128), or “phenomenon” (*Trumpet*, 212). Alternatively, as I contend in the remainder of this chapter, Kay elaborates a fluid conception of identity belonging (variously linked to sexuality, gender, familial ties, and race), which she expresses by crafting a peculiar use of language that draws on the aquatic element in its connection with jazz music as paradigmatic expressions of the Black diaspora, hence contributing to the delineation of a Black queer diasporic aesthetics.

Variations on a Theme: Water, Jazz, and Fluid Identity

Trumpet is inspired by the life story of Billy Tipton, a White American pianist and saxophonist who was born Dorothy Lucille Tipton in Oklahoma City in 1914 and lived his life as a male jazz musician in the Midwest and West Coast, and finally Washington, DC, where he founded a trio. Tipton, who married five times and adopted three children, was found to be biologically female only after his death. Little is known about his gender identity and the catalyst for his decision to live as a man, other than what was speculated in his biography *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (1998), written by Diane Middlebrook.[5] In her book Middlebrook seems to link Tipton’s decision to live as a man to his desire to become a jazz musician, since at the time the usual role available (when at all) to women in jazz was that of singers.[6]

As Jack Halberstam maintains, the claim that Tipton’s decision rested on his ambition is dangerous since it supports the assumption that his relationships with the women of his life were only deceptions.[7] Predictably the biography was commissioned by Tipton’s last wife and thus partly adjusts to her specific standpoint, which manifests itself through the way the author describes Tipton, variously as a “magician” or a deceiver who preyed on innocent women,[8] something that is similarly reflected in the subtitle chosen for the book: “The Double Life of Billy Tipton.”

In a 1999 interview Kay explains her rationale for choosing to tell a story inspired by Tipton’s experience:

> I just happened by chance to be reading in a newspaper . . . about the death of a jazz musician called Billy Tipton. It was just a couple of lines and it said that he’d died and that on his death it was discovered that he was a woman. The important thing for me was that his son was quoted saying “. . . he’ll always be daddy to me.” It just really intrigued me, this idea of

> someone actually not just dressing up as a man or woman or as the opposite sex, but living their life like that.[9]

Intrigued by William Tipton's response concerning his father and by the experience of living one's whole life as the opposite sex, Kay builds her story around the perspectives of a series of people who did not know the truth about Joss and the only one who did, his widow Millie. If Tipton's biography is mainly constructed around the idea of deception posed on the claim that nobody (not even his wives nor sons) knew about his anatomical sex, Kay's fictionalized account in *Trumpet* restores a more complex picture that avoids the sensationalism inherent in the gesture of revealing a hidden truth, but rather celebrates the changing potential of the ordinary in the possibility to perform one's own identity as one perceives it rather than as one's biology states it.

As already anticipated, jazz music plays a significant role in the novel, and not just because it tells the story of a jazz trumpeter, but through its very structure and aesthetics, as Kay herself recognizes in an interview:

> I wanted to tell a story, the same story, from several points of view. I was interested in how a story can work like music and how one note can contain the essence of the whole. I wanted to write a novel whose structure was very close to jazz itself.[10]

Kay's polyphonic narration thus follows the rhythm and structure of jazz, since it offers the reader the same story (that of Joss) that is improvised time and again and told through different perspectives, just like jazz is made up of a refrain and improvised new melodic solo parts.[11] As such, it reflects also the relationality of a diasporic aesthetics that avoids the prevailing of a single story and rather intends identity as something built relationally, like Kay's image of the several rivers running toward the same sea used as an epigraph to this chapter. Indeed, music (especially in the form of jazz, blues, and Celtic folk songs) represents an important influence in Kay's writing, together with the form of Scottish poetry, particularly in its dramatic and performative aspects.[12] Both traditions are connected with her growing up in Glasgow with her White adoptive parents Helen and John Kay: "I was very fortunate that I had a dad who loved jazz and blues. He played it a lot when he was home."[13] Her exposure since she was a child to Scottish poetry events and to jazz music deeply influenced Kay, who particularly remembers a turning point in her life when, at the age of twelve, her father entrusted her

with a Bessie Smith album. As she would recall in the singer's biography *Bessie Smith* which she wrote in 1997, for a Black girl of mixed Nigerian and Scottish parentage growing up with a White family and in a White neighborhood, being able to identify with Bessie Smith's skin color and her music came as an epiphany: "I am the same colour as she is, I thought to myself, electrified. I am the same colour as Bessie Smith . . . the shock of my own reflection came with the Blues."[14] Through Bessie Smith and a number of other Black people from around the globe (including Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, Louis Armstrong, and Ella Fitzgerald), Kay is able to trace imaginative relationships with other Black people, thus making up for the lack of such models in her environment with whom she could identify. In doing so she appreciates jazz's fluidity, its capacity to constantly change to reinvent not only itself but also identity in the process, something that is equally reflected in the performative aspect of Black linguistic practices.[15]

As an evolution of hollers and slave songs performed by African slaves in American plantations, jazz bears in its origin the cross-fertilization of different cultural and musical traditions. It combines Christian and folk songs from Europe, drumming from Africa, European diatonic and African pentatonic scales and harmonic patterns, and so forth, hence being inherently a hybrid, fluid genre that resists being fitted into either-or categories or definitions. Kay maintains:

> I have written a lot about jazz and jazz itself interests me because it's such a fluid form and it comes from the blues and I like the idea that Black music has shifted and changed. It's like identity in that way, identity's something that's fluid, it's not something that's static and fixed . . . I think the wonder part about certain pieces of music is that when we're listening to them we can lose ourselves in them, but we can also find ourselves in them, that music defines us, but it also help [*sic*] us to lose our definitions.[16]

The capacity to define and lose ourselves and our definitions in music, already implied in the description of Millie's remembering her past life in the solitude of the Torr cottage, is explored by Kay especially in the chapter titled "Music," which is one of the two chapters reporting Joss's perspective and emblematically occupies the central part of the novel. Here, the external narrator describes Joss's relation to music as an ecstatic experience through a language that is influenced by the features of jazz. Repetitions, improvisation, variations on the theme, rhythm, and

semantic transposition of the language of jazz to express a fluid conception of gender and race, are all part of Kay's experimentation. She writes: "When he [Joss] gets down, and he doesn't always get down deep enough, he loses his sex, his race, his memory. He strips himself bare, takes everything off, till he's barely human" (*Trumpet*, 131). As Joss gets down, both bending while playing the trumpet and figuratively descending into the music, he is dragged to another place entirely.

His (en)trance into music happens, as a matter of fact, as a sort of immersion into water, a reading corroborated by the expression "He dives back down again" (*Trumpet*, 134) following in the text. The experience of entering music through an affective state comparable to a trance and conveyed through a figurative submersion into music/water recalls, in turn, Afro-diasporic practices connected with Haitian Vodou, according to which priests and priestesses are believed to "spend time 'under water' . . . as part of their initiations," from where they emerge with the acquisition of a "sacred knowledge."[17] Joss's experience of music is thus inscribed as a revelation of a higher knowledge and related to the blurring of gender categories of belonging, since water deities in the tradition of Haitian Vodou (but also in West Africa and across the African diaspora more in general) present hermaphroditic traits, which demonstrate the possibility to "perform both masculinity and femininity" as attributes that move across all bodies.[18] Additionally, the expression "takes everything off, till he's barely human" (*Trumpet*, 131) seems to reflect Sylvia Wynter's formulation regarding the necessity to create new genres of the human through the abolition of "Man": neither a man nor a woman (intended as social constructs) Joss is able to be barely, or just, human, but in a different way, since the act of playing jazz enables him to undo old forms of humanism based on contemporary racialized heteropatriarchy and create new ones.[19]

While my aim is not to romanticize jazz or Black music in general, since the latter even in its most recent formulations continues to be interested by heterosexist practices,[20] I do intend to demonstrate that, despite its inevitable contradictions, it represents a space for transformation and freedom, especially when considering the negotiation of space for the expression of "black female libidinality" and its use within a masculine-dominated arena.[21] An example in this sense is the expression of lesbian desire by blues singers of the 1920s, such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Gladys Bentley, among others. In the novel, jazz becomes precisely an affective language that draws on the empowering potential of the erotic to open a space to rethink identity

as fluid, as a form of becoming, capable of creating new modalities of existence. As sound propagates through the ether in waves—a term that parallels the movement of water in the form of sea waves—Joss experiences, via his submersion into music/water, an alternative temporality. This temporality, in reproducing the cyclical aspect of water, merges the past, present, and future, thus resisting both closure and chrononormativity. As time collapses in this alternative spatiotemporal location, Joss witnesses his own death, to then remember his "blue birth" (*Trumpet*, 132), since, as the "wee black girl" (*Trumpet*, 132) that he once was, he had the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, hence inhibiting her capacity to breathe. The absence of air, in the cyanotic child as in water, anticipates a sort of rebirth in music through the emblematic gesture of blowing air into the trumpet/baby: "He gulps on the trumpet. The music has no breath, no air" (*Trumpet*, 132). The reference here seems to be to the metamorphic aspect, which involves death and rebirth (both literally and metaphorically) of the Black Atlantic as the foundational trope of Black diasporic aesthetics. It reflects the critical political potential inherent in the capacity to change, which is characteristic of water, jazz, and Black linguistic practices and is expressed as well in fluid conceptions of gender and sexual identities. Interesting to notice in this context is that the trumpet is also one of the symbols associated with Lasirèn, which is one of the manifestations of the hermaphroditic pantheon of African diasporic deities known as Mami Wata, who represent the multiple possibilities of gender identification not in terms of binarisms but over a spectrum.

Subsequently, Joss sees himself first as a young girl skipping along an old disused railway in a red dress, and then at the time of his death in a coffin while the funeral director Albert Holding undresses him to prepare his corpse for the funeral. In this context the reference to the old disused "railway line" holds perhaps a hidden meaning, since in jazz jargon a "train wreck" signals the "disagreement" of the musicians on their exact location in the tune they are playing.[22] In other words, in the process of playing jazz instruments someone gets lost so that the chord changes and the melody may get confused for several bars, but usually there are no fatalities and the journey continues.[23] As Joss, in the shape of a little girl, runs along (read agrees) the railway line (which can be interpreted as society's expectations or institutionalized knowledge and assumptions), she realizes that the track (the railway but also the musical tune or the recording) is not to be trusted. Therefore, the musical improvisation, granted by the "train wreck," enables Joss to think about

gender identity "off-beat" in a certain sense, which is following alternative temporalities and "paths" of expression. This reflects the separation of music and speech from the body producing them (made possible by the advent of sound-recording technologies), which enabled the emergence of what Alexander Weheliye calls "sonic Afro-modernity" to indicate new modalities of being and thinking employed by Black artists and performers to rethink subjectivity and identity.[24]

Past and present, woman and man start merging, thus collapsing temporal and gender categories as Joss keeps on painfully plunging and resurfacing in music/water: "The body changes shape. From girl to young woman to young man to old man to old woman" (*Trumpet*, 133). The descent into music, described as painful but regenerative,[25] metaphorically represents Joss's life journey as he sees people peering down at his grave and "throwing mud on his face" (*Trumpet*, 134). Here the dirt that is usually thrown over the coffin during burial is replaced by mud, which not only refers to the discrediting of Joss's memory that followed his death and the revelation of his secret (as the expression "to throw mud at somebody" suggests) but also implies a regeneration through the allusion to the mixture of water and dirt in the composition of mud; in fact, the next part of the sentence reads: "showering him with blooms" (*Trumpet*, 134). The mud that is thrown at Joss enables a regeneration ("blooms"), just as death permits a rebirth, destruction a restoration, in a process of perpetual metamorphosis or (sea)change:

> He can't stop himself changing. Running changes. Changes running. He is changing all the time. It falls off—bandages, braces, cufflinks, watches, hair grease, suits, buttons, ties. He is himself again, years ago, skipping along the railway line with a long cord his mother had made into a rope. In a red dress. It is liberating. To be a girl. To be a man. (*Trumpet*, 135)

As Joss keeps on changing all the time, language itself undergoes a metamorphosis as the syntactic structure of the narrative is altered through inversions (e.g., "Running changes. Changes running"), repetitions (e.g., "changing" and "changes" are repeated twice), alliteration (e.g., "wound right round," 132), semantic recontextualization (e.g., the umbilical cord becomes a rope the young Joss uses to play, and even a snake earlier on in the narrative; the reference to a "galloping piano" is followed by the image of Joss sweating like a horse; the umbilical cord swings, recalling a specific way of playing jazz notes known as

swing), and paranomasia (i.e., when Joss's corpse rests in the funeral parlor among other corpses, the narrating voice comments: "This is their *meet*. One last jam. Dead *meat*"; *Trumpet*, 133; emphasis added).[26]

The expression "O-bop-she-bam"—which refers to a jazz standard by Dizzy Gillespie and represents the verbalization of the sound produced by the new music known as Bebop—is repeated twice in the text (*Trumpet*, 131, 132), which, accordingly, assumes a syncopated rhythm. Among "swirling and whirling," "speeding" and "crashing," as Joss "swings" and goes down, the reader is confronted with an experience that does not simply represent an escape from linear time, but a merging of the different temporal categories, and that, by refusing mere ornaments and labeling, goes back to the body: "He is naked. This is naked jazz. O-bop-she-bam. Never lying. Telling it like it is" (*Trumpet*, 132). When Joss reaches the furthest point of his descent, the expression "There is music in his blood" (*Trumpet*, 134) metamorphoses into "The music is his blood" (*Trumpet*, 135), while the layers representing the categories that people have imposed on him in their attempt to understand him start an irrevocable undoing:

> But the odd bit is that down at the bottom, the blood doesn't matter after all. None of the particulars count for much. True, they are instrumental in getting him down there in the first place, but after that they become incidental. All of his self collapses—his idiosyncrasies, his personality, his ego, his sexuality, even, finally, his memory. All of it falls away like layers of skin unwrapping. He unwraps himself with the trumpet. Down at the bottom, face to face with the fact that he is nobody. . . . Playing the horn is not about being somebody coming from something. It is about being nobody coming from nothing. The horn ruthlessly strips him bare till he ends up with no body, no past, nothing. (*Trumpet*, 135)

Joss symbolically unwraps himself of the different layers of his identity (as constructed by himself and by the people with whom he entered in contact with), just like he unwrapped his chest in front of Millie, dropping all his barriers and revealing the vulnerable naked skin underneath, finally free. This liberation in music follows the structure of the Bebop, in which the musicians typically play the melody of a song, followed by a section of improvised solos, to then return to the melody at the end of the song. In fact it engenders the shattering of Joss's self

and its recreation at the end of the chapter: "He tears himself apart. He explodes. Then he brings himself back. Slowly, slowly, piecing himself together" (*Trumpet*, 136). This experience of descending into the music and in its innermost self as if in a trance seems to reflect also the unbounded diasporic belonging that Nadia Ellis traces in spirit possession across the Black diasporic tradition, when she writes: "the spirit's passing through the air, its passing through the body, shifts matter, bends it in barely perceptible increments, producing infinitesimal shattering and multiplication,"[27] just as it happens with Joss whose subjectivity "explodes," belonging neither to himself, "nor to one particular moment or place in time."[28] Additionally, the reference to blood in this passage is particularly instructive: if, on one hand, the expression "down at the bottom, the blood doesn't matter after all" refers to the absence of a factual blood relation between Joss and Colman (something that I will explore in more detail in the last section of this chapter), on the other, it evokes the presence, through absence, of another type of blood, that is to say menstruation. The blood of menstruation is refused in Joss's narrative just as the possibility to give birth is renounced. This return to the corporeal, to the female anatomy of Joss's body, as well as the process of undoing and redoing the subject through (musical) discourse, recalls the practice of the *écriture feminine*, as theorized in the 1970s by theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Monique Witting, Catherine Clément, and Julia Kristeva in the context of so-called French Theory.[29] The principle purported by the *écriture feminine* is that, since language is not neutral but rather the expression of a patriarchal system, there is a need to enable writing to evade the dominant discourse that regulates a "phallocentric system" by both placing experience before language and privileging nonlinearity in narrative expression. *Écriture feminine* refuses the paralyzing, stiffening call of a patriarchal language system dominated by a masculine sexuality gravitating around the penis (i.e., phallogocentrism) and proposes another language that is fluid, one that recognizes complexity, mobility, openness, and, as such, is capable of "overflow[ing] the subject," that is, of undoing the common notion of the unified and all-rationalist Western cogito by blurring its boundaries through a discussion that, like fluids themselves, is "unstable," uncontainable, both "inside/outside of philosophical discourse."[30]

In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), Cixous writes:

> If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier

> which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this "within," to *explode* it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. And you'll see with what ease she will spring forth from that "within"—the "within" where once she so drowsily crouched—to overflow at the lips she will cover the foam.[31]

Female writing "explodes" the rigid mold of phallogocentrism just as Joss "explodes" his self as constructed through the very language of the racialized heteropatriarchy he lives in, to then piece it back together anew, giving expression and voice to the possibility of new modalities of existence.

While creating a language that is fluid, open to change, Kay emphasizes through Joss's narrative how the need for social approval that characterizes instead "masculine writing" stiffens the language. The language becomes accordingly heavy, steady, and indifferent to change, as visible through Kay's criticism of socially constructed conceptions of gender norms within the text. In fact, movement and fluidity represent both a strength and a vulnerability. As Cixous explains with reference to the woman writer:

> She doesn't hold still, she overflows. An outpouring that can be agonizing, since she may fear, and make the other fear, endless aberration and madness in her release. Yet, vertiginous, it can also be . . . a "where-am-I," a "who-enjoys-there" . . . : questions that drive reason, the principle of unity, mad, and that are not asked, that ask for no answer, that open up the space where woman is wandering, roaming (a rogue wave), flying (thieving). This power to be errant is strength; it is also what makes her vulnerable to those who champion the Selfsame, acknowledgement, and attribution.[32]

Joss, and like him Millie, and later on Colman (but also numerous other characters like Giovanni in *Giovanni's Room* and the ones whose narratives are explored in the subsequent chapters of this book) often find themselves agonizing in this movement, as they keep on hitting against the steady wall of social conventions, their complexity rendering them vulnerable in a society where the unity of the subject and fixed identities

are the rules. Yet, their fluid maneuvering around Western society's impositions on race, gender, and sexuality shows, through their oppositional choices, the strength of errancy in the very possibility of change.[33]

As a matter of fact, Colman is initially the one that is most troubled by the idea of crossing the boundaries of stable binary identities when facing the reality of his father's female biology, something that couples with his latent fear of rejection. With the blood of menstruation tainting, both literally and figuratively, the masculine image he has of his father, Colman starts pondering: "What 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" (*Trumpet*, 67).

Only in music can Joss strip himself both of the strictly masculine gender belonging dictated by his appearance and of the blood tie he has with his female biology. There, he can free himself of the attributes attached to his identity by the symbolic order and de-essentialize and ungender himself to reach for the flesh, as the "zero degree of social conceptualization."[34] He then can start creating himself anew, freely choosing the elements he intends to retain and the ones he wants to discard, untied from society's judgment and imposition: "It is liberating. To be a girl. To be a man" (*Trumpet*, 135). This process is facilitated by the particular history connecting gender and race through practices such as "passing," but also of transness, in the different connotations of the term. In his discussion of the racial history of trans identity, Riley Snorton explains how Spillers's notion of ungendered flesh (used to refer to the reduction to pure matter, chattel, or flesh, of the Black slave's body under slavery) represents a critical genealogy for modern forms of transness.[35] The ungendering of the slave enabled the rearticulation of practices reflecting mutable forms of gender belonging and of being within the Black diasporic tradition. In his analysis of how forms of cross-dressing and passing (that sometimes slaves used to escape captivity) enabled a rethinking of gender as "not fixed but fungible, which is to say revisable within blackness, as a condition of possibility,"[36] he writes:

> blackness functioned as a site for an elaboration of gender in which the fungible interchangeability of sex for chattel persons revealed gender within blackness to be a polymorphous proposition. The ungendering of blackness, then, opens onto a way of thinking about black gender as an infinite set of proliferative, constantly revisable reiterations figured "outside" of gender's

> establishing symbolic order. Its symbolic order, which is simply one articulation of the ordering of things, relies upon gendered others to maintain an epistemological coherence.[37]

Jazz music as a fluid form that derives from the performative practices of the Black diasporic tradition enables, despite its inherent contradictions, the rearticulation of Joss's gender identity as transient, unfixed, and mutable. As Eckstein recognizes: "the epiphany of this moment, placed at the very heart of the novel, not only represents a climax in music; it also represents the climax of the novel's thrust to de-essentialize notions of being and identity beyond the purely musical."[38] In fact, it represents an important example of the movement toward constant change and the gesture of recreating oneself, despite societal conventions and impositions, that Kay traces in the whole novel and that involves both gender and racial identity, respectively explored in the following sections.

"He was a woman," or On Linguistic Vulnerability

"The Truth!"
at which Orlando woke.
He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman.

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*

His father must have had some nerve to sit in a barber's shop full of black men getting a man's haircut all the time knowing he was a woman.

—Jackie Kay, *Trumpet*

First appearing in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), the sentence "he was a woman" captures the reader's attention both for its "grammatical monstrosity," created through a gender inflexion mistake,[39] and paradoxically for the simplicity of the narrative it describes. Just as candidly as Woolf revolutionized the burgeoning genre of life writing, by claiming the importance of recognizing the interplay of imagination and facts in the restitution of someone's biography,[40] so

after her metamorphosis Orlando nonchalantly "looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath."[41] Orlando's sex change, like the secret Joss and Millie share in *Trumpet*, is ordinary, and in fact Woolf depicts it as a simple event that is part of the ever-changing process of identity transformation. Lucas Crawford explains:

> For Woolf, the "sex change" is a portion of the "continuous" "transition" that Orlando undergoes as an affectively capacious body. While trumpets blare and many people seek to make a story of it, Orlando simply yawns and knows that her body will continue to change.[42]

As Crawford suggests, the juxtaposition of trumpets pealing the truth and Orlando's placid reaction brings to the fore, while contesting them, the typical representations of change within transgender narratives, that is, the "shocking rupture" and the retrospective fulfilment of one's self through change,[43] thus establishing *Orlando* as part of a genealogy of trans* narratives.[44] Similarly, Kay does not only use the same linguistic expedient (as the expression "he was a woman" is repeated, and at times transformed according to the practice of repetition with change typical of Black diasporic aesthetics, several times in her novel) but resists the usual spectacularization and attempt to rationalize "factual" details typical of the biographical accounts or exposé concerning the lives of trans* people, which often do not spare even autobiographical material.

Jack Halberstam identifies three models of representation of transgender narratives by nontrans* narrators: "stabilization," which seeks to temper the destabilizing effects of said narratives by presenting them as strange or pathological; "rationalization," which consists of finding reasonable explanations for behaviors that appear as dangerous or "strange"; and "trivialization," which implies a dismissal of the lives of trans* people as unimportant and nonrepresentative of any effective change in gender normativity.[45]

While explaining a number of key terms in transgender theory, Julia Serano seems to bring together Halberstam's three models, with a particular focus on rationalization, in her definition of "trans-interrogation," which could be described as an obsession over the details concerning the existence of transgenderism or transsexuality. With the wit that characterizes her writing, Serano states:

> it occurred to me that, rather than simply removing the gender identity disorder diagnosis from the *DSM* [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*], we should perhaps consider replacing it with transsexual etiology disorder, to describe the unhealthy obsession cissexuals have with explaining the origin of transsexuality.[46]

The unhealthy obsession Serano refers to, not only with the origin of transgenderism and transsexuality but also with the prurient interest in the details of the (sexual) lives of trans* people, is reflected in the novel through the experience of the tabloid journalist Sophie Stones.

Sophie is depicted as a terribly insecure person who does not only need the attention of people but craves for rumors that might allow her to displace the attention from her perceived faults and to project them onto others to relieve herself. As a "little heavy girl," with her weight making her feel "silly and inferior" (*Trumpet*, 124), she recalls being jealous of her sister Sarah and of her successes, and her fascination for gossip stemming from hearing her parents maligning other people's lives (*Trumpet*, 125). This attitude transfers to the book she is writing on the life of Joss Moody as she notes that "people are interested in weirdos, sex-changes, all that stuff" (*Trumpet*, 125) and decides to settle for the word "transvestite" to define Joss as it has "a nice pervy ring to it" (*Trumpet*, 126), her prurience reflected not only in the tabloid-like titles she ponders over—"*The True Story of a Trumpet Transvestite. Blow Her Trumpet. Daddy, You Blew It*" (*Trumpet*, 125)—but also in the details she sets herself to discover: "find out the exact cup size" (*Trumpet*, 127).

As she variously defines Joss as a "transvestite," "tranny," "perv," "freak," and declares her interest in "lesbians," "dykes," and "butches"—shamelessly fetishizing such categories with a sound "the dirtier the better" (*Trumpet*, 170)—Sophie is one of the few who keeps on addressing Joss with the feminine personal pronoun "she," except when she realizes it might be a good marketing strategy to use the male one "he" as Joss's son Colman does (*Trumpet*, 266). In fact, Sophie is the first one in the novel who refers to Joss with the feminine personal pronoun through a letter she addresses to Millie: "I'd like to talk to you about *her* too" (*Trumpet*, 41; emphasis in the original).

In this context, it is interesting to notice that since English is considered a natural gender language as opposed to a grammatical gender one (e.g., Italian, French, or Spanish)—that is, that English speakers

usually refer to nouns with the male or female pronoun based on their being biologically male or female in the real world[47]—the pronoun assumes a particularly important role in revealing the sex or gender of both nouns and the invariable adjectives. Considering this aspect and that Millie has been constantly referring to Joss with the male pronoun, Sophie's choice and sudden use of "her" (typographically emphasized by the use of italics in the text) comes not only as an intrusion but also as an unnecessarily violent act of naming. By refusing to comply with the addressee's perceived gender identity, it in facts represents an example of hate or injurious speech: "To be hailed or addressed by a social interpellation," as Judith Butler maintains, "is to be constituted discursively and socially at once."[48] She explains:

> That one comes to "be" through a dependency on the Other—an Hegelian and, indeed, Freudian postulation—must be recast in linguistic terms to the extent that the terms by which recognition is regulated, allocated, and refused are part of larger social rituals of interpellation. There is no way to protect against that primary vulnerability and susceptibility to the call of recognition that solicits existence, to that primary dependency on a language we never made in order to acquire a tentative ontological status.[49]

Since, as Butler sustains, there is no protection possible against language vulnerability or, in other words, against our dependency on the recognition by others through language to acquire an ontological status, the interpellation (even if *in absentia*) of Joss through the female pronoun calls him into social existence through a gender identity with which he does not publicly identify.

This act of violence, the same that trans* people are constantly subjected to in numerous events of their daily lives, presents itself again in the novel through the medicalized discourse connected with the doctor, and acknowledged both by the registrar and the funeral director. When Dr. Krishnamurty arrives to check Joss's corpse and finishes unwrapping the bandages around his chest, she is surprised to find female breasts and, after a further inspection, female genitals. She then pulls out her "emergency red pen" from her doctor's bag and crosses out "male" from the certificate:

> She crossed "male" out and wrote "female" in her rather bad doctor's handwriting. She looked at the word "female" and thought

> it wasn't quite clear enough. She crossed that out, tutting to herself, and printed "female" in large childish letters. (*Trumpet*, 44)

Dr. Krishnamurty, through a different linguistic register than Sophie's, attempts to rationalize the trans* narrative she is witnessing and, to make it more legible, she does not only forcefully erase what she cannot fully comprehend but symbolically recurs to an unambiguous "childish" handwriting to "correct the wrong." As she attempts to scientifically categorize what she has witnessed, she furthermore inevitably construes Joss's narrative as a "descent" from rationality into instinctiveness, thus stabilizing (Halberstam) such a narrative by making it strange, with Joss metamorphosing from man to woman, to animal, according to a process that others him by abjecting him to the idea and ideal of the Western cogito: ". . . it was not just a body to her. It was a *man*, a person. . . . she . . . closed the door on the dead *woman*. The last thing she saw before the door had closed completely was the bandage lying curled on the bed like a *snake*" (*Trumpet*, 43–44; emphasis added).[50]

When the registrar Mohammed Nassar Sharif arrives and sets himself to issue the death certificate to Millie, he is dismayed by what he sees on the certificate written by Dr. Krishnamurty:

> But Mohammed Nassar Sharif had never in his life seen a medical certificate where male was crossed out and female entered in red. On the grounds of pure aesthetics, Mohammed found the last minute change hurtful. The use of the red pen seemed unnecessarily violent. (*Trumpet*, 77)

Still governed by a sort of aseptic medical (and as such institutionalized) register, suggested by the emotional distance indicated by the expression "on the ground of pure aesthetics," Sharif recognizes nevertheless the violence (which he deems unnecessary) of the use of the red pen and of the crossing out of a term meant to define, and as such circumscribe, only to replace it with another label representing yet another limiting epistemic category. When Millie opens up to him, revealing that Joss would have liked to be remembered in death the way he was in life, he ticks the box "female," but he writes down the name "Joss Moody," instead of Joss's birth name Josephine Moore. Constrained by a juridical frame of reference, Sharif cannot state something that is (legally) unrecognized, yet he empathizes with Joss's story and that of his widow, leaving, for what he can, a certain margin of maneuverability.

Finally, the red pen returns in the funeral director's narrative. A specialist in disguise who has mastered the art of turning even the most distressed looking dead person into a serene one, Albert Holding cannot acknowledge, let alone accept, Joss's corpse since there is nothing that his craftsmanship can do to "fix it." He thus wishes he had the "satisfaction of brutally and violently obliterating 'male' and inserting 'female' in bold, unequivocal red, then at least he would have something to do" (*Trumpet*, 112–13). Again, the violence symbolized by the red pen returns as unnecessary in the narrative, since it barely represents—as it is often the case with transphobic violence—a response to an irrational fear and the failure to understand, which prompts the need to "fix" things, to make them right, according to a logic saturated with preconceived ideas of a gender duality and of "acceptable" forms of behavior that leave uncompromised the ontological stability and unity of the universal subject. Still incredulous, Holding tries to understand the situation before disclosing the truth about Joss's female biology to Colman, who reacts with shock and anger. If, during the whole process Holding refers to Joss with the male personal pronoun and then switches to the female one once he discovers Joss's anatomical sex, he ends his narrative by returning to the male pronoun, which perhaps indicates his eventual acknowledgement of Joss's public gender identity:

> All of his working life he has assumed that what made a man a man and a woman a woman was the differing sexual organs. Yet today, he had a woman who persuaded him, even dead, that *he* was a man, once he had his clothes on. (*Trumpet*, 115; emphasis added)

Dealing with material bodies throughout his career, Holding's perception of gender identity has always been one stemming from the neat distinction between anatomical sexes, yet Joss's story deeply alters his perspective. His idea that dead people are often interested by sudden change at the moment of death finally enables him to recognize the complexity of gender belonging as a fact not only of life but also of death.

Throughout the novel the character who changes the most is Joss's son Colman. Shocked and angered at first by the view of his father's naked body in the funeral parlor, which gives him the impression that his whole life has been based on a lie (again the construction of trans*

life as a deception), he starts accepting Joss's story and the message that he entrusts to him only as the narrative progresses. Despite the troubled father-son relationship, it is in fact to Colman that Joss leaves the "final word" on his story because he recognizes him as the only one who is capable of eventually putting the pieces back together: "I thought to myself, who could make sense of all this? Then I thought of you. I am leaving myself to you" (*Trumpet*, 277), writes Joss in a letter to Colman. As I will explain in the last section, Joss and Colman share a history of displacement and of shifting identity belonging through the change of their names.

As the story evolves, the reader understands that the reason behind their troubled relationship is, in reality, a shared yet misunderstood deep love. If Joss always challenges his son because he wants him to find what makes him feel passionate and eventually excel in life, thus probably burdening him with excessive expectations, Colman, who venerates his father, always feels like he is never good enough for him: "I wanted him to be proud of me as a man, as a black man. I fucking worshipped him" (*Trumpet*, 49). The language of Colman's narrative is the one that most approximates the features of the spoken language (it is mostly a result of a series of interviews and meetings he has with Sophie) and encapsulates also a number of swear words representing his altered state of mind as he struggles with anger in coping with the situation. Additionally, Colman's language may indicate his attempt to embody a certain type of masculinity, of Black masculinity more precisely, which performatively uses certain elements to corroborate itself (e.g., swear words and a certain attitude meant to conform with the ideal of how a masculine man should behave and, at times, sexist and homophobic remarks).[51] As a Black man adopted by an interracial couple (White Millie and Black Joss), Colman is portrayed as struggling with the question of origins, feeling that, unlike his father who embraced a Scottish identity, he could not belong anywhere: "But I didn't feel Scottish. Didn't feel English either. Didn't feel anything. My heart is a fucking stone" (*Trumpet*, 51).[52] This perception, which I will explore in more details in the last section, is exacerbated when Colman discovers the truth about his father's sexuality and starts questioning his own:

> I never fancied boys; no. I've always been one hundred per cent heterosexual, except for those times when I was about sixteen and my mates and me would have a joint and a communal wank . . . . It was just a phase. (*Trumpet*, 57)

Colman's self-doubt about his sexuality is clear in his use of the reiteration "no" after the use of "never" when negating his presumed homosexuality, and by the defensive statement that the communal masturbation with his friends (that could be read as a homoerotic act) was just a phase, thus endorsing the Freudian interpretation according to which homosexual inclinations were acceptable as long as they represented only a phase in the "natural" sexual development toward heterosexuality.[53]

Since Colman elevated his father to the role model of Black masculinity that he himself wants to embody, he is at a loss to discover Joss's female anatomical sex and experiences a sort of epistemological crisis. In this context he subverts the typical assumption, rooted in cissexual privilege, that only trans* people "pass" and that, for example, does not make us consider as passing the daily attempts of cissexual men and women to appear more masculine and feminine, respectively, by adopting specific behavior, choosing particular pieces of clothing, wearing makeup, and so on.[54] In what could be considered an attempt to pass as masculine, to confirm his manhood in the momentary loss of stability followed by the acknowledgment of having molded his own masculinity on a trans* parent, Colman starts reflecting on how, after his father's death, his penis seems to be bigger and harder, and producing more seminal fluid (*Trumpet*, 140). This perception occurs as he masturbates thinking about having sex "full of cruelty and sleaze" (*Trumpet*, 140) with Sophie, an act that represents not only a revenge against her but also a reassurance of his own manhood, which in patriarchal and sexist cultures is usually affirmed through the male domination of women.[55]

While he still mainly refers to his father with the masculine personal pronoun "he," Colman systematically switches to the feminine one every time he thinks about his father's body or his nakedness. Anatomic details—"tits . . . dick . . . pussy . . . balls" (*Trumpet*, 61)—continue to flash through his mind as he linguistically others his father, expelling him further away from his self: "Imagine . . . a programme about fathers/mothers, tranny parents or whatever the fuck you'd call *them*" (*Trumpet*, 61; emphasis added). Colman tries to find a label for his father to make sense of him during the epistemological crisis he is undergoing, while simultaneously othering him through a linguistic construction based on an us-them dichotomy.

The focus on trans* people's genitals or body parts serves as a form of objectification—or "trans-objectification" in Serano's terms—since it not only reduces trans* people to the status of things but also keeps

them fixed in their assigned sex, hence construing their identified gender as something unachievable.[56]

Furthermore, the estrangement in language, most obvious in the sentence "he was a woman" that confounds the very grammar of the heteronormative narrative, is even stronger when Colman recalls the exact time he saw the naked body of his father in the funeral parlor: "But that look is still in my head now. . . . the image of my father in a woman's body. Like some pervert. Some psycho. I imagine him now smearing lipstick on a mirror before he died. . . . 'Freak's the word'" (*Trumpet*, 62–64). Stereotypical images of trans* people start flickering through his mind as he trivializes (according to Halberstam's terminology) the image of his father in the act of smearing lipstick on a mirror. Even when he thinks about the loving looks his parents exchanged when he was a child, he cannot help but comment: "My mother got into a double bed every night for the past thirty odd years and slept with my father, a woman. . . . that's completely out of order. . . . No man wants a fucking lesbian for his father" (*Trumpet*, 66).

Colman's language reflects the crumbling of his certainties as he struggles with heteronormative categories fixed in language (i.e., mother or father, woman or man, heterosexual woman or lesbian, etc.) to find a language that could encapsulate his lived experience and that of his family members. Later on, while he is telling Sophie about the shaving brush he received from his father—who cherished the male ritual of shaving so much as to pass it on to his son (a ritual that Colman associates with his father's need to perform his masculinity to compensate for the lack of a penis)—it dawns on Colman that reality was perhaps much simpler than he thought: "He bought him a shaving brush because he needed a shaving brush. Isn't that all there was to it? Does he need to go through his whole life working out his father's motives for every fucking thing?" (*Trumpet*, 123). Still confused, he slowly starts appreciating that masculine and feminine traits are not completely sealed off from each other (something that reflects Baldwin's conception of androgyny as a fundamental component of every human being explored in the previous chapter) and, in the process, he not only recognizes Sophie's plot, which he defines "Operation Transvestite" (*Trumpet*, 142), but also acknowledges his father's projected manhood, asking Sophie to stop messing about with the "he/she" matter and start using the male pronoun "he" instead.

In this context, a central episode is represented by the memory of a conversation about sex he had with his father, when he was younger.

The memory of his inquisitive self continuously asking his father about his sexual relationship with his mother and especially of the passionate way his father used to talk about it, surprises Colman, who says:

> My father never got a leg over. Had a hard-on. My father was never tossed off. He never stuck it up, or rammed it in, never split his seed, never had a blow job. What did he have down his pants? A cunt—is that it? Or did he wear a dildo? Shit. If he did, he would have rammed it in, I promise you. (*Trumpet*, 169)

If closer to the end of the novel Colman starts recognizing feminine features in his father that he had not noticed before, thus acknowledging the impossibility to fix identity (even sexual identity) and fit it into neatly separated boxes, the recognition of his father's manhood as unrelated to the specific fact of having a penis remains a central part of his narrative, recognizing that masculine and feminine traits and behaviors reside and manifest themselves across all bodies.

Similarly, his mother Millie recognizes Joss's projected masculinity and throughout the novel refers to him with the male pronoun, except for a dream she has in which both she and Joss cross dress, which ends with the potential killing of a female young Joss by a male adult Joss (*Trumpet*, 96), as if suggesting—in Millie's mind (which, as I will demonstrate in the next section, is partly attached to a desire for the normative)—the definite passage from one gender embodiment to the other.

Stranded Beyond (Straight) Time and Language

Millie's narrative is the one keeping the "tempo" around which all the other stories about Joss are weaved together, thus tracing the main temporal shifts within the novel. Together with Joss's (en)trance into music and his consequent experience of a misaligned temporality, her narrative is the one that most approximates the use of the queer tidalectics paradigm. In fact, it does not follow a chronological order but is characterized by a continuous washing on each other of past and present; it mainly unravels following Joss's perceived gender identity as opposed to the one that a cissexist society would ascribe to him based on his anatomical sex; and employs water and aquatic imagery as a way of emphasizing a cyclical temporality, the continuous changes Millie and