

# Borderlands

Performative Acts Across Language,  
Culture and Media

Eva Ulrike Pirker, Kathrin Hettrich & Leslie Fried (eds.)

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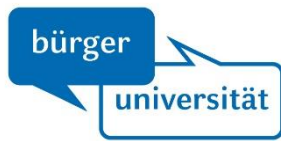
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*Leonie Slak*

## **Trumpeting Change: Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1999) and Transgender Media Representation**

I began to work on this podcast in the context of the seminar *Borderlands* at the Department of English and American studies at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf. In this episode, I am going to reflect on my reading of Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* and talk about its commentary on Transgender representation in the news media.

I will begin with a short summary of the novel and explore its real-life inspiration. For a bit of context, I will then delve into the history of Transgender rights in the UK and the US before I end with a discussion on current Trans-representation.

### **Precarious crossings: Trans Identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* deals with the passing of British Jazz musician Joss Moody and the aftermath of the posthumous revelation of his Transgender identity to the public.

When Joss dies on the height of his career as a successful jazz trumpeter, it is revealed that Joss's body is biologically that of a woman. Because of his prominence as a musician, news of his alleged double life spreads quickly, leaving his widow Millie to face the press knocking down her door. Whereas she struggles to find the space and time to appropriately mourn her husband, the world out there, spurred on by sensationalist news reports, effectively denies him that very title, »husband,« by ascribing gender norms to him that do not correspond to his identity. While Millie keeps their loving relationship in close memory and gathers strength from doing so, their son Colman, overwhelmed by the news, calls into question everything he thought to be true about the person he called father and suffers deep resentment. Already weighed down by his own identity crisis as an adopted child, he seeks an outlet for his feelings. He turns to the press and finds someone ready to exploit and twist his father's story to make a profit. Hurt and exposed, he tries to force answers from his mother. Here is a passage in which Millie ponders over a letter she has received from her son:

The letter says, with hindsight, would you have done anything different? You don't live in hindsight though, do you? Hindsight is a different light. It makes everything change shape. When Colman goes through our house, pointing hindsight's big torch everywhere, he will find things in our garden that we never planted.<sup>1</sup>

The readers learn about Joss Moody's life as a husband, father, friend, musician, and Person of Colour retrospectively, through the memories, the telling of others who knew him. In spite of, or in contrast to, the supposed scandal, these more intimate

accounts show that Moody's Transgender identity is of little relevance to most, eclipsed by their sadness at his death.

Contrasting Millie's desire for privacy with Colman's call for public disclosure, the novel questions if the omission of truth is a lie, and who is entitled to an omitted truth. Family? Friends? The public? It asks if truth isn't wholly subjective anyways, especially when it comes to the conundrum of identity. As Jackie Kay herself said it in an appearance with the BBC World Book Club in 2018, two decades after the novel first appeared:

The novel really is an exploration of the public and the private self, and how much of a story the public deserve, and how much of an intrusion telling the truth is. And how much right we have to keep secrets, whether we have the right to keep secrets or not.<sup>2</sup>

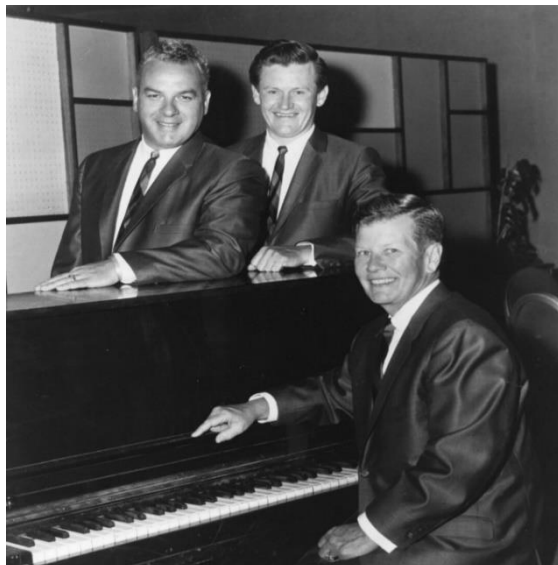
There are lots of interpersonal conflicts to unpack in the novel, but as mentioned, I was most interested in Jackie Kay's depiction of the news media, and how it perpetuates these conflicts. To shed light on the novel's inspiration, I need to take a brief step into the life of one Billy Lee Tipton, born Dorothy Lucille.

As I was surprised to find out, Kay's novel is inspired by true events. American Jazz Musician Billy Tipton was outed as Trans upon his death, just like our protagonist Joss Moody. »Jazz musician spent life concealing fantastic secret,«<sup>3</sup> announced the article revealing Tipton's story in the *Spokesman Review* of 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1989. This headline was written one week after his death, one day after his funeral.

»Some people who knew Tipton think his story should be buried with him,«<sup>4</sup> the article continues, but considering how events unfolded after his death, it seems that this wish may have been superseded by the desire for revenue.

Billy Tipton emerged on the jazz scene in the early 1930s, presenting male, and had completely abandoned his birth name by 1940, when his career took off. He built a life around being a musician, married five times, and adopted three sons, allegedly never disclosing the fact that he was Transgender to anyone. When he died, his family was split on whether to honour the choice he had made in life or seek closure through going public.

Inevitably, other newspapers, among them the *LA Times*, picked up the story on February 1<sup>st</sup>—11



Billy Tipton and his Band Members, *No Ordinary Man* (Film Still), Documentary by Aisling Chin-Yee & Chase Joynt © Oscilloscope Laboratories



days after Tipton's death. And while the original article, speaking to a readership that was familiar with the deceased, spoke well of the esteemed community member, used the correct pronouns and retained a somewhat neutral stance on the controversial topic, others did not. The question ›How did he do it?‹ soon became ›Why did SHE do it?‹<sup>5</sup>, dispossessing Billy of his identity.

*The Spokesman Review* itself was subject to efforts of censure by its readers, as letters published in the issue of February 6<sup>th</sup> show:

Such a story serves neither the public interest nor the high journalistic standards that we expect [...]. Billy Tipton was a kind person and a friend to many, and laying bare in the public prints the secret he carried to his grave can only serve sensationalism, tarnish his memory and add to the grief of his family.<sup>6</sup>

Have you people never heard of ›social responsibility?‹ [...] Even by your own admission, Billy was a good person and never hurt anyone; he was eager to help anyone, was hard-working and obviously was courageous. That was all that needed to be said.<sup>7</sup>

The writers of these letters voice the opinion that a person's right to privacy outweighs the curiosity of the masses. That decency demands the secrets of a dead person to be kept, whether it be for the sake of the family or the sake of a reader whose sensibilities might be hurt by scandalous content. The following issue is highlighted: A newspaper is expected to report on issues of public relevance, but the assessment of said relevance is up to the newspaper. How does one determine the boundaries of propriety? The boundaries of private and public matters, interests, sensibilities?

Interestingly, and perplexingly, the same newspaper issue revealing Tipton's so-called deception contained an article on hate speech, announcing that efforts to legally protect queer people against verbal violence had failed.<sup>8</sup> If attacks directed at people whose identities deviate from a purported norm are not sanctioned when they occur on an interpersonal level, what does it mean when they occur in the media and are magnified in the public arena? The media is of course bound by the legal framework, at least in theory, but any transgression has a graver impact due to its publicity, as evidenced by the aftermath of Billy Tipton's passing. Looking at the history of Transgender rights, that legal framework has changed since Billy's death and *Trumpet's* publication in the UK.

## **Trans Rights in the US and the UK**

Billy Tipton and Joss Moody both lived in times during which Transgender people were little understood and struggle for acceptance. The law offered little to no protection to people whose gender identities conflicted with a heteronormative society.



Transgender Health Care Rally by the White House, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2018  
© Victoria Pickering

Trans Rights in the US are historically inconsistent, as laws on gender changing and anti-discrimination are passed on a state level and may be subject to change whenever a new government is in place. For instance, while the state of California only requires a court order to correct the gender on birth certificates and has no restrictions on amending passports and driver's licenses, Tennessee has actually outlawed the change of birth certificates.<sup>9</sup> Only as of June 2020 was protection against discrimination based on gender identity in the realm of employment, an area that markedly affects a person's livelihood, universally assured by the US Supreme Court.<sup>10</sup> While gender diversity is more visible than ever, open repudiation is just as prevalent, often based on a perceived violation of morals and tradition.<sup>11</sup>

In the UK, it was possible for Transgender people to have their legal documents changed to reflect their gender identity up until 1970 due to the fact that no law existed to expressly prohibit this. Following a legal battle regarding the legitimacy of marriage between a cis man and a Trans woman, the case *Corbett vs. Corbett*, this practice was completely abandoned. The judgement that a physical gender transition did not legitimize a legal change of gender effectively eradicated the possibility for Transgender people to amend their documents. It took 34 years for gender recognition to be reinstated in the UK after the intervention of the European Court of Human Rights in 2002 that was called upon by affected citizens, culminating (and culminated) in the Gender Recognition Act of 2004.<sup>12</sup> However, the process now requires the applicant to be officially diagnosed with gender dysphoria by two different medical experts and to have lived as their true gender for two years.<sup>13</sup> While the erstwhile three-figure fee was reduced in 2020 to facilitate application, efforts to establish self-identification have been shut down at the same time.<sup>14</sup>

Going forward, anti-discrimination laws have been gradually expanded to include Transgender people under the Equality Act of 2010. There is a distinct move towards a reflection on the complexity of gendered identities.<sup>15</sup> That this move has provoked hostile reactions on smaller or larger scales should not go unmentioned.

## Questions of Representation

If the legal framework to some degree determines media reporting, then the media, just as individual actors in personal interactions, can and should be held accountable for violations of these rights. The transformation of the media, the rise of the internet, social mediascapes and the resulting rapid spread of information and influential



opinions have changed conversations about Transgender identities dramatically. These new forms of media carry a great educational potential when it comes to notions of gender diversity. Increasing non-stereotypical depiction of gender-divergence in popular culture, like Laverne Cox's Sophia Burset in *Orange is the New Black*, and affirming coverage of famous people transitioning such as Elliot Page are working towards what can be described as the de-othering of gender identities that work against still prevalent heteronormative patterns. Stories like Billy Tipton's, as warranted by the 2020 documentation *No Ordinary Man*, or Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* are still relevant today, as they make positive changes visible, such as increasing legal protections as well as call attention to still prevalent issues like gender identity and sexuality marking people for public scrutiny.

In this podcast, I offered a cursory glance at the novel *Trumpet*, pointing at its depiction of a predatory news media as a societal problem. The story and the history of Billy Tipton seem to have struck a chord with the author who recognised gender identity to be a polarizing topic in the public realm. Jackie Kay portrayed how that realm proves inhospitable to certain individuals as a result and years later holds fast to her message:

I think *Trumpet* still feels fresh because that is something that we're still really, really fascinated by as an issue in our society: of what makes somebody male, what makes somebody female, what makes somebody feel comfortable inside their own skin, and what makes somebody feel completely uncomfortable. And what kind of life is possible for us, you know. Are we able to be our possible selves in the world that we live in?<sup>16</sup>

Kay's novel skilfully explores the perspectives of individuals confronted with gender nonconformity. It contrasts the right to privacy regarding one's own body with the assumptions people make from observing other bodies, pointing out a dichotomy between the need and the desire to know a person's gender identity. By retracing Transgender experiences in a changing legal and medial situation, I have tried to shed light on Jackie Kay's efforts at calling out biases and emphasized the impact medial representation has on public perception of gendered identities that challenge societal norms. I hope to have created interest not only in Transgender history and representation, but also in Jackie Kay's novel. Although it was published more than two decades ago, it has not lost its relevance, but has become a kind of classic in its own right.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (London: Picador, 1999), 95.

<sup>2</sup> Jackie Kay, Interview with Harriett Gilbert, »World Book Club Jackie Kay: Trumpet,« *BBC Sound*, February 3, 2018, streaming audio, 15:11-15:30. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csvg3>. Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>3</sup> D. Clark, »Jazz Musician Spent Life Concealing Fantastic Secret,« *The Spokesman Review*, January 31, 1989, B1-B2.

<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=0klj8wIChNAC&dat=19890131&printsec=frontpage&hl=en>. Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, B2.

<sup>5</sup> Associated Press, »Death Reveals Musician Who Lived as Man to Be Woman,« *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1989. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-02-02-mn-2585-story.html>. Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>6</sup> John Luppert, »Op-Ed Letters,« *The Spokesman Review*, February 6, 1989, A5. <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=0klj8wIChNAC&dat=19890206&printsec=frontpage&hl=de>. Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Goodwin, »Op-Ed Letters,« *The Spokesman Review*, February 6, 1989, A5. <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=0klj8wIChNAC&dat=19890206&printsec=frontpage&hl=de>. Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>8</sup> Associated Press, »Gays Cut from Harassment Bill,« *The Spokesman Review*, January 31, 1989, A8. <https://www.news.google.com/newspapers?nid=0klj8wIChNAC&dat=19890131&printsec=frontpage&hl=en>: A8. Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>9</sup> National Center for Transgender Equality, »ID Documents Center,« Transequality, April 8, 2020. <https://www.transequality.org/documents>. Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, »Protections Against Employment Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity,« EEOC, June 15, 2021. <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/protections-against-employment-discrimination-based-sexual-orientation-or-gender>. Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>11</sup> Winston Luhur, Taylor N.T. Brown & Andrew R. Flores, »Public Opinion of Transgender Rights in the United States: 2017 Ipsos International Survey Series,« UCLA School of Law Williams Institute, August 3, 2021. <https://www.williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/public-opinion-trans-rights-us>. Access 15/09/2021.

<sup>12</sup> Sophie Nevrkla, »The History of Transgender Rights in the UK,« AllAboutLaw, November 12, 2018.

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<sup>13</sup> *Gender Recognition Act*, 2004. c. 7 (UK): sections 2-3, last modified January 30, 2020. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/section/2>;

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/section/3>. Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>14</sup> Hazel Shearing, »Gender Recognition Certificate Cost Cut to £5,« *BBC News*, May 4, 2021. [www.bbc.com/news/uk-56972195](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-56972195). Access 15/12/2021.

<sup>15</sup> See Sophie Nevrkla, »History of Transgender Rights.«

<sup>16</sup> Jackie Kay, Interview with Harriet Gilbert, »Trumpet,« 43.00-43.30.

**Leonie Slak** is currently studying in the MA programme Literary Translation. Prior to this she obtained her bachelor's degree in German Language and Literature and Anglophone Studies at Philipps-University Marburg. She has always been interested in working with older texts, *Trumpet* being comparatively young, and examining how, despite changes of language, culture and accessibility, they often retain relevance and can add to contemporary discussions about social and political issues.

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