

## Unlosing Brandon

### Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography

What is remembering? Remembering brings the absent into the present, connects what is lost to what is here. Remembering draws attention to lostness and is made possible by emotions of space that open backward into a void. Memory depends upon void, as void depends upon memory, to think it. Once void is thought, it can be canceled. Once memory is thought, it can be commodified.

—Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*

The act of remembering, says poet and essayist Anne Carson, “connects what is lost to what is here.” And to be unlost is to exist in that space between retrieval and obliteration where erasure waits on one side and something well short of salvation waits on the other side. In many ways, Brandon exists among the unlost; he is actively remembered by people who never knew him, and he is endlessly memorialized as a symbol for the lives that have passed unnoticed and the deaths that have gone unrecorded. When we “remember” Brandon, what do we remember, who do we remember, and why do we invest so much hope in the remembering of an individual who would have appeared unremarkable and possibly unsympathetic had most of his mourners met him today? By calling the legacy of Brandon an “archive,” as I did in my last chapter, I draw attention to the material and phantasmatic investments in this figure who stands enigmatically for a generation or community of the lost, and I show how the act of remembering Brandon constitutes an act of mourning for a life unlived, a potential unrealized, and an identity unformed. In *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson comments: “Once void is thought, it can be canceled. Once memory is thought, it can be commodified.” In this chapter, I will trace the commodification of memory by biographers of transgender subjects. If some memories are motivated by an idealizing and sentimental desire to elevate these characters to iconic states,

others, as we will see in the examples that follow, are motivated by the anxious need to protect a fragile status quo. In the idealized narrative, the transgender subject occupies the status of "unlost"; he is retrieved and preserved in the amber of those memories that would hold him up as an example, an icon, a symbol. In the excoriating narratives, the transgender man is lost to history, and in his place we find only a magician disappearing in a puff of smoke and leaving in his wake a perfectly arranged tableau of heterosexual order.

### Transgender Histories

Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look.

—Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (1997, 22)

The names Brandon Teena and Billy Tipton have become synonymous with a cluster of questions and concerns about passing, gender identities, memory, history, space, and transgender biography. Brandon was a young woman who passed successfully as a man in a small town in Nebraska and who was brutally murdered when some local men decided to take their bloody revenge for what they considered to be a grand deception. Billy Tipton was a jazz musician who was only discovered to have a female body after his death. Since Tipton had married several times and was survived by a wife and adopted children, the revelation of his biological sex created a minor sensation. In the case of each of these transgender subjects, their lives were dismantled and reassembled through a series of biographical inquiries. This chapter situates transgender biography as a sometimes violent, often imprecise project that brutally seeks, retroactively and with the benefit of hindsight, to erase the carefully managed details of the life of a passing person, and that recasts the act of passing as deception, dishonesty, and fraud. I will be asking here what kind of truths about gender we demand from the lives of people who pass, cross-dress, or simply refuse normative gender categories. None of the transgender subjects whom I examine here can be definitively identified as transsexual, and none can be read as lesbian; all must be read and remembered according to the narratives they meticulously circulated about themselves when they were alive. In this chapter, I address

thorny questions about the ethics of biography, biographical temporality, and who has the right to tell tales about whose life; and I explore and flesh out the postmodern category "transgender." This chapter also makes contact with the ghosts who animate contemporary queer consciousness about transgender life.

While transgender has served as a kind of umbrella term in recent years for cross-identifying subjects, I think the inclusivity of its appeal has made it quite unclear as to what the term might mean and for whom. Some theorists like Bernice Hausman have dismissed transgenderism as a form of false consciousness that circulates through the belief that genders can be voluntary and chosen, and she concludes in *Changing Sex* that "the new gender outlaws are just newer versions of the old gender conformists" (Hausman 1995, 197). Others, like transsexual theorist Henry Rubin for one, read transgender politics as a postmodern critique of the commitment to the "real" that is implied by transsexualism (Rubin 1996). Still others, like Bidy Martin, identify transgenderism as a faddish celebration of gender crossing that assigns non-cross-identified queers to the ignominy of gender conformity (Martin 1994). But as I will show in this chapter, we have hardly begun to recognize the forms of embodiment that fill out the category of transgenderism, and before we dismiss it as faddish, we should know what kind of work it does, whom it describes, and whom it validates. Transgender proves to be an important term not to people who want to reside outside of categories altogether but to people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition. Transgender may indeed be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds.

I will engage here with the somewhat paradoxical, but necessary project of transgender history: paradoxical because it represents the desire to narrate lives that may willfully defy narrative, but necessary because without such histories, we are left with only a bare trace of a life lived in defiance of gender norms. At least one of the reasons that the term transgender quickly became popular and widespread in the early 1990s was the emergence of communities of cross-identifying women who did not comply with medical models of transsexuality. And as female-to-male transsexuals became more numerous and visible in urban queer communities, there was inevitably a reshuffling of categories and etiologies. Young people coming out in the 1990s, as my introduction showed, may be forgiven for not quite knowing what their experiences of cross-identification might mean. If "lesbian" in this

context becomes the term for women who experience themselves as female and desire other women, and if "FTM transsexual" becomes the term for female-born people who experience prolonged male-identification and think of themselves as male, then what happens to those female-born people who think of themselves as masculine but not necessarily male and certainly not female? We do use the term "butch" for this last category, but it cannot adequately bridge the categorical gap between lesbian and transsexual.

Jay Prosser's book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, in particular, has been enormously useful in thinking through the relations between the terms transgender and queer, and elucidating the continuities and difference between butch and FTM (Prosser 1998). Prosser's work helps us map the theoretical terrain of transgender studies. His formulation of the role of narrative in transsexual transition has established itself in opposition to what he understands to be a queer and indeed postmodern preference for performativity over narrativity. In *Second Skins*, Prosser asks what the effect of a theory of gender performativity has been on our understanding of transsexuality; he also argues that for all our talk about "materiality" and "embodiment," it is precisely the body that vanishes within ever more abstract theories of gender, sexuality, and desire. Prosser points out that in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler implied that it was the transgender subject in particular who symbolized the "gender trouble" to which every subject is heir; in other words, the split between sex and gender, which is so readable within the transgender or transsexual body, reveals the constructedness of all sex and gender. Gender normativity, within this schema, is a place of self-deception inasmuch as the "straight" subject imagines his or her gender to be consistent with his or her sex and the relation between the two to be "natural" (Butler 1990). As Prosser comments: "While within this framework, this allocation is a sign of the devaluation of straight gender and conversely queer's alignment of itself with transgender performativity represents queer's sense of its own 'higher purpose,'" in fact there are transgendered trajectories, in particular transsexual trajectories, that aspire to what this scheme devalues. Namely, there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply to be" (32). This is a complicated passage, but I think it can be rendered as: many transsexuals do not want to represent gender artifice; they actually aspire to the real, the natural, indeed the very condition that has been rejected by the queer theory of gender performance.

While I am totally sympathetic to Prosser's argument that the transsexual has been used in queer theory as a symbol for the formulation of a

subjectivity that actually threatens transsexual claims to legitimacy, I do think there are problems with his formulation of a transsexual desire for realness and his sense that gender realness is achievable. After all, what actually constitutes the real for Prosser in relation to the transsexual body? The penis or the vagina? Facial hair or shaved legs? Everyday life as a man or a woman? The main example of a transsexual desire for realness that Prosser examines involves Venus Extravaganza from the film *Paris Is Burning*, a figure whom Butler discusses at length in *Bodies That Matter*. Prosser critiques Butler for making a distinction between transgender transgression and transsexual capitulation to "hegemonic constraint," and he notes that as long as Venus remains gender ambiguous, then she can represent the transgression of the "denaturalization of sex"; but because she expresses a desire to become a white woman and live in the suburbs, Butler talks of the "reworking of the normative framework of heterosexuality" (Butler 1993, 133). Prosser, on the other hand, not only wants to release the transsexual from the burden of representing subversive sexuality and gender; he also wants to draw attention to the fact that Venus Extravaganza is killed by a transphobic john not because she is a woman but because she is mid-transition, not quite a woman. Prosser notes ominously that "Butler's essay locates transgressive value in that which makes the subject's life most unsafe" (49).

In the critique of Butler waged by Prosser, I believe a distinction needs to be made between realness and the real—a distinction that would have been meaningful to Venus, who lived in the world of balls, voguing, and realness. Realness in *Paris Is Burning* is, in the words of drag queen ball elder Dorian Corey, "as close as we will ever come to the real." It is not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation; it is the way that people, minorities, excluded from the domain of the real, appropriate the real and its effects. Another category in the world of drag balls exemplifies the inflections of realness: "butch realness." Masculine women compete within this category for the trophy that recognizes the most compelling, exciting, or convincing performance of passing by a butch. Here, as in other drag categories, the term realness offsets any implications of inauthenticity within the category, and it invites masculine women, passing women, to put their masculinity on display and inhabit it with style and emphasis for the entertainment and scrutiny of the judges of the competition. While it may seem to imply manipulable agency, butch realness actually describes less of an act of will and more of a desire to flaunt the unpredictability of social gendering.

Realness—the appropriation of the attributes of the real, one could say—is precisely the transsexual condition. The real, on the other hand, is that which always exists elsewhere, and as a fantasy of belonging and being. Venus Extravaganza, in the clips from *Paris Is Burning* discussed by Prosser and Butler, accordingly expresses her desire for the real in the form of things she will obviously never attain, such as white suburban respectability; meanwhile, in another performance of realness, the transgender man expresses his desire for a manhood that will on some level always elude him. The ever receding horizon of the real, however, need not be the downfall of transsexual aspiration; indeed, it may be its strength. Needless to say, the fantasy that many queers may entertain of gender realness is extremely important as we challenge the limits of theories of performance. Prosser suggests that transsexuals become real literally through authorship, by writing themselves into transition. “Narrative,” Prosser notes, “is not only the bridge to embodiment but a way of making sense of transition, the link between locations: the transition itself” (9). Gender discomfort can be alleviated by narratives that locate the oddly gendered subject in the world and in relation to others. While I cast the relationship between the transgender subject and narrative in slightly different terms, I find Prosser’s understanding of the role of narrative in transsexual self-authorization to be crucial. What happens when the transgender subject has died and is unable to provide a narrative of his complex life? What is the difference between transsexual autobiography and transgender biography?

One way in which queers and transgenders have put themselves in the way of gender realness is to inhabit categories of their own making. While some people suggest that categories (gay, lesbian, transsexual) are themselves the site of regulation, trouble, and repression, I would argue that categories represent sites of “necessary trouble,” to use one of Butler’s terms (Butler 1991, 4). Queer theory has long been preoccupied with the relationship between identity and regulation; post-Foucault, we recognize that to embrace identities can simply form part of a “reverse discourse” within which medically constructed categories are lent the weight of realness by people’s willingness to occupy those categories (Foucault 1980). Nevertheless, it may be that we have allowed this Foucauldian insight to redirect discussions of identification away from the subject of categories themselves. The term “reverse discourse” in Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1*, identifies and rejects the traditional formulations of gay and lesbian political struggle as essentially oppositional. Since certain sexual liberation discourses

recapitulate the terms of the homo/hetero binary that oppress minority sexual subjects in the first place, then these discourses become part of the installation of the very sexual hierarchy that they seek to oppose. Foucault, however, also understands emancipation struggles as strategically and historically necessary. Furthermore, a reverse discourse is in no way the “same” as the discourse it reverses; indeed, its desire for reversal is a desire for transformation.

We may not want to reject all reverse discourses per se, but may instead want to limit the ways in which we invest in them (coming out, for example) as end points: Foucault, and Butler for that matter, clearly believe that resistance has to go beyond the taking of a name (“I am a lesbian”), and must produce creative new forms of being by assuming and empowering a marginal positionality. The production of categories is also different in different spaces: expert-produced categories (“the homosexual,” “the invert,” “the transsexual”) are ultimately far less interesting or useful than sexual vernaculars or the categories produced and sustained within sexual subcultures. The naming of sexual vernaculars and the production of community histories can be traced back to the work of Gayle Rubin in particular, and she has spoken eloquently about the limits of expert discourses on sexuality (like psychoanalysis) and the importance of questions of “sexual ethnogenesis” (the formation of sexual communities).<sup>1</sup> Scientific discourses have tended to narrow our ability to imagine sexuality and gender otherwise, and in general the discussions that take place in medical communities about embodiment and desire may be way behind those on e-mail lists, in support groups, and in sex clubs. Accordingly, we should take over the prerogative of naming our experience and identifications.

Nowhere has the effect of naming our identifications been clearer in recent years than in relation to the experience we call “transgendered.” Transgender is for the most part a vernacular term developed within gender communities to account for the cross-identification experiences of people who may not accept all of the protocols and strictures of transsexuality. Such people understand cross-identification as a crucial part of their gendered self, but they may pick and choose among the options of body modification, social presentation, and legal recognition available to them. So you may find that a transgender male is a female-born subject who has had no sex-reassignment surgery, takes testosterone (with or without medical supervision), and lives as a man mostly, but is recognized by his community as a transgendered man in particular. The term transgender in this context refuses the stability

that the term transsexual may offer to some folks, and it embraces more hybrid possibilities for embodiment and identification. At the same time, the term transsexual is itself undergoing reconstruction by publicly identifiable transsexuals; Kate Bornstein, for one, has made a career from reshaping the public discourse around gender and transsexuality (Bornstein 1998). In other words, transsexual is not simply the conservative medical term to transgender's transgressive vernacular; instead, both transsexuality and transgenderism shift and change in meaning as well as application *in relation to each other* rather than in relation to a hegemonic medical discourse.

In relation to the female-born person who passes as male (with or without hormones) for most of his life, the term transgender registers the distinction between *his* cultivated masculinity and a male's biological masculinity, and it addresses the question of the transgender man's past history as female. For these subjects, of course, we need a transgender history, a method for recording the presence of gender-ambiguous subjects sensitive enough not to reduce them to either "women all along" or "failed men." Transgender bodies seem to be both illogical and illegible to any number of "experts" who may try to read them. At the same time, transgender lives often seem to attract enormous attention from biographers, filmmakers, talk show hosts, doctors, and journalists, all of whom are dedicated to forcing the transgender subject to make sense. While one would not wish to assign the transgender life to the inauspicious category of nonsense, we should be wary of overly rational narratives about lives filled with contradiction and tension. Ultimately, we must ask questions about history, documentation, and the sometimes dangerous project of scrutinizing lives that were organized around gender passing.

The lives and deaths of Brandon Teena and Billy Tipton have suffered the untimely and rude effects of overexposure. While obviously my efforts to examine the flurry of representation surrounding Brandon, Billy, and other transgender figures actually adds to this effect, the production of counternarratives seems all-important in a media age when suppression of information is virtually impossible (nor would I necessarily argue for the suppression of information under any circumstances). In the cases of Brandon and Billy, however, it serves some purpose to examine the motives behind various representations of transgender lives. In general, we can identify three different and often competing sets of motivations for the representation of a transgender life by nontransgender people. First, there is *the project of stabilization*. In this narrative project, the destabilizing effects of the transgender narrative are defused by establishing the transgender narrative as strange,

uncharacteristic, and even pathological. Stabilization, for example, is the underlying principle of cable television shows like *Weird Lives* on the Biography channel, a show that has featured the life stories of both Billy Tipton and male-to-female transsexual Christine Jorgenson.

Then there is *the project of rationalization*. Within a rationalizing project, the biographer, filmmaker, or writer finds reasonable explanations for behavior that may seem dangerous and outrageous at first glance. A good example of a rationalizing narrative about gender passing would be Maggie Greenwald's film *The Ballad of Little Jo*. In this account of a passing woman in postbellum America, the heroine is assigned an economic motive for her masquerade and she ultimately gives up her disguise when she falls in love with a man. This narrative placates mainstream viewers by returning the temporarily transgender subject to the comforting and seemingly inevitable matrix of hetero-domesticity.

Finally, there is *the project of trivialization*. A third narrative told about transgender subjects in order to contain the threat they represent to gender stability is a trivializing one in which the transgender life is dismissed as non-representative and inconsequential. Such a containment strategy can be found in numerous tales of female-to-male cross-dressing soldiers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Usually in such narrative accounts, the cross-dressing "military maid" is cast as an adventure seeker or a brave nationalist, but only rarely is she characterized as cross-gendered.

The term transgender can be used as a marker for all kinds of people who challenge, deliberately or accidentally, gender normativity. Jazz singer Little Jimmy Scott, just to give one example, is a male vocalist whose high countertenor voice causes him to be heard as female. His voice has been described as "angelic," and he has influenced many famous female jazz vocalists like Nancy Wilson. The term transgender can be applied here not to remove Scott from the category "male" but to prevent him from being heard as "female." In interviews, he strenuously objects to criticisms of his voice that liken it to a woman's and he insists, in a way, that his voice, his transgender voice, extends the category of maleness rather than capitulates to the strict dictates of gender normativity. In this context, the term transgender appears as an adjective to describe a voice rather than as an identification category that describes Scott's gender identity or sexual orientation. In what follows, I will use transgender as a descriptive term for several different forms of nonnormative gender presentation. While Scott has recently given interviews about the medical condition (Kallman's syndrome—a hormonal dysfunction) that

gave him his high voice and androgynous appearance, other people who present their gender ambiguously may not be given the opportunity to explain what motivates their gender variance.<sup>2</sup> Transgender history should allow the gender ambiguous to speak; too often, I will claim, the histories of women who pass as men or the narratives of transgender men attempt to rationalize rather than represent transgender lives in the glory of all their contradictions. In the rest of this chapter, I examine the biographical accounts that have been produced about transgender men in the last decade and argue that with only a few notable exceptions, these biographies cast transgender men in the somewhat salubrious roles of cad, deceiver, seducer of young women, or simply the delusional charmer.

### Ghost Writing: The Case of Billy Tipton

Many ghost writers believe they are the real authority on their subject and not the ghost themselves.

—Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (1998, 262)

Early on in *Trumpet*, a haunting novel by British author Jackie Kay, Millicent Moody, the widow of the celebrated jazz musician Joss Moody, comments: “The only thing that feels authentic to me is my past” (37). Shortly after her husband dies, the secret that she and Joss have kept meticulously over the years of their marriage leaks out to the press: Joss was born a woman. As Millicent mourns the death of her beloved husband, she also has to fend off journalists, try to repair the damaged relationship with her son, and protect the memories of her life with Joss from the vicious rewritings to which they are now subject. “I am the only one,” she says, “who can remember him the way he wanted to be remembered” (40).

*Trumpet*, as even a short summary of the novel makes clear, models the character of Joss Moody on the life and death of the U.S. jazz musician Billy Tipton.

When Tipton died in 1992, paramedics called by his son were shocked to find breasts beneath the man’s clothing. Tipton’s son and his last wife claimed to have no knowledge of Tipton’s secret. Unlike Tipton’s wife, Millicent in Kay’s novel *Trumpet* is depicted as having full knowledge of the “facts” of her husband’s embodiment. For Millicent, her husband’s breasts and female genitalia were “our secret”—a secret not all that different from the many secrets kept between spouses: “Lots of people have secrets, don’t

they? The world runs on secrets. What kind of place would the world be without them?” (10). The revelation of the secret of the passing man or woman, however, seems to occasion a particular kind of curiosity, and has produced sometimes cruel and disrespectful revisions of life narratives. The revelation of Tipton’s “secret,” for example, prompted speculation and investigation of the so-called true identity of Tipton.

In her highly publicized biography of Tipton, *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton*, academic biographer Diane W. Middlebrook comes dangerously close to claiming that Tipton’s life as a man was simply the result of his overwhelming ambition to perform as a musician (Middlebrook 1998). Despite recent research providing evidence to the contrary (Dahl 2001; Tucker 2001), Middlebrook argues that jazz gigs were hard to come by for women in the 1930s and 1940s. And by emphasizing the impenetrable nature of this music scene for women, she is able to make Tipton’s desire to perform and tour seem like motivation enough for his momentous decision to live his life as man with a woman’s body. This rationalizing rubric then forces Middlebrook to view his relationships with women as elaborate deceptions within which Tipton finds younger women to date and then exploits their sexual naiveté, using them as a “beard.” Middlebrook depicts Tipton accordingly and variously as a “magician” and as someone who preyed on innocent and naive women. Of one wife, Betty, who was very young when she married Tipton, Middlebrook writes, “Billy made a shrewd choice in choosing Betty as a partner, and it is the shrewdness that diminishes Billy’s moral stature” (177). In such moments, the supposedly objective and scholarly biographer turns abruptly into judge and juror, and the life hanging in the balance is measured by impossibly high standards.

While obviously transgender and transsexual critics may also be guilty of manipulating the subject matter of transgender lives, more often than not transgender or transsexual researchers will reveal their own investment in the subject matter at hand (Stryker 1994; Hale 1998). Other analysts, biographers, and historians, like Middlebrook, remain hidden from view, content to allow the spotlight to shine on the strangeness and duplicity of the transgender subject. For this reason, Middlebrook’s academic biography is subtitled *The Double Life of Billy Tipton*, and Kate Summerscale’s biography of butch lesbian Joe Carstairs marks Carstairs life story as “eccentric” in its subtitle (Summerscale 1997). Eccentric, double, duplicitous, deceptive, odd, self-hating: all of these judgments swirl around the passing woman, the cross-dresser, the nonoperative transsexual, the self-defined transgender person, as

if other lives—gender-normative lives—were not odd, not duplicitous, not doubled and contradictory at every turn. When Middlebrook tries to reveal herself to the reader's gaze, she oddly places herself in the position of a duped wife: "What if I had met Billy at age eighteen, Betty's age when they became lovers? In 1957 I was as ignorant about the specifics of sexual intercourse as most of my girlfriends, and I did not know much about male anatomy. Would I have discovered Billy's secret?" (175). In fact, this isolated moment of self-revelation in a text completely trained on the eccentricity of Tipton, does tell us much about the biographer, Middlebrook. It tells us that she identifies and is in sympathy with Billy's wives rather than Billy; it tells us that her particular perspective may allow her unique insight into the lives of those women who chose to ignore and accept Billy's anatomy while loving and honoring his chosen gender. Indeed, Billy's last wife commissioned this biography, and it is written for her (or at least on her behalf), to her, and in concert with her desires. In many ways, in fact, *Suits Me* well suits the wife who wants to distance herself from her late husband's legacy of queerness, and it suits too the needs of a mainstream reading public who want to be fascinated but not challenged, provoked but not transformed. What would the biography look like if the biographer identified with Billy? Should such an identification be a precondition for writing such a biography? Why is the life of Tipton the life on show when the lives of his wives share in the eccentricity that so fascinates Middlebrook? Those wives also lived double lives, also made choices—shrewd choices. How does the scandal of the transgender body drain attention away from the extraordinary qualities of other conflicted lives?

Returning again to Kay's novel, we find a character closely mirroring Middlebrook. In *Trumpet*, a biographer is hot on the trail of Joss's secrets, and tries to bribe both his son and his wife to give her information about Joss. In the last half of the novel, Kay details the struggle between journalist Sophie Stones and Joss's son, Colman, over the documenting of Joss's life; it is in this section of the novel that Kay forcefully brings to a crisis questions about naming, identity, and narrative. In the characterization of Stones, moreover, it is impossible not to read parallels between her and Middlebrook. While Middlebrook's biography of Tipton was commissioned by his last wife, Kitty, in *Trumpet*, Joss's wife steadfastly refuses to have anything to do with a biography of Joss, and Millicent comments in outrage, "The idea that I could cooperate with a book about my life, that I could graft myself into this life that they think I had. . . . My life is up for grabs. No doubt they will call me a les-

bian. They will find words to fit onto me. Words that don't fit me. Words that don't fit Joss" (Kay 1998, 153–54). Kay depicts the biographer as a stranger who seeks intimacy with the dead for the purposes of telling a good story: "The public might hate perverts, she [Stones] tells herself, but they love reading about them" (264). In order to tell the story of the cross-dresser or the transgender subject, the biographer must convince herself that her own life is normal, beyond reproach, honest. But Kay shows that biography as a project is inevitably bound to deception and manipulation in its own way. How else does the biographer get loved ones to inform on their former father/husband/son? How else to create a position from which to judge? At one point, however, Stones questions her own motivations, asking herself, "I wonder what I would have felt if I had been Mill Moody. Would I have fallen for Joss Moody too?" (126). This question is an uncanny echo of Middlebrook's own questions about her motivation for rewriting Tipton's carefully constructed life. And in both cases, the biographer is shown as one with no identification with the subject of their biographical project; in both cases, the biographer can only wonder about the desire directed at the transgender subject.

In a flurry of investigative zeal, Kay's novel shows us that a life carefully written by its author, owned and shielded by loved ones, may suddenly stand exposed as a lie. The beauty of Kay's narrative is that she does not try to undo the life narrative of a passing man; rather, she sets out to honor it by weaving together a patchwork of memories from Joss's survivors, but mainly his wife, and making that patchwork into the authentic narrative. When Millicent asserts, "I am the only one who can remember him the way he wanted to be remembered," she rejects the attempts made by the press to revise, reform, and rescript her husband. Although the blurb on the back cover of *Trumpet* refers to the love between Millicent and Joss as something built: "out of a complex, dazzling lie," the novel itself quietly sidesteps the equation between passing and lying, and instead investigates the particularity of desire: "I didn't feel like I was living a lie," Millicent thinks. "I felt like I was living a life" (95).

While Tipton was born a white midwesterner, Kay's character, Moody, is a black Briton: "His father was African, his mother Scottish" (17). Joss and Millicent adopt a black son together, Colman, who later in life wonders how his parents pulled off their masquerade. In the wake of the revelation of his father's sex, he struggles with the complex legacy of ambiguity that Joss leaves him: "I didn't feel Scottish. Didn't feel British either. Didn't feel anything. My heart is a fucking stone" (51). He remembers how Joss could not tell him

stories about his grandparents, but told him instead to make up his own bloodline, imaginatively create his own family tree. He remembers the accidental resemblance between his father and himself: "I am the same kind of colour as my father. We even look alike. Pure fluke" (50). And Colman takes pride in the ways in which his father and he are related despite the lack of a biological link. Finally, Colman struggles to make sense of his masculinity, modeled so clearly on his father's and destabilized now by the revelation of female body parts. Is his own masculinity a lie? he wonders. Does his own identity dissolve in the wake of his father's death?

The voices that tell the life and death of Joss are various, like the lives he lived, like the lives we all live. His wife's memories approximate most closely the life he made and narrated for himself. His son's struggle with his father's legacy creates a complex and contradictory story of fatherhood and forgiveness. But there are other voices as well: a doctor, a registrar, a funeral director. The doctor and registrar both play their part in the construction and destruction of identities: the doctor crosses out "male" on the death certificate and quietly inserts "female"; the registrar agrees to record Joss as "Joss Moody" on the death papers and not "Josephine." So too the funeral director states, "There are as many different deaths as there are different people" (103), and he carefully guards the genre of death that Joss has chosen. But the biographer is a different story, has a different story, and it is the battle between competing narratives about Joss that speaks to the ethics of biography.

By taking aim at the project of narrating a life built around passing, Kay's novel also produces important questions about the project of transgender history and biography. The danger of biography, Kay's novel suggests, lies in the way "many ghost writers believe they are the real authority on their subject and not the ghost themselves" (Gordon 1997, 262). Kay warns us here to listen to the ghost. In her beautiful sociological study of haunting, *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon also advises us to listen to the ghost, to hear the unspoken, and to see the invisible. She remarks that "the ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" (8). Obviously, the ghost for Gordon is not quite the same as the ghost for Kay, yet both texts share a sense of the mechanism of haunting as an articulate discourse. Both texts also suggest that haunting is a mode within which the ghost demands something like accountability: to tell a ghost story means being willing to be haunted. "Following the ghosts," Gordon says "is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are lo-

cated" (22). The error of the willful biographer lies in her refusal to be changed by her encounter with the ghost she chases; the method of the transgender historian must be encounter, confrontation, transformation.

Kay's novel raises thorny questions about biography, about precisely the kind of biography that Middlebrook has written. Should identification be a prerequisite for writing up someone's life? Is a biography that tells tales and reveals secrets an act of violence? Should there be an ethics of biography? Kay herself points to the danger of biography and warns us to listen to the ghost. And unlike the ghostwriter who cares nothing about the ghost, Kay grants her ghost the last word. In the novel's final section, Joss returns from the dead in a letter he leaves for his son to finally tell his own story. This simple but effective gesture of giving Joss the last word summarizes Kay's particular interest in the Tipton legend and its retelling. She comes to praise, memorialize, and eulogize Tipton/Moody and countless transgender men, and not to bury them.

#### Male Fraud: The Case of Brandon

While Tipton died a so-called natural death in 1992 only to have his life rearranged by the discovery of his "secret," Brandon, one year later, was exposed and then killed precisely for his secret. While the death of Tipton and the subsequent discovery of his "true" sex created a ripple in the media, the Brandon murders created a veritable landslide of both queer and mainstream narratives. As I suggested in the previous chapter, this mountain of documentation can now be recognized as an archive of marginalized queer lives. But we can also find a fair share of "ambulance chasers" among the multitudes of writers and artists who have felt drawn to the case. What does this narrative symbolize about late-twentieth-century gender norms, and what is its appeal, not simply to queer communities who mourn Brandon's passing, but to straight writers over whom the narrative exerts a mesmerizing effect? Just a quick rundown of the fictional material inspired by the "true" story of Brandon would include the following: the case has been fictionalized in a novel by Dinitia Smith called *The Illusionist*; it has been written up as a true-crime mystery called *All S/he Wanted* by Aphrodite Jones; and John Gregory Dunne wrote about the murders for the *New Yorker* (Smith 1997; Jones 1996; Dunne 1997). In terms of cinematic representations, Diane Keaton tried unsuccessfully to produce a feature film about the case, starring Drew Barrymore, but fortunately she was beaten to the punch by *Boys Don't Cry*, which

in turn drew heavily from *The Brandon Teena Story*. At the same time, queer media artist Shu Lea Cheang has created a Web site for the Guggenheim Museum simply called *Brandon* that she describes as a "multi-artist, multi-author, multi-institutional collaboration."<sup>3</sup> In my next chapter, I will look at the feature film made about Brandon more closely, but here I want to consider what the implications might be of such a rush to represent, fictionalize, and document this case in print media.

The story of Brandon has been carefully disguised and written up in Smith's *The Illusionist*, a tale of a young man called Dean Lily who seduces young women without revealing to them that he is really a woman. *The Illusionist* recasts the Brandon story in Sparta, New York, and makes the Brandon character into an amateur magician who picks up women in the Wooden Nickel bar; the novel insists, in other words, that since Dean Lily is only a counterfeit man, "a wooden nickel," he must seduce his unknowing heterosexual partners by using a deadly combination of charm and magic. Smith's narrative characterizes the appeal of Brandon's charms as a deliberate mode of pandering to feminine adolescent fantasies of nonthreatening and nonadult masculine sexuality. Smith never actually acknowledges that her novel is based on the Nebraska murders, and the novel carries the usual disclaimer stating that "names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental." Blurbs from reviews printed inside the book confirm that the power of this narrative lies in Smith's particular skill as an author, and so reviewer Hilma Wolitzer exclaims, "Dinitia Smith is the true illusionist." And another reviewer, Rosellen Brown, pinpoints Smith's skill as her ability to "make the bizarre plausible." Gay author Larry Kramer notes simply that the novel is "an overwhelming accomplishment of the imagination." The insistence on the originality of this narrative, of course, is highly ironic here. The basis for the narrative in this book springs not from the mind or the imagination of Smith but is inspired by the "true-crime" mystery of the Brandon murders; and the lack of originality within the novel is not of negligible interest since her depiction of the Brandon character has everything to do with the difference between the real and the fake.

While Brandon used many names during his brief life, Smith gives her hero only one: Dean Lily. This name plays all too obviously on some combination of "James Dean" and a virginal "lily of the valley."<sup>4</sup> Whereas Brandon's life was full of complicated relations to his female lovers and male bud-

dies, Smith reduces all desire directed at Dean Lily to the vulnerabilities of adolescent females, and she simplifies Dean Lily's relations to other men by depicting his masculinity as inadequate, lacking, and endangered. The novel's title, *The Illusionist*, refers to the performance of magic tricks by the protagonist. As Smith writes, "He curls a dime around his fingers and it changes into a penny. . . . The partyers watch him, mocking smiles on their faces, skeptical. They only half believe what he is doing is magic. They've seen his tricks before. They know he's an imposter and a con man. . . . And they love him anyway" (Smith 1997, 97). This simple and even simplistic literary device, which marks Brandon as a magician and then uses magic to explain his gender performance, certainly accesses some of the power of Brandon's "act," but it dangerously confirms a conservative view of his gender performance as trickery, illusion, subterfuge, and sleight of hand. By casting him and his gender as magical, the narrative actually reiterates the logic that sentences Brandon to death: his gender is unreal, it is indeed ethereal like magic, it is dangerous and it must be punished. The magician may be a special character, protected and charmed, but he is also, after all, an imposter and a con man. He is the illusion that disappears into thin air when his magic wand is challenged by the real wand of manhood. This notion of Brandon as a magician, furthermore, echoes Middlebrook's characterization of Tipton as a "magician" (147) weaving a "tangled web of deceit" (176). The metaphoric use of magic in both instances implies that the transgender man creates a gender act that takes advantage of a trusting audience, forcing them to invest hope and desire in an illusory identity. Both Middlebrook and Smith place their antiheroes in the realm of magic in order to assert that true manhood exists in the space of the real and does not rely on a set of tricks that conjure up masculinity. For both writers, the real man is solid and present while the transgender man has an identity that can appear or disappear like a rabbit in a hat.

While this novel misses many of the nuances of Brandon's life, a review of the book in the *New York Times* is simply homophobic and transphobic. In her strange summation, reviewer Patricia Volk tells us that this novel is about "two dumb homophobic hoodlums, needy girls, a depressed town and a transgender stranger with a Casanova complex" (Volk 1997). And she continues, it is not about "homosexual love. It is about being so emotionally deprived that anything that fills the void looks viable." Volk concludes that "Miss Smith has no trouble convincing the reader that Dean was the answer to these maidens' prayers. You just wish they had prayed for something

better. 'I mean if he does everything that a man does,' one of his girlfriends says, 'what does it matter?' He doesn't and it does" (B7). This paranoid insistence that "he doesn't" do everything that a man does and that "it does" make a difference that Brandon is not biologically male, yet again repeats in a different mode the eradicating violence aimed at Brandon throughout his life. Also, the use of the term "maidens" characterizes the girls as virginal and even presexual—in other words, as lacking the basic adult knowledge that would allow them to tell the difference between authentic and unauthentic maleness. Volk also insists that the plight of both Dean Lily and the girls he seduced has to do with an emotional deprivation arising out of class circumstances. Within Volk's flip reading of the already simplified version of Brandon's story, emotional complexity emerges as a symbol of bourgeois identity and working-class identity must be reduced to the impoverishment of all aspects of life.

Early on in his career as a man, Brandon passed as "Billy." As Billy, he dated a young woman called Heather Kufahl while still living in Lincoln, sometimes at home with his mother; in addition to Heather, he regularly dated girls who thought he was male. Certainly at this stage in his life, the ambiguities of adolescent gender aided him in his ability to pass, but he was also helped by the fact that so many of the girls he dated, like fourteen-year-old Heather, found that there were huge contradictions between the romances they saw depicted on television and in magazines and the realities of teenage sexual etiquette. Heather said of Billy: "He was everyone's dream guy. . . . He was romantic. He took you out to dinner, bought flowers, roses, just everything" (Jones 1996, 61). Billy, unlike other guys, lived up to her romantic notion of masculinity. When Billy told Heather that he was a "hermaphrodite," she was satisfied with this explanation of his bodily difference, not because she was stupid, but precisely because she was satisfied with Billy's performance of masculinity. Later, Billy would leave Lincoln and deploy different explanations for his male identification ranging from transsexuality to intersexuality; even then his girlfriends accepted these explanations without question.

As a counternarrative, then, to bourgeois and heteronormative renderings of heroic individualism, Brandon's self-presentation was itself—and must be read as—a damaging, indeed threatening critique of middle-class as well as working-class male masculinity. Not only did he deliberately offer the women with whom he went out those things that he knew they could never get from local boys, he also acknowledged the complexity of their own self-

understandings. By showing his girlfriends respect, generosity, sweetness, and politeness, Brandon excelled in the performance of masculinity that we most often associate with middle-class values of self-restraint and courtliness. His masculinity destabilizes the essential nature of not only male masculinity but also middle-class masculinity. One of his lovers, Lana Tisdale, commented that she was attracted to him "because he was well-dressed and really polite. The guys I knew in Falls City weren't like that. They weren't like that at all" (Jones 1996, 128). Another called him "the perfect woman's man," and still another dubbed him "a perfect gentleman" (Minkowitz 1994). Many of the women in their accounts of Brandon describe him as a fantasy, an ideal, an improved and even aristocratic version of the usual forms of masculinity that they came across. But mainstream writers like Smith and Volk insist that these women deserved something better than Brandon despite the fact that the women insisted that he was their dream come true. Something better in this context constructs authentic maleness as the combination of middle-class status and male embodiment.

If Brandon was convincing to his girlfriends, it was certainly in part because these young women wanted to be convinced by his romantic persona, but it was also in part because they clearly felt some dissatisfactions with other versions of maleness that they had encountered. Brandon knew all too well what these other versions of masculinity looked like. Indeed, in relation to his male friends, Brandon constantly walked a dangerous line between identification, friendship, and rivalry. While many of his male friends knew on some level that he was not a man, for short periods of time they did accept him as such. Since so much of what we recognize as masculinity and masculine relations revolve around intense sites of competition and aggression, Brandon's performance might be expected to raise the stakes considerably within the everyday contestations of manhood. In one cocky picture of Brandon reproduced in Jones's informative true-crime mystery, we see Brandon grabbing his crotch while his "buddy" John Lotter makes a bicep. Brandon compares his manhood to his friend's by offering his crotch as a gender marker equal to John's bicep. This photo has an eerie oracular quality when we realize that the comparison would come down to a deadly standoff only days later when Lotter would demand to see the crotch, no longer satisfied with the symbolic evocation of it. Lotter and Nissen knew on some level that the only thing that disqualified Brandon from manhood was the contradiction of his body, and while this contradiction signified no obstacle at all as far as Brandon's girlfriends were concerned, for the men, the body must be

the final arbiter of manhood because, in a sense, this is the only competition within which they can beat the version of masculinity that Brandon champions. When Brandon literally did not measure up to the physical test of manhood, his two male "friends" took him out to a remote spot, where they then raped and sodomized him. The punishment, as far as they were concerned, fit the crime inasmuch as Brandon must be properly returned to the body he denied. If Jones's research on the Nebraska murders is correct, this was a punishment with which Brandon had been threatened many times. Jones comments on an earlier friendship between Brandon and a roommate named Drew: "Some of Drew's buddies didn't like Brandon's charade. They felt they were being made fools. 'If she wants to be a man, she better well fight like one,' one of them threatened. 'If all she wants is dick, she could ask me,' another teased, 'I'll give her some'" (Jones 1996, 71). While Brandon's relations with his girlfriends demonstrates that a penis is neither necessary to nor inevitable within heterosexual encounter, the men whom he antagonizes insist that "all she wants" (where "she" means both Brandon and the girlfriends) is penis, and the penis becomes the sum total of what they are willing to give. Brandon, as I will elaborate on later, gives in very different ways.

According to the documentary account, when he went to the police after the rape, Brandon was further abused by a police officer, who chastised him for "running around with girls instead of guys." The response of Police Chief Laux, of course, confirms that Brandon deserved what he got and that he had it coming; Laux's unethical questioning of Brandon uses the traditional charge against a woman in a rape case—namely, that she was to blame all along—but annexes it to the idea that gender nonconformity must be corrected through the enforcement of heterosexuality. What is made all too clear in this case is that heterosexuality is violently enforced in multiple sites. Accordingly, Brandon's gender "disorder" wreaks havoc within the unstable arena of adolescent and early-adult gender relations, and must be brutally eliminated within that same space. But Brandon also represents an abiding threat to the law itself, and within the confines of the police station, he must be coerced back into the role of female victim. Naturally, then, the police did not act immediately on the rape charge against Lotter and Nissen, and one week later, as a consequence of some combination of police inactivity and vigilante enthusiasm, Brandon was shot to death at the age of twenty-one in a deserted farmhouse by the two men. In her woefully unimaginative rendition of the violent dispatch of Brandon, the counterfeit male, Smith can only

collude with the representational system that makes Brandon a target for brutalization. By casting his masculinity as inadequate, slight, deceptive, and made up of tricks and sorcery, Smith fails to see that for the girls of Falls City, Brandon's masculinity occupied the space of the real comfortably and without contradiction. When she discounts Brandon's masculinity, Smith inadvertently discounts his female suitor's ability to desire particularity, and the ensuing narrative marries a transphobic narrative to a sexist one.

Smith also misunderstands the nature of Dean Lily's gender role. Depicted as a mysterious stranger who enters the lives of young and impressionable women, Smith compares Dean to Shakespeare's Viola from *Twelfth Night*, and a quotation from that play frames the novel as a whole. By making the connection between Viola and Dean, Smith implies that Dean's cross-dressing transformation, like Viola's, is only a temporary disruption to the heterosexual romantic narrative. Furthermore, through the comparison to Viola, Smith promises to restore gender order by the story's end. Ominously, then, the last section of the book is named for the last part of the quote from *Twelfth Night*: "I am not that I play." This section, which records the aftermath of Dean's brutal murder, implies that a kind of unmasking has occurred, and that the real Dean and the mystery of Dean Lily has finally been solved. By relegating Dean's life to a play and his gender to a role that Dean has assumed unsuccessfully, the novel ultimately insists that the real Dean, the Dean beneath the costume, was always and only a woman. This impression is further emphasized by the form of the narrative within which Dean's lovers take turns describing their experiences with him while Dean speaks only once. Dean's sole first-person narrative presents the rape scene, and so his authority in speaking is undercut by the self-eradicating experience that he describes. By the novel's end, Dean has been dismantled completely; no longer an illusionist, he seems finally to be simply an illusion.

Another writer, Dunne, similarly tried to disentangle the desires of the girls from the identity of Brandon, and while Smith simply dismisses the whole teenage gang in Falls City as simplistic, Dunne actually manages to champion the masculinity of Brandon's murders even as he casually dismisses Brandon's own. In a long account of the case titled "The Humboldt Murders," Dunne casts Brandon in the role of a confused and pathetic androgyne. He describes "her" as "small and vaguely androgynous," and claims that "her" appearance is more "unisexual" than "masculine" (Dunne 1997, 49). Given what he sees as Brandon's unconvincing masculine appearance,

Dunne can only explain Brandon's successful performances as male as evidence of the ignorance of working-class youth. He calls the women Brandon went out with "child women" trapped in cycles of sexual abuse and domestic violence, and suggests that Brandon's appeal boiled down to the fact that he was "an unthreatening romantic, a lean and unmuscular quasi-man who offered sex without pregnancy or fisticuffs" (50). Dunne repeats here Smith's insistence that Brandon's masculinity was unthreatening, and that it looks tame compared to the real armed and dangerous masculinity of working-class male youth. He also repeats Volk's assertion that Brandon passes because he mingles with ignorant working-class adolescents. Of course, this construction of Brandon masks a much more complicated reading of his masculinity in which his successful and romantically viable approximation of heterosexual masculinity attracts women precisely because it is denaturalized; furthermore, the insistence that Brandon's masculinity is unthreatening sounds anxious here given how clearly threatened all the men (including Dunne) involved in this case obviously were. Dunne bluntly refuses to take Brandon's masculinity seriously and depicts him as a poor deluded woman who lacked even "the imaginative range to consider the idea that she was truly at risk." The boys who kill Brandon, on the other hand, are shown to be victims of unstable families who are trapped by their class backgrounds and lack of opportunities.

In relation to Nissen in particular, Dunne's sympathies run riot and, in the course of writing his story, he begins a long correspondence with Nissen. He goes on to present pieces of this correspondence to show that despite Nissen's low IQ and grammatical errors, this young man is perceptive and insightful. In short, Dunne attributes to Nissen the complex subjectivity and sense of self that he consistently denies to Brandon. While Nissen is a heroic consciousness struggling with a hopeless situation, Brandon is "self-indulgent" and "uses her gender confusion as an excuse to abdicate personal responsibility." There are, of course, many ways in which Dunne could have expressed a degree of empathy for the Nissens of this world—working-class, uneducated white men—without doing so at the expense of Nissen's victim and without erasing the disastrous choices that this man made throughout his life. Indeed, Nissen's life was a record of abuse, suicide attempts, and foster homes; it was also a record of flirtations with white supremacist military cults and episodes of violence. What bears examination, in other words, in relation to Dunne's representation of the Brandon case is the way Dunne can casually justify male expressions of violence, but cannot account for trans-

gender expressions of rage; Nissen's flirtation with white racism is simply described as a wrong turn, while Brandon's criminal record for forging checks becomes evidence of a deep pathology.

At one point, Dunne turns to Willa Cather in order to evoke the hard landscape of rural Nebraska. He comments on Cather's preferred name—William Cather—and her habit of wearing short hair and mannish clothes. He classifies Cather as a discreet lesbian and notes approvingly: "Her relationships with women had the virtue of constancy." Ultimately, Dunne concludes, Cather used the backdrop of Red Cloud, Nebraska, as "raw material" and then converted it into novels—*My Antonia*, *Lucy Gayheart*. By contrast, Brandon, he notes, "was the raw stuff distilled to its very essence, . . . a young woman from that constituency living at or below society's safety net. The tyranny from which she could not escape was less that of gender than of class; a prison more tyrannical than Willa Cather's prairie town, especially in white America, where class distinctions are not supposed to exist" (49). Dunne uses a troubling metaphor here in order to subsume the drama of gender instability within what he sees as the more general theater of U.S. class politics. Brandon has become the raw material that cannot be rescued from the turmoil of poverty. While earlier for Dunne, Brandon in relation to the women he seduced was anything but raw, an all-too-cooked version of gender trouble and self-indulgent masquerade, now he becomes the savage of the heartland who can never escape the primitive landscapes of social injustice and thuggery.

To add insult to injury, Dunne even tries to imagine what Cather's response to Brandon might have been. He uses Cather's depiction of the servant girl Antonia Shimerda in *My Antonia* as paradigmatic of Cather's attitudes toward working-class women and then notes, "I suspect that Brandon Teena would have made Cather impatient: Teena was socially and economically no more disadvantaged than Antonia and one can assume that Cather would have regarded her obsession with gender and its discontents as self-indulgent, and her gender confusion as an excuse to abdicate personal responsibility" (50). Perhaps it is pointless to be shocked by such pronouncements, and perhaps Dunne's do not matter so much in the general scheme of things, but this particular move, the projection of harsh judgment onto Cather, reveals precisely how a figure like Brandon becomes snared in the space between recognizable categories and doomed therefore to a bloody dissection. Dunne first evokes Cather in order to provide an aesthetic landscape for the drama he describes, but then she becomes the acceptable and indeed

middle-class version of gender and sexual deviance against which Brandon's particular experiences and actions must be measured.

Cather and Brandon, of course, do not represent the cooked and the raw, the refined and the primitive, the civilized and the savage elements of rural America. Rather, they exist in more of a continuum of gender impropriety. It is not hard to imagine that gender nonconformity and what Dunne calls self-indulgent gender confusion provided Cather with precisely those startling insights into small-town bitterness to which Dunne is so drawn. Cather and Brandon are less close and less distant than Dunne would think. The violence directed at Brandon may in some way explain why sixty years earlier Cather had to leave Red Cloud; but at the same time, both Cather and Brandon found Nebraska to be a place where they could pass, where they could assume male identities, and where they could move around in men's clothing. When Cather left rural Nebraska for urban life, she also abandoned her cross-dressing practices. Since his maleness was so important to him, we might assume, Brandon chose not to stay in urban Lincoln and seek help at the gay and lesbian center (and we know that people suggested just this to him). His plans were better served by the daily routine of life in a small town where most people lived far apart, asked few questions, and kept their opinions to themselves. Brandon lived within the freedoms offered by a small town and he died because for two boys the version of masculinity that Brandon paraded, exposed the lack at the heart of their own enactments of manhood. But the brutality that visited Brandon late one night in a deserted farmhouse was not simply the violence of rural working-class maleness, as Dunne would love to believe, it was also a violence linked to a bourgeois investment in the economy of authenticity.

What I have tried to show here is that the murder of Brandon has been followed by other violences that do not merely repeat the original trauma but rather extend and stretch the punishment of Brandon to other potential sites for gender transgression. Furthermore, Brandon's masculinity clearly presents a threat not only to male masculinity in general but particularly to notions of the authenticity of bourgeois manhood. Dunne, Volk, Smith, and Police Chief Laux as well as Lotter and Nissen all seem to agree on one thing: Brandon is a fake man. In Smith's book, as mentioned earlier, Brandon is named "counterfeit" by making a bar called the Wooden Nickel into the backdrop for his magic tricks. The naming of his masculinity as counterfeit, ensures that Brandon's impersonation will be read within a class narrative as both a quest for social mobility and an ill-fated assault on masculine privi-

lege. While Smith, Dunne, and others are fascinated by the sexual drama surrounding Brandon and the women he dated, they also insist that this story is merely a subplot to the narrative of working-class degradation. Gender for Smith and Dunne is merely a personal crisis, an opportunity for self-indulgence, but class is a prison. Along these lines, then, Brandon's gender presentation threatens some people and seduces others, but the dark and brutal events that lead to his death are reduced to the volatile combination of poverty, lack of education, and childhood abuse. The subordination of gender to class here allows for both Smith and Dunne to assure themselves that the Brandon story happens in another world far from the one in which they live with their families.

At the heart of the narrative of Brandon stands an economy of representation. It is no coincidence that Smith's novels takes place at a bar called the Wooden Nickel, and most accounts of this story suggest that Brandon's habit of forging checks and fraudulently using his girlfriend's credit cards represents in economic terms the contours of his gender masquerade. Both Smith and Dunne fetishize Brandon by making him the figure for both excessive power and extreme degradation. It is a little easier to understand the anxious attempts to cast Brandon as counterfeit if we read the metaphor of the Wooden Nickel as a fetishizing device, but also as an economic metaphor that attempts to grapple with the value of Brandon's iconic status rather than simply with its content. The fetish, within psychoanalysis, is the thing that masquerades as a phallus and creates an illusion of wholeness. To say that Brandon is a fetish figure for the straight white writers who dissect his life, not to mention the killers who shot him, is to understand that for his supporters and detractors alike, Brandon represents both what is missing and what is present for the observer. For Smith, Brandon serves as a fetish object that covers over the lack at the heart of heterosexual romance. Smith can deny that romance itself offers young girls a promise it cannot make good on and instead she can project that failed promise onto the seemingly inadequate body of Brandon. The fetish of Brandon also allows Dunne to shore up white middle-class manhood by projecting the blurred and weak boundary between the passing woman and the biological man onto working-class forms of masculinity. And for numerous other contemporary viewers and readers, Brandon's body becomes the marker of a gender disorder that always resides elsewhere.

The postmortem productions of narratives about Brandon that continue to defuse the obviously potent and effective masculinity that he carefully

crafted for himself despite overwhelming odds, are themselves violent attempts to reassert the primacy of even a damaged and mutilating male masculinity over and above the simulated, but pleasurable transgender masculinity that Brandon created. This pleasurable masculinity was characterized by most of the women who went out with him as tender, romantic, caring, and above all generous. Everyone depicted him as a man who loved to give and asked for nothing in return. This spirit of generosity, even where the generosity was funded by someone else's credit card, should be read as the economy of a radical form of manhood that Brandon pioneered. While Brandon's crimes of forgery and embezzlement have been held up as evidence of the pathological and indeed illegal nature of all of Brandon's so-called impersonations, such prognostications refuse to acknowledge the power of the forgery, the endless generosity of the Robin Hood figure who transfers wealth and currency from one place of abundance to another place of need.

The word counterfeit has been used against passing women long before anyone had heard of Brandon. For example, in a book called *Counterfeit Ladies*, Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing edit the life histories of two women who took liberties with their womanhood in the seventeenth century (Todd 1994). These two women, Mary Frith (Moll Cutpurse) and Mary Carleton (a German princess) both trespassed beyond the boundaries of accepted feminine behavior, but they did so in different ways. While Carleton's crime was one of impersonating nobility in order to seduce a rich husband, Frith's crime was that she wore male clothing, engaged in masculine activities, and pursued a career in embezzlement of one kind or another. Obviously, the term counterfeit in relation to each of these historical figures conjures up the combination of impersonation and theft. Carleton uses class impersonation to find her way to a wealthy marriage, but Frith uses male impersonation to make her own money. The idea of counterfeiting, then, both reduces male impersonation to an economic opportunity and collapses it into the phenomenon of social climbing. In other words, if male impersonation can be safely explained in terms of economic advantage, then the gender crisis it also names can be avoided.

Rather than reduce male impersonation to a form of counterfeiting, I think we can read an economics of impersonation into both historical and contemporary acts of gender passing. There are ultimately few material gains to be garnered from the kind of passing performances perpetrated by Brandon and his historical antecedents; but the act of passing does damage the

investments made in conventional gender, sexuality, and domesticity. As a wooden nickel passing as silver, a Brandon Teena throws into doubt the value of conventional currency and also shows how easy it is to circumvent the monetary system altogether. In a controversial commentary on the meaning of Brandon's gender act that appeared in the *Village Voice* soon after the murders became public, lesbian journalist Donna Minkowitz attempted to read Brandon's complex economy of gender and desire. Minkowitz harshly judged Brandon as a selfish con artist who had to leave Lincoln, Nebraska, because his debts were in danger of catching up with him. Minkowitz ends her problematic account of the case with the following judgment: "Brandon had to go to Humboldt because everyone who loved her [sic] in Lincoln was finally too infuriated with her, whether she'd stolen their love or taken the money they needed to live" (Minkowitz 1994, 30). Brandon traded in love and desire; he gave love and attention to the girls he dated, and sometimes took money in return or sometimes asked for nothing. But his bad checks, financial tricks, and forgeries do not add up to cheap love in impoverished circumstances. Unlike the men he exposes, Brandon gave something of worth in exchange for the money he took, and because his attentions to the girls were worth more to them than credit cards and money in the bank, he earned the undying hate of the men he supplanted.

### The Unlost

The stories of Brandon Teena and Billy Tipton, their own stories, the stories that are told about them, and the stories that the people around them produce, help to conclude several outmoded narratives about gender and embodiment in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. Neither Brandon nor Billy comfortably fit into the sexological categories of inversion from the early twentieth century, but neither do they represent new transsexual discourses involving bodily transformations. Brandon and Billy have little to do with modern gay and lesbian identities, nor are they indicative of future renderings of gender, class, and embodiment. Perhaps they are the unresolved tales of gender variance that will follow us from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, not resolved, not neat, not understood. Perhaps the only way to honor the memories of Teena and Tipton is to remember them as they wish to be remembered: not as heroes or demons but as examples of what Gordon calls in *Ghostly Matter* "complex personhood." At the very least, Gordon tells us, "complex personhood is about conferring the respect

on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" (5). When we read transgender lives, complex and contradictory as they may seem, it is necessary to read for the life and not for the lie. Dishonesty, after all, is just another word for narrative.

Returning to Carson's extraordinary study of memory and preservation, *Economy of the Unlost*, I suggest that we try not to "unlose" the complex figures of Brandon and Billy to the fates of biography and sentimental remembrance. Carson's study of the historically distinct poets Simonides and Paul Celan situates poetry as a mode of expression caught between different economic structures. While the Greek poet Simonides literally found himself trapped between two systems of money, the gift and the commodity, Celan wrote poetry in the shadow of the Holocaust and found language, particularly German, to be an inadequate tool for mourning, memory, and rage. "Remembering," writes Carson, "draws attention to lostness and is made possible by emotions of space that open backward into a void." As we have seen, poetic moments in Kay's lyrical novel *Trumpet* captured the lasting imprint of a transgender character in a mood of remembrance rather than in a description or rationalization. While the biographer remembers through fact, Kay's narrative suggests, the poet remembers through "emotions of space," and it is poetic memory that best approaches the legacy of a life that has become symbolic through death. Again, in the case of Brandon, his murder reorganized the meaning of his life as well as the significance of the choices he made about passing as a man and engaging the desires of others. Until the murder, Brandon was a slightly foolish, fairly brave, oddly confident youth who had the luxury to live an inconsistent life made up of equal parts of courage and myopia. After his murder, Brandon's life—the jumbled desires and deeds—becomes frozen into either a heroic narrative of derring-do or a reprehensible story of deception and denial. In most accounts of Brandon's life, the wild strands of narrative incoherence are reined in by an all-encompassing fantasy of moral order. All future attempts to recapture this life will now have to chip away at the laminate that fixes this narrative to its place and time. In many ways, the moralizing narratives that I examine here commit Brandon to the status of "lost" soul, and the task that remains to queer archivists is to render Brandon "unlost."

Like the poets about whom Carson writes so movingly, Brandon is a figure standing between different economic orders. While for Simonides, the economic orders that trapped him were materially identifiable as gift and

commodity cultures, Carson is less concerned with the transition between economic systems and more focused on the impact of this transition on the role of the poet. If formerly the poet was a figure who penned verses for a host in return for hospitality, in a new economic system, the poet must reconcile himself to being someone who sells grace. Simonides, Carson says, never could make the clean transition to currency and so redefined the role of the poet: "Simonides spent his literary as well as his historical life exerting a counterpressure to the claims of the merely visible world" (60). Celan's work, according to Carson, continues in this poetic tradition of "not seeing what is there" (62). Like the poet in Carson's essay who refuses to sell poems to the highest bidder, a Brandon figure refuses to recognize the current values and meanings of masculinity, and circulates as and within an alternative system of value. The task that faces us now as we write epitaphs, elegies, and encomiums for Brandon, Billy, and others like them is to craft a poetic rather than a moral framework of remembrance—a framework, moreover, that tackles the economic charge that propels Brandon out of the realm of flesh and into the order of fetish, icon, commodity.