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Reading the Potential of Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* for Transgender Ethics



Jackie Kay. Photo © Caroline Forbes.

BILLY TIPTON (1914–1989) lived his adult life as a man.¹ After his death it was revealed that he was female at birth. According to the distributed media narratives, he had concealed "the truth" even from his wife and children. Tipton's death evoked a media sensation and strong emotional responses, in particular disapproval, which were based on the contention

that Tipton had lied about his identity. Thus, it was commonly alleged that his whole life was based on a lie. The strong condemnation of Tipton follows the stereotype of transgender people as "deceivers," which stems from the appearance-reality contrast between gender presentation and the sexed body (cf. Bettcher 2007, 48). Transgender life stories disturb the predominant epistemological understanding of a human as a gendered and sexual being. At the same time, they bring significant new dimensions to our knowledge of gender and embodiment.

Judith Halberstam takes Tipton's case as an example of how the memory of transgender subjects is circulated by biographers. She sees biographies of transgender subjects as largely motivated by the need to maintain gender conformity. As such, they silence the ambiguous lives of complex individuals (Halberstam 2005, 48). Halberstam takes Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* (1998), which is based on Tipton's life, as an example of a counter-narrative to typical narratives produced of transgender lives. She compares Kay's novel to Diane Middlebrook's biography *Suits Me: The Double Life of Tipton* (1998) that suited the needs of the mainstream public audience by oversimplifying Tipton's story (Halberstam 2005, 57–8).

In her conclusion, Halberstam (2005, 74) interprets Kay's narrative as suggesting that "while the biographer remembers through fact" it is "the poetic memory that best approaches the legacy of a life that has become symbolic through death." Thus, she calls for a poetic rather than a moral framework of remembrance. Although Halberstam's point is not to suggest that poetic remembrance is only possible in fiction, her conclusion inadvertently gives the impression that fiction is an ethically more valuable and sustainable genre. Nevertheless, what Halberstam means by poetic memory is somewhat unclear. In this article, I will draw attention to the relationship between narrating and ethics. I will focus on Kay's narrative based on Tipton's life and place it in the larger context of life writing.² Moreover, I will explore a narrative's potential as a channel for thinking about transgender ethics. My starting point is that narratives, rooted in experiences, have a fundamental role for human self-comprehension.³ They are central both to our ways of making

sense of ourselves in relation to others, and to our ways of encountering the world. Narratives are able to display a plurality of perspectives; they show us various ways of responding to and being in the world. As such, they offer ways of looking at things from alternative perspectives. This is ethically significant. As the news and discussions about Tipton's case demonstrate, in the case of transgender life stories and narratives based on them, the moral and ethical concerns are inevitable. I am interested, in particular, in the ethical potential of transgender narratives to move us to reconsider the complexities of gendered life.

My thinking about transgender ethics is inspired by feminist new materialist thinking, in particular by Elizabeth Grosz's (2008) theorizing about the creative capacity of art to transform materials from the past into resources for the future. Her theoretical approach continues from her previous work on the movement of time, and how rethinking time might generate new understandings (Grosz 2004; 2005). In her outlines for a philosophy of art, that draws particularly from writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Grosz does not address questions of ethics, but is interested in common forces and powers of art, which she understands as encompassing all forms of creativity that generate intensity and affects. As Grosz puts it, art establishes peculiar relations "between the living body, the forces of the universe and the creation of the future" (Grosz 2008, 3). My aim is to produce an analysis that draws attention to points of the untimely or the unexpected in narratives that contain a sense of openness to something that moves beyond our current comprehension of gender, to what may yet be possible. Explicating the ruptures one encounters in the narrative, I believe, gives clues to the complex relations between discursive and material, between our ways of meaning-making and experiencing the world. At the same time, these ruptures entail an ethical dimension that contributes to the founding of new epistemologies.

Entanglements in Past Lives

As Judith Halberstam (2005, 48) argues, Diane Wood Middlebrook's biography, *Suits Me*, narrates Tipton's act of passing as deception. In the first chapter, Middlebrook (1998, 9) describes her work as "undoing

Billy's disguise." She sees Tipton's dishonesty as exceptionally severe, because as a musician, he was a *public figure*, and a *respected individual* in his community. Middlebrook repeatedly expresses her frustration about the impossibility of untangling the reasons behind Tipton's act of "male impersonation." Tipton did not leave a personal journal behind, which might have revealed information about his inner life. Instead, Middlebrook (1998, xiv) uses the archive of photographs to function as "the most eloquent testimony to the way life felt and looked."⁴

Middlebrook stresses Tipton's deceitfulness in the parts of her book that depict his relationships with women. Tipton had several longer relationships in his life including four "*sui juris* marriages." That is, Tipton and his wives presented themselves as married couples, but the marriages were not legally recognized as marriage by license or official ceremony. According to Middlebrook (1998, 177), after Tipton had begun passing as a man, he made a "shrewd choice" in choosing his partners. The biography portrays Billy as a morally problematic character, firstly, because he chose to live as a man in heterosexual relationships (instead of as a woman in lesbian relationships), and secondly, because he assumed the privileges reserved for men, whilst settling down comfortably within the normative, white, middle-class community.

Middlebrook's book fits Halberstam's (2005, 55) description of a narrative that rationalizes and oversimplifies the life of a gender-passing subject. Halberstam (2005, 57) finds problematic that Middlebrook does not explicitly reflect her own aims and investments in the subject matter, but remains in the background. When she momentarily reveals herself to the reader, she tries to identify herself with Tipton's wife. This would not be problematic, perhaps, if she analysed her reasons for doing so, or rather, tried to challenge the need to see Billy as a morally problematic character. Halberstam (2005, 61) asks if identification with the subject should be a prerequisite for writing about transgender life. Instead of answering the question directly, she calls for the willingness to remember the subjects not as heroes or demons, but rather as complex personhoods, whose lives may not be neatly resolved (Halberstam 2005, 73–4).

In contrast, Kay's biography of the blues singer Bessie Smith (1997)

offers an example of an alternative approach to its subject. Kay's *Bessie Smith* was published in a series chronicling the lives of gay and lesbian writers and creative artists. The biography is best characterized as representing a hybrid genre. As Peter Clandfield notes (2002, 15), Kay's moves beyond categories and conventions of genres and fuses together autobiographical elements, fiction and poetry. Kay is a versatile writer, who customarily combines and reworks fictive, non-fictive, and autobiographical elements, and genre conventions. The transgression of genre conventions and skilled narrative strategies serves here to gain a critical insight into social hierarchies and injustices.

Using her own life as an example, Kay elaborates in the preface of *Bessie Smith* how she understands her own identity and position in relation to other individuals and their life stories. Kay was born to a white, Scottish mother and a black, Nigerian father. She was adopted by a Scottish white couple in Glasgow, and grew up in a suburban neighbourhood north of Glasgow (Kay 2010, 3). She and her brother – who had been adopted few years earlier by the same family – were the only black persons in the neighbourhood. In the preface, Kay describes listening to Bessie's songs as an intense experience: "You listen so hard she practically inhabits you; her very soul seems to find a way inside you." (Kay 1997, 14) As a young girl, Kay assumed Smith was singing about her own life: "The blues sounded like autobiography, like ordinary people telling the story of their lives." (Kay 1997, 12) For Kay (1997, 13), blues songs seemed to be inseparably linked to colour and the experience of being different from others. Smith became, together with other famous black people, part of an imaginary black family Kay concocted for herself (Kay 1997, 15). In other words, Kay constituted her sense of unity of self and continuity with the help of Smith's life story (cf. Cavarero 2000, 40–1).

The preface to *Bessie Smith* seeks to explain the feeling of parity between the author and the subject of the book. It recognizes life writing as an intimate act that entails a close identification between the author and the subject. The process of producing the narrative is made visible by pointing out how the relation between the author and the subject is

socially, culturally and historically mediated. The preface, and the entire book, can be defined as a "reflexive and recursive life story," according to Ken Plummer's (2001, 34, 41–2) classification. These kinds of life stories bring with them a greater awareness of life stories as constructions. Kay's preface displays a two-way-movement in which she makes explicit her role in the interpretation of the life story and her awareness of how stories move us, and may change our beliefs.

What I find most significant, however, is the way in which Kay leaves space for multiple meanings and interpretations. Firstly, Kay's book does not offer simple and causal reasons for the tragic elements in Smith's life. Secondly, Kay does not use Smith's suffering as a necessary fuel for the narration or depict the blues singer merely as a victim. Thirdly, Kay emphasizes the existence of many stories about Smith's life, and maintains that it is not essential to know which of them are true, because "all stories are true" (Kay 1997, 110).

Evocative Polyphony of *Trumpet*

Trumpet is set in Scotland at the end of the 1990s. The narration of the novel is polyphonic, consisting of a diversity of voices and point of views, which recall the past life of Joss Moody, a jazz trumpeter, who died in 1997. According to Kay, Tipton's story worked as the initial inspiration, but she was less interested in writing a fiction about a real person (Bold Type 1999). Moody's father was a black man from an unspecified African country, and his mother a white, Scottish woman, reminiscent of Kay's own life. As in Kay's works in general, the use of autobiographical elements draws attention to social hierarchies and biases. In *Trumpet*, Moody's mixed-race background seems less significant compared to the question about his gender. As Victoria Arana (2009, 250) notes, his skin colour has been a perfect element of his image as a jazz musician. Yet at the end of the novel, Moody's background and the question of race is highlighted in a letter Moody has left to his son. In the letter, Moody tells the story of his father, John Moore, a black man in diaspora, who came to Scotland as a migrant child from a British colony at the beginning of the 20th century. Moore's life story draws attention to the

resilience and potential of a marginalized individual. Although John Moore's life was not exceptional, it offered a positive future for Joss, who had a good life and became a famous trumpet player.

As in Kay's other works, the question of race and ethnicity intersect with those of gender, sexuality, class and generation (D'Aguiar 1993, 66; Clandfield 2002, 2). Accordingly, the novel can be read as a critique of identity that disturbs the persistence of identity categories, not only that of gender and sexuality, but also of race and ethnicity, which are shown as unstable and intrinsically linked to other social categories.

The polyphony works in the narration in thought-provoking ways. To begin with, it questions the simple dichotomy of truth and fictiveness. Moreover, the polyphony works to challenge the reader to consider the ways in which the characters process the knowledge and emotions evoked after Moody's death. As the narration draws attention to how the characters are affected by the knowledge about Joss Moody's gender and reflects on their processes of meaning-making, it engages the reader in an ethical dimension that evaluates the characters' choices from different perspectives. For example, the funeral director, Albert Holding, who is rarely surprised, is stunned when a female body is revealed under the layers of Moody's clothes. As he glances at Moody's face again, it changes into a woman's face: "It had never happened to him before. He had never seen a man turn into a woman before his very eyes." (Kay 1998, 111) This makes him reconsider questions about gender. He starts to doubt whether anatomical and physiological differences define gender: "Yet today, he had a woman who persuaded him, even dead, that he was a man, once he had his clothes on." (Kay 1998, 115) By depicting Holding's readiness to learn from the encounters with people both living and dead, the narration creates an ethically motivated perspective in the story.

Three of the characters are given more prominence in the narration: Millie, Joss Moody's widow, Colman, their adopted son, and Sophie Stone, a journalist who decides to write a book about Moody. Millie Moody represents a perspective that does not try to explain her husband's life choices in any way. From Millie's perspective, telling someone's life story is impossible. Millie is the only one to whom Joss has

revealed that he is anatomically a woman. Millie cannot see Joss as anything else than her beloved husband, as the following quote illustrates:

I look at the picture on the album cover, but no matter how hard I try, I can't see him as anything other than him, my Joss, my husband. It has always been that way since the first day he told me. I remember feeling stupid, then angry. I remember the terrible shock of it all; how even after he told me I still couldn't quite believe it. [...] But I don't think I ever thought he was wrong. (Kay 1998, 35)

For Millie, the question about her husband's gender is meaningless, because it does not threaten her identity in any way. She does not have to question her identity as a woman or wife during their marriage, and she never has any doubts about their relationship. Joss's sex is a shared secret between the two. In the eyes of others, they are a man and a woman, a married heterosexual couple. The only disturbing aspect to others is that the relationship is interracial. Millie's mother, for example, does not approve of her daughter's marriage to Moody, because he is black.

Soon after they are married, Millie starts to dream of a child of her own. Joss agrees to adopt a child to make Millie happy. According to Millie, it was extremely important for Moody to pass as a man during his lifetime. This includes living according to the normative rules of gender, sexuality and family. He does not undermine or transgress the hetero-normative masculinity of his social and cultural context.

Millie's narration and perspective highlight her loneliness and sorrow after Joss's death. From her point of view, life with Joss has been ordinary. She cannot read newspaper articles, which distort the story of Joss's life. Her friends are no longer in touch with her, because they do not know how to talk to her: "They are embarrassed, confused, shocked. Perhaps angry. I don't know." (Kay 1998, 205–6) Faced with the confusion of surrounding community, Millie feels deeply misunderstood.

Journalist Sophie Stone's perspective demonstrates a stance that tries to stabilize Moody's life story by representing it as strange and pathological. Her way of signifying his story recalls a *project of stabilization*

as defined by Halberstam (2005, 54–5). In the process, features of the story that evoke anxiety are rendered harmless, by depicting them as pathological. This is typical for a discourse of scandal. In a scandal discourse the story of a public figure is constructed in ways that aim to evoke strong emotions, for example disapproval, and is connected to a particular moral discourse (Dahlgren, Kivistö and Paasonen 2011, 7–8). Stone is the only one in the novel's narration, who refers to Joss with the pronoun "her" and categorizes him as a "transvestite," even before she knows anything about Joss Moody's life. This is apparent in the following excerpt in which Stone considers titles for her forthcoming book:

Dreaming up book titles is good fun. [...]. *The True Story of a Trumpet Transvestite. Blow Her Trumpet. Daddy, You Blew it. Blow That Thing. Joss Moody's gamble.* A headline is only around for a day, but its title's permanent like a hair dye. I've got to get it right. They should have no problem selling this book. People are interested in weirdos, sex-changes, all that stuff. (Kay 1998, 125)

Stone's perspective draws attention to the role of life stories as commodities. She wants to make Moody's story as sellable as possible. In order to attain her goal, she chooses Colman as the narrator of the book. This creates a subjective and intimate tone and enhances the effect of authenticity.

Moody's male musician friends stress that all Joss wanted to do was to play the trumpet and make music. They rationalize his choice to live as a man as a professional choice. Their way of explaining Moody's life can be perceived as *normalizing* (Garber 1992, 69), or *rationalizing* (Halberstam 2005, 55). A typical means of normalizing is to interpret the cross-dressing/passing as an economic necessity. As Marjorie Garber (1992, 69) observes, the normalizing model often maintains a particular progress narrative, according to which an individual chooses to pass in order to work and find his place in the world.

According to Ryan Fong (2011, 243), by delving into the subjective experiences of various characters and by "emphasizing the intensely affective components of each," Kay's novel "generates a compelling sense

of empathy” for Joss and all the other characters. Kirsty Williams (2006, 158), in turn, suggests that the use of several, contrasting narrative voices refuses the reader a fixed position from which to judge Joss. I agree with both, but would like to draw more attention to *how* the novel generates a sense of empathy in the reader. Howard Sklar, who focuses on the significance of the experiential and emotional forms of imagination, compares the process in which readers create an image of a character in a fictive world, to our experience of real people in our daily lives. As Sklar explicates, we perceive fictional characters by filling in gaps and completing our knowledge in light of our own experiences in the real world. Furthermore, both fictional and non-fictional narratives draw on our experience of people in real life (Sklar 2008, 15–21).

These parallel ways of perceiving and understanding fictional characters and real people helps to explain the nature of the emotions the readers experience with regards to fictional characters. When fictional characters create a sense of empathy in us it means that we take on their experience, in particular the emotional experience, of the character in question (cf. Sklar 2009, 37). In *Trumpet*, each perspective enriches the story and can generate a sense of empathy in readers. The reader recognizes something familiar in each character’s way of understanding and making sense of Joss. The different perspectives and opinions create a net of intricate and contradictory subjective and emotional responses in the narrative. Moreover, the use of multiple perspectives demonstrates the partiality and limitedness of each perspective. On a general level, the novel can be seen as encompassing the multifarious processes of how we understand others and produce knowledge about them. In particular, the novel draws attention to the processes of sexing/gendering; how the processes of gendering permeate everyday life, and central beliefs and models of human development.

Unravelling the Normative Frames

Colman, Moody’s adopted son, finds out his father’s secret only after his death. He is furious and feels that his parents have let him down. Consequently, he cuts all ties with his mother, and agrees to be interviewed by

Sophie Stone. Moreover, he feels the need to go through his past life, and search for signs of how his father's female sex affected their life as a family. Colman has lived an unconventional life, because his father was a jazz musician. His most significant memories are related to racism and the colour of his skin, which was black like his father's, and not to moments when his father may have behaved strangely, and unlike a man or a father.

As a child, Colman identified strongly with his father, who was his hero and an object of admiration. As he grew older, he felt pressure to become as talented and famous as Joss Moody. As a teenager Colman rebelled against his father. After Joss's death, it is very hard for him to accept that his father had a female body, because he identified with Joss as a man. At this point, he starts to doubt the grounds of his own identity.

After the revelation of the secret, Colman is fixed with an idea of his father's sex as an anatomically and dichotomously determined fact: "My father didn't have a dick. My father had tits. My father had a pussy. My father didn't have any balls. How many people have fathers like mine? Which chat line could I ring up for this one?" (Kay 1998, 61) Colman feels he has to reassess his parent's identities and the nature of their relationship as the following quotation demonstrates:

If my mother would have been a lesbian or my father a gay man, I don't think I would have gone all het about it. What is it that is eating me? [...] It's probably the fact that my father didn't have a prick. Maybe it's as simple as that? No man wants a fucking lesbian for his father. Maybe for his mother. But for his father! (Kay 1998, 66–7)

Colman's identification with his father is based on an idea that they share the same experience of anatomical and physiological maleness. Joss had been an important object of identification for Colman, not only because of shared maleness, but also because they have the same skin colour. Growing up as a black kid, first in Scotland and later in England, had been difficult for Colman. The pressures of social context are strong for him wherever he goes. In Glasgow, as a little boy, he was scared of people staring at him because of his skin colour (Kay 1998, 54), in

London he was bullied because of his Scottish accent (51), and in school he felt embarrassed because of his different-looking and unconventional parents (47). Social pressure built up again for Colman after the death of his famous father: "You just need to mention Moody and people think of the trumpet man who turned out to be a woman." (Kay 1998, 57) He now has to confront yet another effect of the normative rules concerning identity categories prevalent in society.

Furthermore, the above excerpt discloses that Colman's conceptions of gender and sexuality are closely linked to familial relations. As long as he implicitly tries to understand his developmental story within the traditional oedipal model and patriarchal order, his inner conflict deepens. He feels fooled by his father, who has guided and supported his growth from boyhood to manhood: "My father once said to me, I know what it's like, son, when I was going through some fucking teenage torment. I remember it myself. But he didn't, did he. That was an out and out lie." (Kay 1998, 67) Colman questions his father's authority and reliability both in parenting and as the object of identification.

Subsequently, Colman decides to investigate his father's past as a girl. This is a moment of inflexion that directs Colman's self-processing in a new direction. Another substantial turning point occurs, as he travels to meet Joss Moody's white mother, Edith Moore, whom he had not heard of before. Edith gives him a photo of Joss as a seven-year-old child. Colman recognizes his father's familiar features in the girl, and stares at the picture waiting for something to happen that would explain all (Kay 1998, 242). Indeed, a change happens, but in Colman himself. The next time he meets Sophie Stone, he tells her that he cannot continue with the interviews for moral reasons. Stone is furious and asks Colman who he thinks he is, to which Colman answers: "Who do you think I am? I am Colman Moody, the son of Joss Moody, the famous trumpet player. He'll always be daddy to me." (Kay 1998, 259)

After this, Colman has a dream in which he is with his father, who is a small girl. The girl is deaf and he has to speak with her in sign language. They are in a basement of a house, which starts to fill with water. Colman takes the girl on his back to save her. The dream reflects

a transition in Colman's relation to his father. Colman's journey to the past, to the little girl his father once was, signifies a process in which the familial relations and the dominating masculine development story are reassessed. This is a clarifying experience for Colman. His relation to his father is now changed, because he acknowledges the fragility of his father's past, and sees it as being in need of protection.

Through Colman's perspective, the narration examines the frames of normative masculinity, which are based on rigid categorizing of gender and sexuality. As Matt Richardson (2012, 374) suggests, Colman is beginning to understand the assembly of heterosexual and patriarchal black manhood as an untenable construction. In the narrative process, Colman is discharged from the contradictory oedipal model of male psychosexual development. A move beyond the father-son struggle and compulsive reliance on male body morphology enables him to create a new relation to the dead Joss Moody. At the end of the story, Colman understands the value of closeness between people, who create a family because of this closeness. The novel ends as Colman travels to meet Millie.

Transformation Through Musical Abstraction

Trumpet includes a chapter positioned in the middle of the novel that depicts an unspecified moment when Joss Moody is forced to witness his own death. This chapter entitled "Music" focuses on Moody's experience by using indirect speech and third-person narration. The narrative style differs from all the other chapters, reaching an experience akin to jazz performance. The ways in which the music theme works in the chapter cannot be distinguished as an element of structure or content, but, rather, as a medium for a certain sensation. As such, it exemplifies Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's idea of a book as a little machine. As they contend, "[t]here is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 4). The narration does not depict Moody's view or experience in ways that would explain his life or his life choices. Instead, the narration aims to describe experience that is beyond narrative discourse. That is, the narration delves into an event in which the experience is not defined by what is already narrativized

or materialized, but, instead, draws on something beyond the discursive and the material.

Following this further, the narration reaches within and beyond Moody's subjective experience, opening up to an event that intensifies the active potential of temporality. The event works as a nick, a productive moment of becoming, which has a potential to generate an unforeseeable transformation in the present and the future (cf. Grosz 2004). In "Music", the intensifying event is emphasized as a bodily process. Moody takes a *bodily* journey through music – by playing the jazz trumpet – to "the place down there," where he sees his life in flashbacks from birth to death. The section emphasizes virtual movement and continual change:

He can't stop himself changing. Running changes. Changes running.
He is changing all the time. It all falls off - bandages, braces, cufflinks,
watches, hair grease, suits, buttons, ties. He is himself again, years ago[.]
In a red dress. It is liberating. To be a girl. To be a man. (Kay 1998, 135)

The change releases Moody from all appearances, which is simultaneously painful and liberating for him. Moody's mode of changing recalls the notion of becoming as conceptualized by Gilles Deleuze (see, for example, Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 257–341); it is a continual production of difference, the very dynamism of change. The continual becoming includes a movement within, and away from, the contradictions and frames of defining categories such as gender or sex. The movement releases Joss Moody to a state of being, in which differences exist simultaneously, and change continually.

The significance of music in the chapter is central. The process of becoming something else is imaginable because of music, of Moody's trumpet playing. Music intensifies his sense of himself as a series of movements, connected to larger forces. Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 329–30) define music as a creative mode of art that is inseparable from becoming. Elizabeth Grosz explains, in her Deleuzian-Guattarian inspired outline of ontology, how music opens our bodies and the world itself "to a new site of becomings [...], to the opening up and explora-

tion of chaotic elements" (Grosz 2008, 56). Gradually, Moody releases himself from memories, and all that defines and binds him: "All his self collapses – his idiosyncrasies, his personality, his ego, his sexuality, even, finally his memory." Finally, playing the horn enables Moody to be "nobody coming from nothing" (Kay 1998, 135).

By becoming one with the music Moody opens up to his potential and to a series of becomings. Ultimately, he opens up to "becoming imperceptible," to use a Deleuzian-Guattarian term. As Grosz (1993, 176) explicates, becoming imperceptible disaggregates and frees rigid, regulating structures that try to form identities as stable. It is a process of multiplication in which all the identities break down, and that ends only with complete dissolution (Grosz 1993, 178). In the chapter "Music," Joss Moody goes through a transformation in which he falls away from all the particulars, attributes that have defined him during his life, and from the meanings of the past. In the end, he dissolves into pieces and starts a process of assembling himself again: "He tears himself apart. He explodes. Then he brings himself back. Slowly, slowly, piecing himself together." (Kay 1998, 136) The direction of his transformation remains indeterminate, but the series of becomings leading to the transformation suggests that the outcome is something unequivocally different, beyond all known structures.

The chapter can be interpreted in line with Deleuze's and Guattari's (2004, 330–1) ideas about the significance of music as an art form that gives voice to minorities, which otherwise may not have the opportunity to express/articulate themselves. The central point of the chapter, I argue, is to offer a disruption that has a powerful effect on the reader and to draw attention to the act of imagining the potential of a subject. Following Grosz's (2005, 3–5; 2010, 49) idea about the untimely as a leap into the future through becoming, as a moment of becoming-more and becoming-other, I read the chapter as involving the orientation to what could be in the future. This orientation includes an active and productive letting go of the past, and a movement to what is beyond current comprehension. The chapter engages the reader in ways that creates a response in the reader that may move her/him towards a sense of openness.

Moreover, the chapter gives additional nuances to the title of the novel. As a "trumpet," a musical instrument, the novel blows multiple variations to the theme. The multiple voices bring different angles to the theme. This narrative strategy creates ambiguity that draws attention to the complex elements of materiality. On the one hand, the polyphony of variations demonstrates the counterpoints and the limitedness of individual perspectives. On the other hand, the diverse perspectives produce multiplicity.

"The Future Is Something Else Entirely"

The last but one chapter contains Joss Moody's letter, his "last word," to his son. With the letter Joss leaves all his hidden letters, photographs and documents to Colman. In the letter Joss recalls the story of his father, whose death changed his life forever. Furthermore, he reveals that he has "discovered a strange thing that is probably only possible to discover when you are dying [...] I've discovered that the future is something else entirely" (Kay 1998, 277). He stresses that it is Colman, who is the future and who will be, or not be, telling his story. Their roles as "father" and "son" are reversed so that Colman becomes the father, and Joss will now be his son "in a strange way" (Kay 1998, 277). The letter underlines the importance of remembering for the future, although what and how people remember cannot be controlled. Moreover, the letter points out that past lives have impact on the lives of those who come after in unpredictable ways.

As Judith Halberstam (2005, 60) contends, Kay's novel demonstrates the various competing needs of others in relation to the transgender subject, and raises critical questions about the production of transgender history and biography. Indeed, *Trumpet* offers a creative alternative to the challenges of remembering a transgender subject. It engenders an ethical dimension that functions in dynamic intersections of narrative strategies and the reader's responses, by using polyphony and leaving space for multiple meanings. Overall, the novel functions as a resource for thinking about the boundaries of gender and imagining alternative ways of being.

The polyphony in the narration demonstrates elaborately how we cannot use simple reasoning for an individual's ways of living and embody-

ing gender. Moreover, it illustrates the interaction of individuals, a collective sense of the dynamics of making sense of a past life story. Various characters and their intersecting and conflicting perspectives create a complex network, and epitomize how the knowledge of transgender life is collectively produced. Each perspective is limited by varying frames of identity categories, cultural models and beliefs. Nevertheless, the novel displays that these rigid frames can be unravelled. This is demonstrated in particular through the character of Colman, who goes through a process in which his fixed ideas about masculinity, sexuality and familial relationships start to disentangle and change. That is, his character demonstrates a process in which he is able to reflect on and evaluate certain values of his cultural and social environment. This is a process that generates a personal development and a new sense of responsibility in Colman that has ethical implications in his life such as refusing to collaborate with the journalist writing a scandalising story of Joss Moody.

In the chapter entitled "Music," the trans figure highlights the *potential* of diversity and multiplicity. In a sense, the chapter recalls similar, ambiguous figures in fiction that suggest fluidity and reassembling of reductive categories (cf. Ilmonen 2008; Prater 2012). However, Moody's character and life story as such do not suggest a subversive transformation. Although Moody crosses the fixed terms of a gender binary during his lifetime, he has to carefully adjust himself to the prevailing boundaries of the gender system. His life can be perceived as a struggle to become something more than he was, as we are able to see what has been possible for him through the recalling of his past life by various narrative voices. Moody's act of "becoming nobody" at the moment of his imminent death expresses freedom that does not belong to him as a subject. Instead, it is to be seen as a *positive capacity for action* that is attained through bodies and their struggle to become more than they are, to use Grosz's (2011, 60) conception. Along with the various perspectives on the past life of Moody, this chapter challenges us to think about the unknown future, beyond the existing ideas of life's boundaries.

The novel responds in many ways to recent debates about transgender and its conceptualizations. Several theoreticians have emphasized

the importance of being aware of the variety and complexity of actual transgender lives and experiences (cf. for example Noble 2006; Valentine 2007; Elliot 2010). On the other hand, theorization on the existing and emerging non-normative genders is a developing field, and cannot account for the complexities of lived experiences. The debates about transgenderism have demonstrated that disagreements force us to re-evaluate the relations between theorization and politics, abstraction and experience (Noble 2006, 2; Elliot 2010, 6; Salamon 2010, 95–6). Working with existing needs and goals in the present is as important as trying to imagine new ways of thinking. Kay's novel offers a basis for transgender ethics, which contains a willingness to accept multiplicity and variance with its various articulations, functions, and connections.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Katherine Harrison and two anonymous reviewers for careful readings and helpful comments. I am grateful to The Finnish Cultural Foundation for the financial support that allowed me to write this article.

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NOTES

1. Billy Tipton, born Dorothy Lucille Tipton, was an American jazz musician. He worked as a bandleader in several bands – including The Billy Tipton Trio, which recorded two albums – and toured from 1930 to the end of the 1950s. After retiring in the 1970s, he lived a quiet life.
2. According to the definition by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010, 19), life writing is a general term referring to writing that takes someone's life as its subject, and

- may include autobiographical, biographical, novelistic, or historical writing.
3. My starting point draws from the field of narrative studies, where the centrality of narrative in human self-understanding has been theorized widely, and from different perspectives. (See, for example, MacIntyre 1981; Ricœur 1992; Cavarero 2000; Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001, 1).
 4. Most of the photographs are from Tipton's archive found in his office. Tipton's former wife, Mrs Kitty Tipton Oakes, granted Middlebrook "complete editorial autonomy" in using the photographs and other materials included in the archive (Middlebrook 1998, xiii).

SAMMANFATTNING

Transpersoners livshistorier utmanar den förhärskande epistemologiska förståelsen av en människa som en könad och sexuell varelse. Samtidigt kan de genom att bidra med nya och viktiga insikter, fördjupa vår kunskap om genus. I denna artikel belyser jag förhållandet mellan berättande och etik, samt visar hur narrationer om transsubjekt kan erbjuda en etisk potential för studier av genuskodade livs komplexiteter. Jag har hämtat inspiration från Elizabeth Groszs tankar om konstens kreativa förmåga att förvandla material från det förflutna till resurser för framtiden. Jag gör en läsning av Jackie Kays roman *Trumpet* (1998), som är inspirerad av den amerikanske jazzmusikern Billy Tiptons (1914–1989) liv. Tipton levde sitt liv som man, men efter hans död upptäcktes det att han var av kvinnligt kön. Kays fiktiva beskrivning överskrider tidigare berättelser om Tipton och transpersoner på många sätt. Jag diskuterar hur användandet av vissa narrativa tekniker i romanen skapar en etisk potential och uppmanar oss att tänka bortom hur vi förstår könat förkroppsligande. Jag hävdar att Kays roman erbjuder en utgångspunkt för en transetik, som innehåller en beredskap att acceptera mångfald och variation, med sina varierande uttrycksformer, funktioner och samband.

Keywords: transgender, life writing, narrative, ethics, becoming