

Fecha de recepción: 18 enero 2023
Fecha de aceptación: 12 abril 2023
Fecha de publicación: 15 febrero 2024
URL: <https://oceanide.es/index.php/o12020/article/view/118>
Océanide número 16, ISSN 1989-6328
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37668/oceanide.v16i.118>

Laura Aldeguer Pardo

Universidad de Oviedo, España

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7196-8340>

“He Has Made Us All Look Unreal”: Strange(r)ness in Jackie Kay’s “Trumpet” (1998)

≈ Abstract

In Jackie Kay’s debut novel, *Trumpet* (1998), the private life and identity of its recently deceased protagonist, popular jazz musician Joss Moody, are dissected following the discovery of his female birth sex. The reach of this revelation extends to his closest family members, who are put under a limelight that questions the very relationships that underpin their personalities. Particularly, this work centres around the mediated portrayal of the “transgender stranger”, as delineated by those characters who represent the legal, medical and familial discourses during a series of posthumous strange encounters. This article combines close reading techniques with an interdisciplinary theoretical approach: gender and affect theory. Sara Ahmed’s contemporary theories of “strange(r)ness” and the sociality of emotion, with a special focus on disgust, allow for an innovative reading of this Scottish novel, previously interpreted regarding representations of gender performativity and matters related to “passing”. The aim of this article is to explore the mechanisms and attitudes behind the various reinscriptions of Joss’s identity, based on the discrepancy between his female birth sex and his lived masculinity.

Keywords:

Jackie Kay; *Trumpet*; strangeness; Sara Ahmed; affects

≈ Resumen

En la novela debut de Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (1998), la vida e identidad privadas de su protagonista recién fallecido, el famoso músico de jazz Joss Moody, son diseccionadas tras el descubrimiento a su muerte de su sexo biológico femenino. Además de afectar a la imagen del músico, el alcance de esta revelación llega hasta sus familiares más próximos, situándolos en el punto de mira y poniendo en tela de juicio las relaciones sobre las que se sustentan sus personalidades. Como tal, este artículo se orienta a la representación mediada del “extraño transgénero”, tal y como lo delinear los personajes que representan los ámbitos legal, médico y familiar durante una serie de encuentros extraños póstumos. Este artículo combina técnicas de análisis literario con un enfoque teórico interdisciplinar: las teorías del afecto y de género. Las postulaciones contemporáneas de Sara Ahmed sobre la “extrañeza” y la dimensión social de la emoción, con especial atención a la del asco, han permitido una lectura innovadora de esta novela escocesa, hasta ahora interpretada en base a los conceptos de performatividad del género y “passing”. El objetivo de este artículo es explorar los mecanismos y actitudes que subyacen a las diferentes reinscripciones de la identidad de Joss, basadas en la discrepancia entre su sexo biológico femenino y su masculinidad vivida.

Palabras clave:

Jackie Kay; *Trumpet*; extrañeza; Sara Ahmed; afectos

Jackie Kay emerged as an “iconic figure to young aspiring black and Asian writers” (Brown 2006, 324) during the 1990s, a period that saw other British authors eager to break the mould by transgressing identity boundaries and generic experimentation. A younger representative of the so-called Second Scottish Literary Renaissance of the late 20th century (Wallace 1993; Hagemann 1996), Kay has been an active promoter of ethnic and gender equality in Scotland, as well as a public advocate of the need to reconfigure social relations in the nation, especially from her current and highly influential role of Scots Makar or National Poet of Scotland. As the third poet to occupy this post, she situates herself as a mixed-race adopted lesbian, and has explored these intersections recurrently in her works.¹

In *Trumpet* (1998), Kay takes a step further in the exploration of liminal identities by creating Joss Moody, a jazz trumpeter who “embod[ies] some of the contradictions usually rejected by the norm” (Rodríguez González 2007, 90), and whose life is deconstructed throughout the text by those affected by his death. His story is loosely based on Billy Tipton, a North American jazz pianist born female, but who passed as a man before the eyes of everyone. Born Josephine Moore and never having undergone sex reassignment surgery, Joss’s biological gender is only revealed to the public and to his adopted son posthumously.

From Tipton’s life story, Kay borrows his musical genius and his successful story of “passing”, that is, the fact that his masculinity was never questioned until the discovery of his female birth sex following his death. Up until that point, Tipton passed as a cisgender man, meaning that his gender identity seemed to correspond with his birth sex. However, in Joss Moody, we find a Scottish man of African descent who sees in his wife Millie a worthy confidant. The characters that guide the narration with recurrent contributions and, therefore, constitute the leading voices in *Trumpet*, are those of Millie, the couple’s adopted son Colman and tabloid journalist Sophie Stones. The rest of the voices, especially those who only encounter Joss posthumously – such as the doctor, the funeral director and the registrar – will be under analysis as they articulate Joss’s identity as “strange”.

Although strange(r)ness can be studied from different angles in the novel, the focus will be on the portrayal of the deceased protagonist, Joss Moody, as a “transgender stranger” whose mediated representation is based on the discrepancy between his female birth sex and his lived masculinity. By placing Joss at the centre, this work also intends to highlight Kay’s contributions towards the diversity and plurality contained in the role of Scots Makar by giving experiences of “strange(r)ness” and hybridity a privileged space in the debates on Scottishness or what it means to be Scottish. As such, Joss’s Moody’s corporeity and life choices will be discussed, as well as the strange encounters experienced by those characters whose firm medical and legal beliefs are endangered by his presence.


Theorising Contemporary Strange(r)ness

Sara Ahmed’s influential work offers one of the most fertile conceptualisations of experiences of otherness and marginalisation. She draws on George Simmel’s (1950), Alfred Schütz (1944), and other twentieth-century theorisations of the stranger as someone who is physically near but socially distant; however, she contends that the stranger is not a person we fail to recognise, but rather

one we recognise immediately. This Eurocentric belief cuts off the stranger from their histories of determination² and from “broader historical asymmetrical power relations which mark some bodies as stranger than others” (Marotta 2021, 2). Facing a stranger, then, does not imply a process of misrecognition, but the very opposite. The labelling of strangers, as Ahmed puts it, becomes a “form of recognition” (2000, 21). She draws upon Marx’s model of commodity fetishism to exemplify how strangers are seen as figures who pass around communities as objects of difference and, in doing so, they demarcate their community’s collective identity. Essentially, strange bodies are created as projections of society’s worst fears. Ahmed highlights how “stranger fetishism” ultimately results in the belief that “all forms of movement, travel and displacement [...] lead to the same place: the place of the stranger” (2000, 6). That is, this fetishisation or reification works to erase all the vital differences between ways of being displaced from home,³ thus generalising the experiences of the stranger.

The title itself, *Strange Encounters*, already hints at Ahmed’s focus of analysis. As opposed to Schütz’s view of the stranger as having ontologically different ways of being in the world to the host-members, Ahmed argues for a non-ontological reading of the stranger, one that does not present the stranger as a particular body figure that we ought to expel, welcome or fear. In her analysis of *Strange Encounters*, which she defines as being surprising and as having the ability to shift the boundaries of the familiar, she highlights the dialogical production of bodies and texts. According to her, we do not come into the world with a given body that is already differentiated from others, but these differences emerge in the surface of our bodies as we come into contact with other familiar and strange bodies. Ahmed is specifically concerned with how cultural differences and social antagonism function to mark out the boundaries of bodies (2000, 40). It is important to note, she argues, that all bodies are marked through differentiating acts or gestures, but also that these techniques of differentiation work to define both strange bodies and bodies-at-home (Ahmed 2000, 15).

To illustrate this, Ahmed focuses on “passing”, one form of social differentiation premised on the epistemic authority of the Western subject, in which the figure of the stranger becomes the site upon which knowledge rests (2000, 125). Ahmed builds on approaches that theorise “passing” as a transgressive act that “destabilises and traverses the system of knowledge and vision upon which subjectivity and identity precariously rest” (2000, 125), by examining the role of this process of destabilisation in securing relations of power. In this process, strange identities are subjected to the economy of desire “to tell the difference”, an apparatus of knowledge based on the assumption that “the difference can be found somewhere (or in) the bodies of strangers (or underneath their skin)” (2000, 126). Ahmed resists considering “passing” as a condition of identity formation, as it precludes a differentiation between “kinds of identifications and particular forms of ‘crisis’ over identity” (2000, 126).

Thus, Ahmed conceptualises “passing” not as an event, but as “a series of encounters between others whose boundaries are not fixed” (2000, 128). Strange bodies, then, function as “the border that defines both the space into which the familiar body [...] cannot cross, and the space in which such a body constitutes itself at home” (2000, 54). In the end, the production of these bodies brings us back to stranger fetishism, as they are assimilated – but as the unassimilable – within the encounter. 

Most contemporary work on affect is influenced by seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who put into words the *yet-ness* of bodies by stating “no one has yet determined what the body can do” (1959, 87). In *Ethics* (1677), Spinoza describes affects as the body’s ability to affect and be affected. Such capacities go hand in hand, so that when you act on something, when you affect it, you are simultaneously “opening yourself up to being affected in turn” (Massumi 2015, 4). According to Spinoza, mind and body, though – for him – separate entities, are equally influenced by affects. Proponents of affect theory, such as Brian Massumi, Canadian philosopher and instigator of the latest re-emergence of interest in affect theories thanks to his essay “The Autonomy of Affect” (Seigworth and Gregg 2009, 5), view affects as “encompass[ing] all the depth and breadth of our experiencing of experiencing” (Massumi 2015, 5), thus advocating a differential usage of the affect and emotion.

It is for this reason that in the rest of this section – as well as in the forthcoming ones – Ahmed’s decision not to separate emotion and affect will be followed. She argues that while you can have a rationale for separating affect and emotion, “it needs to be understood as a method allowing you to do certain things and not as corresponding to a natural distinction that exists in the world” (Schmitz and Ahmed 2014, 98). Ahmed finds the term “emotion” to be the most fitting to her analysis, since she is not as interested in looking at the body’s responses to the world, as she is to how objects, over time, are given certain value, as objects of feeling through the projection of emotions (2014, 97). Her interest does not stop on bodily encounters – at which level affects are used – but goes beyond that, reaching the preceding and guiding histories present in encounters.

Ahmed, informed by sociological and psychological accounts, rejects both on the grounds that they take the separation between inside – the individual – and outside – the social – as given. Indeed, there are distinguishing factors between them – the psychological view regards emotions as moving “inside out”, thus “centred internally, in subjective feelings” (Strongman 2003, 3) whereas the sociological theory deals with them as “a social form, rather than individual self-expression” (Ahmed 2004, 9). Whether coming from the inside or the outside, both arguments ultimately define emotions as something that we can possess. Instead, Ahmed argues for her own model of the sociality of emotion, one where emotions play a crucial role in creating “the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place” (2004, 10). Ahmed asserts that “it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (2004, 10). As such, she considers emotions crucial “to the very constitution of the psychic and the social objects” (Ahmed 2004, 10). By offering her theory of the sociality of emotion, Ahmed aims to give an account of “how the subject arrives into a world that already has affects and feelings circulating in very particular ways” (Schmitz and Ahmed 2014, 98), rather than offering a fixed definition of emotions.

In the *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed tackles the question of “what sticks?” in relation to how our investment in social norms explains the importance of emotion in politics. Ahmed uses Judith Butler’s example of the social norms of

marriage or heterosexuality to show how repetition works to produce their “boundary, fixity and surface” (2004, 12), but this is also reminiscent of Jaggar’s work. Jaggar conceptualises emotions as being partially socially constructed: “they bear the mark of the society that constructed them” (1989, 165). She contends that we learn the language of emotion and the values of our society simultaneously. Along with this, she emphasises that the predominant values will be those that benefit the dominant groups.

In this respect, Ahmed’s notion of disgust is enlightening, as she claims it “works to produce the disgusting, as the bodies that must be ejected from the community” (Ahmed 2004, 15). The emotion at stake firmly adheres to her definition of emotions as cultural practices: ideas, values and judgements about things (Schmitz and Ahmed 2014, 99). Unlike animals, which avoid ingesting bad-tasting foods, our disgust is not simply an independent feeling, but it requires an initial degree of awareness: it is indeed “a feeling about something and in response to something” (Miller 1997, 8). However, we have come to learn that emotions are not mere psychological states, as they do work upon bodies, and disgust is no exception to this rule. If anything, the powerful sensory images intrinsic to disgust work to reinforce this feeling of aversion towards an object. The process of disgust is highly dependent upon proximity, as “it is only through such a sensuous proximity that the object is felt to be so ‘offensive’ that it sickens and takes over the body” (Ahmed 2004, 85). Disgust extends even further when the approximation to the object is followed by a movement of recoiling that relies on a certain history of previous contact with objects that have been designated as disgusting (2004, 86). By this, Ahmed is able to conclude that disgust behaves like a contact zone.

Hence, in making sense of such characterisation of disgust, Ahmed makes use of Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Kristeva shows menaces are only threatening insofar as they are felt to have infiltrated “the clean body” (1982, 53); she sees the object of revulsion as a process, which “can be represented by any kind of transgressive, ambiguous or intermediary state” (Moi 1986, 239). Ahmed elaborates on this idea by adding border objects to her theory of disgust, but states that disgust is a quality that sticks to objects, through contact with other sticky objects which already possess it. Ahmed uses stickiness in a metaphorical sense, as a form of relationality in which the elements that become sticky get bound together, producing effects of binding and blocking. The task of defining stickiness is a complex one for Ahmed, owing to the fact that it “involves such a chain of effects”. In the end, she brings to our attention that in referring to an object as sticky we are noticing how its stickiness “accumulates and affects that which it touches” (Ahmed 2004, 91), rather than pointing to one of its properties.

Medical and legal reinscriptions of the transgender stranger

Most academic analyses of Jackie Kay’s novel *Trumpet* delve into its representations of gender performativity, often focusing on issues related to “passing”. Kay has previously expressed her interest in the fluidity of identity and the concept of “passing”, which she sees as “this idea of someone actually not just dressing up as a man or a woman or as the opposite sex, but living their life like that” (Jaggi and Dyer 1999, 53), thus taking cross-dressing themes out of the picture. Joss Moody’s characterisation is in fact articulated in a more complex way, following Judith ~

Butler's conceptualisation of gender as "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (2011, 45). Gender, in Butler's terms, is not a given nor natural to the self, but it is performed. Joss puts on a life-long performance of convincing, stereotypical masculinity: he "walk[s] like a man, talk[s] like a man, dress[es] like a man, blow[s] his horn like a man" (Kay 1998, 37). Not only that, but Carole Jones states that in conducting his performance, Joss "reinstates the binary of normal gender roles" (2009, 109). Thus, Joss can be said to comply with and sustain the well-established categories of gender and sex.

Kay's protagonist fits Jack Halberstam's analysis of transgender experiences and his concept of "transgender person". This inclusive label encompasses the experiences of those people "who want to reside outside of categories altogether [and] [...] who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition" (Halberstam 2005, 49). Prior to his death, Joss's "passing" was successful inasmuch as the difference between his portrayed image of masculinity and the sign of masculinity itself was unrecognisable, but his death becomes the spark that sets it all ablaze. To be more precise, it is when the bandages he employs to bind his chest come loose that his identity becomes fully transgressive. In my analysis of the removal of Joss's bandages and specifically the effect on those who undo them, I claim that while they are helpful in enabling Joss to pass as a male, they also stand for the danger issuing from the transgender stranger, insofar as their removal destabilises his (as well as pre-given definitions of) identity and gender.

In *Trumpet*, it is not only the identity of the absent protagonist that is under examination, but identity itself. Kay's portrayal of Joss does not scrutinise his underlying motives for "passing" as a cisgender man, but focuses on "the people around Joss and their response to his life, rather just his life itself, the way one life affects others" (Jaggi and Dyer 1999, 53). Formally, Kay makes use of the novel's fragmented structure to convey the impact Joss's female body has on those around him, reproducing the pattern of jazz, a genre in which instruments come together to the rhythm of the same song, while also leaving room for improvisation. Much like jazz, as Carla Rodríguez González contends, *Trumpet* proves how "identities are [...] a collective product rather than an individual phenomenon" (2007a, 92).

Out of the extensive gallery of characters present in the novel, only three of them witness Joss's bandages coming undone: Joss's wife and confidant Millie, Dr Krishnamurty and funeral director Albert Holding. Millie's perspective is interesting as a clear counterpoint to the other characters' reactions, particularly when Joss's "secret" is revealed to her for the first time, in a moment of intimacy in which both characters retain their agency. Yet the main encounters under analysis in this article are those which stand in stark contrast to Millie's, namely those found in the chapters narrated from the perspectives of the doctor, the registrar and the funeral director. It is not a coincidence that their chapters are preceded by a description that focuses on the space of the familiar, since the first step to recognise someone as a stranger is to differentiate between the familiar and the strange.

As such, there is nothing out of the ordinary in Dr. Krishnamurty's arrival at the Moody household and the early allusion to the

"unmistakable smell of death" (Kay 1998, 42) signals to every other home death visit she has conducted. When immersed in Dr. Krishnamurty's consciousness, the omniscient narrator assumes a cold and distant tone, typical of medical reports. The telegraphic utterances point to her professionalism and to her ability to detach herself from the delicate nature of the situation. Another side to this character is explored in the initial stages of this brief chapter, namely her emotionality and sensibility. For instance, prior to the examination of Joss's body, she shows concern for Millie's wellbeing by offering to prescribe her a sleeping pill. As a doctor, Krishnamurty strays away from beliefs endorsed by the medical field, when she draws from her spiritual faith in referring to Joss's corpse as containing his soul. The description of the familiar reaches its peak moments before she continues undoing the bandages, when the doctor makes us aware of her conventional beliefs on gender – birth sex and gender must correspond – when she starts filling in the "obvious" (Kay 1998, 43) on Joss's medical certificate.

Dr. Krishnamurty is the second character, after Millie, to undo Joss's bandages, a process she describes as "removing skin" (Kay 1998, 43). This simile is interesting in view of Ahmed's treatment of skin as "a border or boundary [...] containing the subject within" (2000, 44). In her analysis of Kay's works, Victoria Arana argues that skin becomes a "legible sheath that cannot be peeled off and discarded" (2009, 254). Even though Arana's comment refers to skin colour, her description of Kay's use of this signifier corresponds perfectly with the doctor's uneasy feeling when removing Joss's bandages. Ultimately, binding constitutes one of the key elements of Joss's masculinity, one that was religiously performed by Millie, who "wrapped two cream bandages around his breasts every morning, early" (Kay 1998, 238). Yet, the doctor's actions resemble those of a trespasser rather than a helper: with Joss no longer capable of controlling his representation, she is imposing her own categories on him and thus exposing him to what he avoided throughout his life, categorisation: "[h]e never went to the doctors, said he was terrified of them" (Kay 1998, 56).

This instance constitutes a rupture in the doctor's routine physical exam, which hints at the approaching strange encounter, when the struggle presented by the bandages prompts a negative reading, as the doctor confesses to being "apprehensive about what kind of injury the bandages could be hiding" (Kay 1998, 43). The moment the bandages come undone, Dr. Krishnamurty is faced with Joss's well-preserved breasts and immediately seeks solace in familiar images, "Mr Moody must be one of those men that had extra flab on top" (Kay 1998, 44), which shows that Joss's strange(r)ness is beyond her grasp.

This encounter is a moment of crisis, or rather of emergency – as the doctor's red pen is labelled. It is a moment of surprise which shifts the boundaries of the narration, as the previously objective, professional and attentive Dr. Krishnamurty crosses out "male", writes "female" and then crosses it out again only to rewrite it in "large childish letters" (Kay 1998, 44). The transgressive character of the bandages is confirmed when the doctor turns her back on any objectivity and refers to them as "lying curled on the bed like a snake" (Kay 1998, 44) before closing the door on them. The venomous aspect of the bandages is ambivalent: it does not only question the certainties of the medical discourse, but also the lives of those who come into close and continuous contact

with them: Joss and Millie. With Joss's performance of masculinity suspended by the discovery of his female anatomy, the couple's life becomes a target for conventional and prejudiced readings.

Dr. Krishnamurty passes the baton over to the registrar as she leaves it up to him to interpret the certificate. In the registrar's chapter, a new kind of strange(r)ness arises, along with a divergent reaction. This chapter, which is also preceded by a description of the registrar's milieu, presents him as a humane and understanding professional, whose ample experience allows him to recognise that "every person was special" (Kay 1998, 74), as were also their individual circumstances. The registrar's tolerance is connected to his Indian ethnicity, a detail that sheds light on Mohammad Nassar Sharif's strange(r)ness within his own field of expertise. As opposed to other colleagues' practices, the interactions that take place in his office are not impersonal nor bureaucratic. In fact, individual identities are respected within those four walls: "you couldn't come from Bangladesh and not realise the significance of names, what they told you, the occupation they gave you" (Kay 1998, 77). Sharif takes great pride in his position as a stranger, one he highlights by contrasting his considerate fountain pen to the doctors' violent red biro. The first traces of the registrar's strange(r)ness surface as he is handed Joss's scribbled death certificate. Despite the fact that Sharif "had never in his life seen a medical certificate where male was crossed out and female entered in red" (Kay 1998, 77), his thoughtfulness, symbolised by his beautiful black Indian ink, prevents him from jumping to unfounded conclusions about Joss.

Afterwards, the mismatching documents Millie brings into his office – some corresponding to Josephine Moore and some to Joss Moody – pose the shocked registrar a conundrum that extends beyond his cultural parameters: the existence of a person who "plucked the name Joss Moody out of the sky and called himself this name and encouraged others to do likewise" (Kay 1998, 80). In accordance with the doctor, the prevalence of biological facts and legalities is out of the question, yet it is the matter of writing down Joss's unsanctioned name that implies a breach of Sharif's principles. Once again, the registrar proves to have a high regard for individuality, as he does not feel the need to force Joss's identity into a universal, rigid yet ultimately futile mould, but takes his wife's word as proof of his achievement. Thus, after having soaked in Millie's presence and her love towards Joss, the registrar finally surrenders to his performance and writes down Joss's made-up name, followed by his birth sex, thus capturing Joss in all his strange(r)ness.

The work of disgust upon transgender bodies

The next character to follow Dr. Krishnamurty's steps in reinscribing Joss's identity is funeral director Albert Holding. His point of view is relevant insofar as it will later be transposed onto Colman, since Holding will be responsible for breaking the news to the couple's son. Prior to his encounter with Joss's body, the omniscient narrator introduces Holding as a straight man who is so used to oddities that he "can tell more about those distinguished, idiosyncratic personalities than he can about the cause of death" (Kay 1998, 103). That is, Albert Holding regards himself as someone who is cured of all strange(r)ness, making Joss all the stranger in his eyes. Thus, unlike in the aforementioned chapters, Holding initiates the description of his encounter with Joss's body by bringing awareness to the fact that he is still

confronted with the effects of said meeting in the present: "[w]hat happened made him think new things and been some years since Holding has had new thoughts in his head. He has been thinking about men and women. The differences between them" (Kay 1998, 108).

The effectiveness of these differences is of the utmost importance to the funeral director and, thus, drawing from Ahmed's theorisation of "passing", we can see how their encounter follows a sequence of "telling", in which Holding undergoes a crisis of reading, where he "hesitates over the gap between an image that is already assumed and an image that is yet to be assumed" (Ahmed 2000, 127). Having initially identified Joss as male, the absence of a penis does not immediately signal to Joss's strange(r)ness, but Holding develops an anxiety which manifests itself in the form of blame, as if the lack of a virile member was a direct consequence of him not doing his job adequately. Indeed, the fact that Holding is not able to see past conventional notions of gender prevents him from "control[ing] the encounter, or predict[ing] its outcome" (Ahmed 2000, 8). However, when the breasts are revealed to him, he does not seek to justify their existence, as the doctor did, but ponders over their hidden nature. As if putting a band-aid on an ideological bullet wound, the funeral director resorts to providing Joss's body with a fixed meaning, in a process that Ahmed explains as the "re-reading [of] the ambiguous body in light of pre-existing regimes of identity cards" (Ahmed 2000, 129), in this case a binary conception of gender that renders Joss's female organs sufficient proof of his womanhood.

Yet, the instability of the dominant categories of gender and sex is made patent as the parts of Joss's body lead the funeral director to reconsider the heteronormative discourse he has held for all his working life: "what made a man a man and a woman a woman was the differing sexual organs" (Kay 1998, 111). Moments before his meeting with an oblivious Colman, and clearly threatened by his momentary hesitation, Holding soothes himself by reasserting his authority as he "pulled open his special drawer to check that his red pen was still there. If there was anything untoward in the death certificate, he would be duty bound to correct it with this very red pen" (Kay 1998, 112). In the opinion of Holding, the unequivocal stroke of the dominant red pen is vital to fix Joss's transgender identity to a recognisable and stable ground, or else he remains a passing stranger, endlessly cruising the male and female genders, without ever inhabiting either.

Once Colman enters the funeral parlour with the intention of seeing his father, Holding refuses to leave his side, afraid his encounter with Joss will be fogged by his emotions, therefore potentially condoning the unfixed identity of his father. The funeral director takes on a different stance with Colman: he does not try to ease him into the parlour, as he conscientiously does with other clients, for whom he waits until they feel ready to enter. Alternatively, Holding appeals himself as the mediator of Colman's encounter with Joss and resorts to impersonal and overly redundant biological facts that must precede the family encounter: "In other words, he does not possess the male body parts, but instead the person lying through next door that I am given to understand is your father is actually a woman" (Kay 1998, 114).

Colman's exposure to the rigid heteronormative discourse of the funeral director, as well as to the disgust wannabe biographer Sophie Stones sticks onto Joss's persona by using terms

such as “pervert”, “freak”, “monstruous” or “grotesque” (Kay 1998, 265), lead him to desperately seek to burn his bridges with his father. What the musician’s son fails to realise are Holding’s underlying motives for rendering his father’s transgender identity as strange, as he is selflessly contributing to the perpetuation of certain normative values that maintain his privileged position in society. Right after his visit to the funeral parlour, Colman’s confusion is evident in the mixed use of male and female pronouns – “I never had a bath with him or saw him or her naked” (Kay 1998, 55) – as if his grief and his disgust were head-to-head.

While Colman’s attitude towards his father’s biological gender resembles a child’s tantrum, it also reveals the hold that the concept of normative gender has over his self-identification and his notion of family. The young man, blinded by others’ unsympathetic readings of his father’s body, leaves all emotional attachment aside to examine his father’s identity in the cold light of biological discourse and wonders: “[w]hat was his puberty like? I mean he’d have got his periods, wouldn’t he? That’s disgusting, isn’t it? There’s no way around it. The idea of my father getting periods makes me want to throw up” (Kay 1998, 67). Colman’s juxtaposition of the image of his father and the process of menstruation is interesting in light of Kristeva’s theory of the abject and her characterisation of menstrual blood as “stand[ing] for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual)” and as “signifying sexual difference” (1982, 71). Judging by that utterance, what Colman seems to find revolting – to the point where this emotion registers on his body – is that Joss lied all throughout their father-son relationship by hiding his biological female characteristics, therefore depriving Colman of an “actual” fatherly bond and exposing him to contamination.

The performative and sticky properties of disgust are applied in Colman’s emotionally charged statement. The utterance “[t]hat’s disgusting” functions as a performative speech act that generates what it names: disgust. As Sara Ahmed points out, “to say something is disgusting is still to make something, it generates a set of effects, which then adhere as a disgusting object” (2004, 93). Thus, I argue that in transferring the sticky property of the word “disgust” onto his father’s body, Colman is aligning his identity in opposition to his father’s, in an attempt to place himself in a space where he is supposedly sheltered from contamination. However hard he tries, it is too late for the musician’s son to distance himself from his father. The reason being that Colman’s encounter with his father’s body opens up previous histories of contact with Joss, that is, instances in which he was in extreme close contact with the now sticky object.

Consequently, Colman’s journey of reminiscence is one of self-punishment, as he recalls how he worshipped his father as a child: “maybe I copied his smile so much I look like his carbon” (Kay 1998, 50). Hence, he avoids exposure to anything tinged with Joss’s essence, such as his copies of *The Broons*, Scottish malt, music and his mother, Millie. The power of Colman’s description – mainly the performative speech act in “that’s disgusting”, but also the reiterative use of pejorative terms – work to generate effects of disgust around Joss’s biological change. Nevertheless, Colman’s outburst is short-lived, much to tabloid journalist Sophie Stones’s demise, who defeatedly admits that “instead of hate or fury or spite or repulsion, the emotion, that I saw clearly written across the wide high bones on Colman Moody’s cheeks was love” (Kay 1998, 210-11).

In a similar vein, Tracy Hargreaves observes that it is Millie, neither consciously queer nor camp, that poses a threat to dominant sex-gender systems (2003, 3). This remark is helpful in connecting Joss’s death to the transformation Millie and Colman undergo; they turn into the disgusting strangers under the spotlight, as shown by Krishnamurty, who “wondered at the woman waiting for her downstairs” (Kay 1998, 45). Once the physical differences between gender and sex on Joss’s corpse have been registered as strange, it is Millie and Colman who, due to their proximity to Joss, are perceived to carry that same quality.

To stop themselves from looking “unreal” (Kay 1998, 60), a feeling both mother and son allude to, they draw upon universally accepted experiences that will provide them with a sense of belonging now that Joss is gone. As such, Millie clings to memories of her life with Joss, as well as to the experience of widowhood: she seeks comfort in the fact that all widows are somehow misunderstood. As for Colman, it is a letter full of Joss’s memories that raises his awareness of the different and contradicting elements that come into play in the construction of all identities. With this letter, Joss lays out facts and anecdotes about his childhood and his father’s journey from Africa to Scotland, making Colman the only recipient of “the sum of [his] parts” (Kay 1998, 277), while leaving the door open for him to appropriate some of it, or discard it altogether. Ultimately, Colman ceases to reject salient elements of his identity, such as his Glaswegian accent, as Joss’s letter gives him one last push towards the realisation that alternative genealogies can become a source of freedom rather than strange(r)ness, as the musician successfully demonstrated.

Conclusion

This work has discussed that, in the framework of the polyphonic structure of the novel, the representation of the figure of the stranger is subverted by means of the juxtaposition of Joss’s liminal identity and the shielding and violent reactions generated by the discovery of his difference. Such opposition is based on the representation of feelings of love and disgust embodied by its characters. By this, Kay’s novel simultaneously challenges heteronormativity and homogenising discourses of identity, revealing the constructed nature of the identity politics inherent in any process of collective identification.

Three of the perspectives under analysis – Dr. Krishnamurty’s, the registrar’s and the funeral director’s – have been shown to culminate in divergent reinscriptions of Joss’s strange(r)ness, owing to personal and cultural situated views. The doctor’s encounter with Joss is guided by her firm stance on normative gender and sudden assertive behaviour, which allow her to use Joss’s differences to reinforce the boundaries of the conventional. During the registrar’s encounter, the discovery of Joss’s “secret” is mediated by the positive emotion of love, for it is the intervention of Millie that proves the legitimacy of Joss’s self-made identity. Furthermore, his ethnicity situates him also as a stranger within the legal sphere and fosters an appreciation for individuality that allows him to come to terms with the idiosyncratic aspects of Joss’s life. Encounters like his offer a glimpse into the possibility of accommodating strange(r)ness, rather than erasing it or capitalising on it.

Regarding the funeral director, his strictly biological conception of gender is repeatedly challenged by Joss. Ultimately, the

dominance of the heteronormative discourse over unfixed identities is confirmed, as Joss's strange(r)ness is pinned to a stable ground. Besides, Holding further acts towards the subversion of strange(r)ness by triggering a similar reaction in Colman, in fear the young man's love for his father causes him to overlook Joss's nonconformist identity.

Finally, the discussion around the work of disgust upon transgender bodies, including an examination of the magnitude of the accumulation of strange qualities and disgusting signs onto Joss's identity, as Colman unquestioningly reproduces heteronormative readings of his father, has shown that it is the mediation of the emotion of love – triggered by a letter in Joss's handwriting – that brings to his attention the subjective component of all life narratives and identities, which makes him realise that looking unreal or strange is a matter of choice.⁴

Works Cited

- AHMED, Sara. 2000. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- ARANA, R. Victoria. 2009. "Clothing the Spirit: Jackie Kay's Fiction from *Trumpet* to *Wish I Was Here*." *Women: A Cultural Review* 20 (3): 250–61.
- BAUMAN, Zygmunt. 1991. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- BROWN, Ian (ed.). 2006. *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature: Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- BUTLER, Judith. 2011 (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- HAGEMANN, Susanne. 1996. *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- HALBERSTAM, J. Jack. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Vol. 3. New York: New York UP.
- HARGREAVES, Tracy. 2003. "The Power of the Ordinary Subversive in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*." *Feminist Review* 74 (1): 2–16.
- JAGGAR, Alison M. 1989. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology." *Inquiry* 32 (2): 151–76.
- JAGGI, Maya and Richard Dyer. 2008. "Interview: Jackie Kay in Conversation to Maya Jaggi and Richard Dyer." *Wasafiri* 14 (29): 53–62.
- JONES, Carole. 2009. *Disappearing Men: Gender Disorientation in Scottish Fiction 1987–1999*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- KAY, Jackie. 1998. *Trumpet*. London: Picador.
- KRISTEVA, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP.
- MAROTTA, Vince. 2021. "Meeting Again: Reflections on Strange Encounters 20 Years on." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 42 (1): 1–7.
- MASSUMI, Brian. 2015. *Politics of Affect*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- MILLER, William Ian. 1997. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- MOI, Tori (ed.). 1986. *The Kristeva Reader*. New York: Columbia UP.
- RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, Carla. 2007. "Biographical Improvisation in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*." *Scottish Studies Review* 8 (1): 88–101.
- ROWELL, Charles H. 2014. "An Interview with Jackie Kay." *Callaloo* 37 (2): 268–80.
- SCHMITZ, Sigrid and Sara Ahmed. 2014. "Affect/Emotion: Orientation Matters. A Conversation between Sigrid Schmitz and Sara Ahmed." *FGZ* 20 (2): 97–108.
- SCHÜTZ, Alfred. 1944. "The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology." *The American Journal of Sociology* XLIX: 499–507.
- SEIGWORTH, Gregory J. and Melissa Gregg. 2009. "An Inventory of Shimmers." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 1–25. Durham and London: Duke UP.
- SIMMEL, Georg. 1950. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Edited by Kurt H. Wolff. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- SPINOZA, Baruch. 1959. *On the Correction of Understanding*. Translated by Andrew Boyle. London: Everyman's Library.
- STRONGMAN, Ken T. 2003. *The Psychology of Emotion: From Everyday Life to Theory*. Chichester: Wiley and Sons.
- WALLACE, Gavin. 1993. "Introduction." In *The Scottish Novel since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams*, ed. Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson, 1–7. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Notes

¹ Indeed, some of her best-known texts are scattered with biographical elements, as her prize-winning collection *The Adoption Papers* (1991), where she tackles the experience of adoption from the points of view of the birth mother, the adoptive mother and the daughter. Kay's "fusion of identities" manifests itself as a perk in her writings, whether that be through her "ability to articulate a wide range of emotional experiences" (Rowell 2014) or through her permeability across multiple genres: short stories, children's literature, fiction, poetry, radio and theatre.

² The notion of histories of determination refers to the processes through which strangers are acknowledged as such, "involv[ing] the differentiation between some others and other others at the same time as it conceals that very act of differentiation" (Ahmed 2000, 32).

³ Ahmed challenges a sense of “home” that implies familiarity, security and stability and that is, therefore, free of strangers. She does this by revealing the movement, dislocation and “strange(r)ness” present within spaces constructed as homes, namely nations. By this, Ahmed argues for an idea of “home” that rests on the non-opposing nature of being home and away.

⁴ This research was supported by the Spanish National R&D Programme, grant PID2021-127052OB-I00 (World-travelling: Narratives of Solidarity and Coalition in Contemporary Writing and Performance) funded by MCIN/AEI/13039/501100011033/ERDF A way of making Europe, the R&D Programme of the Principado de Asturias through the “Intersecciones” Research Group of the University of Oviedo (grant no. GRUPIN SV-PA-21-AYUD/2021/51893) and the Predoctoral Research Fellowship granted by the Principado de Asturias Administration through the “Severo Ochoa” grant programme for research and teacher training of the Principado de Asturias.

Título:

“Nos ha hecho a todos irreales”: La extrañeza en *Trumpet* (1998), de Jackie Kay

Contacto:

lauraldeguer18@gmail.com