that this veil of normality has masked a secret scandal. Millie has already, however, foreclosed certain lines of enquiry: 'I haven't killed anyone. I haven't done anything wrong' (1). If Millie has not 'done anything wrong', then the reader can only assume that it is Joss who is guilty of some profound transgression. This gives rise to a host of questions: What crime did he commit? Why? When are we going to find out what happened? The big surprise (which is not a surprise at all if you have read the reviews on the back cover) is revealed sixteen pages later, as Millie reminisces about the early days of her relationship with Joss. She is young, in love, and worried: Why won't the man she is courting take her to bed? What is wrong with her, or him, or them? It is not long before she demands to know the truth: "An explanation, you owe me an explanation. What's the matter with you? Are you sick? Have you killed somebody?" (20). The revelation of the 'truth', as far as such a thing exists, is cast into the terms of an intimate sexual encounter; this, in fact, is the only context in which a full recognition of the space between 'what you wear' and 'what you were' can take place.

He is undoing the buttons of his shirt . . . I'm excited watching this man undress for me . . . Underneath his vest are lots of bandages wrapped around his chest . . . 'Did you have an accident? I don't care about superficial things like that.' I go towards him to embrace him. 'I'm not finished,' he says. He keeps unwrapping endless bandages. I am still holding out my hands when the first of his breasts reveals itself to me. Small, firm (21).

On that revelation the flashback ends. We are not told what the emergence of this breast will mean to the relationship, and nor do we get to meet the second one. Rather, the narrative returns to the present. In the next remembered incident, Joss and Millie are getting married. This is not a blessing ceremony or a lesbian marriage, and nor is it a parody or an imitation: it is the marriage of Millie and Joss, the bride and groom. The reader is not privy to the conversations that have taken place in order to make this marriage possible, but it is clearly the result of a series of choices that have been taken by Joss and Millie. At some point, they have made the decision to accept a particular version of reality, to acknowledge the territory of crossing and all that goes with it: 'For a split second, I feel jealous, imagining what it would be like if Joss were ever unfaithful to me. Then I remember and feel safe. We have our love and we have our secret' (29). Throughout the novel, Millie does not stray from this unquestioningly normative reading of her relationship with Joss. This is not to say that the 'secret' is never acknowledged—at

times the practicalities of life make it impossible to ignore— but simply that Millie does not recognise her relationship with Joss as being subversive or deviant.

When the couple decide they want a child, the ‘truth’ of Joss’s biological identity is acknowledged, but only tacitly. Interestingly, both partners choose to attribute Joss’s inability to impregnate Millie to an absence of sperm, rather than to the presence of a womb:

“We’d say you’ve had a hysterectomy”, Joss says.

“No, we’ll say your sperm count is too low!” The look on his face is a picture (40).

There is no suggestion in Millie’s narrative that her relationship with Joss was anything other than heterosexual. The accessories of cross-dressing, and the act itself, is not eroticised in any way; references to the actual ‘putting on’ of Joss Moody are scarce and purely functional:

He put on his boxer shorts and I turned away whilst he stuffed them with a pair of socks . . . He was always more comfortable once he was dressed. [...] His breasts weren’t very big. They flattened easily. Nobody except me ever knew he had them. I never touched them except when was wrapping the bandages round and around them. That was the closest I came to them, wrapping them up (238-239).

This is not parody. Joss and Millie’s sexual relationship is not based on ‘gender fucking’ or lesbianism: they are husband and wife, and what could be straighter than that? The relationship is only thrown open to homosexual interpretations after Joss’s death, when the people who knew Joss and Millie – particularly Colman and Sophie Stones—are left to make sense of Joss’s motives. For Stones, the journalist, homosexuality is a marketable commodity in the publishing world: she knows that sex sells: ‘Lesbians who adopted a son; one playing mummy, one playing daddy. The big butch frauds’ (170). For the relationship between Joss and Millie to be a lesbian relationship, however, would it not be necessary for at least one partner to acknowledge it as such? There is no evidence of any such acknowledgement in Millie’s account of the relationship, and she should know best. The need to define, or impose a meaning upon, private sexual relationships is a staple feature of Western cultures. While the temptation to label cross-dressing or transgendered relationships as gay or lesbian is understandable, it is also short-sighted and restrictive. In *Transgender Warriors* (1996), Leslie Feinberg uses his own life to illustrate the extent to which labels fail to inscribe the nuances and complexities of certain types of relationships:

Some people refer to my love relationship as lesbian, because they consider the fact that my wife and I are female to be a biological determinant of our sexuality. Others, who label me as “looking like a man”, assume we live in a safe heterosexual space. Neither exactly corresponds to my life. [...] So are my love and I lesbian women, mother and son, lesbian woman and gay male friend, or some other combination? Our

relationship is Teflon to which no classification of sexuality sticks (92).

In *Trumpet*, the fact that Millie and Joss are neither homosexual nor heterosexual (in any conventional sense) does not mean that they are not sexual beings. On the contrary, Millie's accounts of her sex life with Joss recur throughout the text, and she is often surprisingly graphic in the detail she provides. While stopping short of explaining who did what to whom, the sex seems to conform to the stereotypical heterosexual model of possession and penetration, of one person being 'taken' by the other:

I know he wants me . . . I feel myself being taken away . . . I feel myself
being taken away . . . I feel myself being turned around. He straddles me.
Pushes himself into me (197).

This might sound like a straightforward heterosexual encounter but how can we be sure? It is possible to read the episode as 'lesbian', on the grounds that it is a description of two women having sex, but why should we? Joss does not revert to being Josephine Miller just because he has taken his trousers off. Similarly, his cross-dressing should not be read as designating a lesbian identity just because the genitals are consistent with such a description. Gender, sex, sexuality, and identity are tricky things to pin down, and what one person is doing to another at a particular time in a particular bed would seem to be an inexact and disorderly way of discerning *who they are*. Rather, in order to interrogate the complexities of identity we need to recognise the flexibility of this concept, as well as the potentially discontinuous relationship between what one is, what one was, what one wears, and what one does.

At its most basic level, cross-dressing is an act of personal choice, of dynamic self-determination. The self that is being defined, and the perception of that definition, can be a thousand different things at any one time and to any number of people. While the cross-dresser may have links to gay and lesbian communities, transsexual and transgender communities, and heterosexual society, these links should not be used to impose a fixed, singular meaning upon the act of cross-dressing. As Bornstein states, 'There are as many truthful experiences of gender as there are people who think they have a gender' (8). All of this would not matter if cross-dressers and transgendered individuals did not live in a society that demands absolutes, which constantly asks 'Are you a man or a woman? Are you gay or straight? Are you right or wrong?' For the most part, transgressing gender boundaries gives rise to marginalisation and disenfranchisement: if one's identity is not easily reconcilable to a neat label or a tidy compartment, then one's ability to participate in certain parts of social life is severely compromised. Those who fall foul of the gender "rules" tend to end up like the Billy Tiptons, the Brandon Teenas⁴ and the Joss Moodys of this world; vulnerable outsiders who run the risk of ridicule, neglect and death, their position too tenuous to be tenable.

⁴ 'Brandon Teena, a young white man, moved to a small town in Nebraska in 1993. After a minor brush with the law, the police reportedly exposed the fact that Brandon had been born a female. A short time later, Brandon was forcibly stripped at a Christmas party in front of a woman he had dated, then he was kidnapped, beaten, and gang-raped. [...] On New Year's Day, Brandon and two other people were found shot to death; Brandon's body was repeatedly stabbed' (Feinberg 1996: 132). His story was later turned into the 1999 Oscar-winning film 'Boys Don't Cry', starring Hilary Swank.

As Feinberg so starkly illustrates, the implications of transgression can be life threatening, cruel and dreadful:

As my temperature spiked dangerously high, I bundled up and travelled through sleet and snowstorms to clinics and hospital emergency rooms. I experienced raw hatred from some health care professionals who refused to care for me solely because I am a masculine female. I heard doctors and nurses refer to me as a “Martian” or as “It” . . . While delirious with fever I learned once again that my human right to be treated with dignity and respect and caring had to be fought for (168).

It would seem clear, then, that while it is possible to situate cross-dressing within the fluid world of queer theory, the material experience of cross-dressing is, more often than not, read in accordance with the logic of gender, and sexual, binarism. Indeed, it is the widespread social adherence to these binaries that enables cross-dressing to exist in the first place, and, moreover, available for critical analysis. Is there a sense, then, in which it might be more appropriate to foreground the individual dimensions of cross-dressing as a way of accounting for the potential multiplicity of its meanings? We are all what we wear, what we where and sometimes, what we would like to be, and that is not a bad way to be.

Bibliography

- Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Desert, Jean-Ulrick ‘Queer Space’. *Queers In Space*. Ed. Gordon Brent et al. Seattle: Bay Press, 1997. 17-26.
- Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Warriors*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests. Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Kay, Jackie. *Trumpet*. London: Picador, 1998.
- Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Suits Me. The Double Life of Billy Tipton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- Segal, Lynne. ‘Sexualities’. *Identity and Difference*. Ed. Kathryn Woodward. London: Sage, 1997: 183-238.
- Whittle, Stephen. ‘Gender Fucking Or Fucking Gender?’ *Blending Genders*. Eds. Richard Ekins and Dave King. London: Routledge, 1996: 196-214.