Feinberg's Femmes

How Femmes Care in *Stone Butch Blues*

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In Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, caring is not a weakness but a strength, indeed, one of the novel's strengths. Reading *Stone Butch Blues* for the first time, the femme subjectivities that accompany the butch protagonist touched me deeply. As I was reading, what stood out to me was the strength incorporated by the femmes through their vulnerability, not in spite of it. It is this strong vulnerability that came to characterise what it meant for me to be femme – playing with the tension between power and softness in terms of both gender and desire. Although femmes are not necessarily vulnerable and soft, having been figured through hardness and brazenness, vulnerability is tightly attached to femininity and its devaluation and subjugation. Subverting this subjugation is part of what makes femme queer (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002; Schwartz 2020). Throughout the novel, vulnerability transpires in and between its lines, as protagonist Jess Goldberg navigates the constraints of her gender and her relationships to femmes. With this, Jess offers and receives care from her partners and friends, but, I argue, the ways in which caring is construed in Jess' life changes over time due to her closeness with various femmes. In this article, I follow a feminist and queer tradition of re-reading canonical texts, in this case, from a femme standpoint, through a femme lens, centring femme care as constitutive of Jess' affective development. I ask how care materialises in *Stone Butch Blues* and in what ways femme subjectivity is crucial to the manifestation. I explore how femme care transpires in the novel, how Feinberg's femmes generate strength through vulnerability and how they impact Jess' own care praxis.[1]

Stone Butch Blues follows Jess Goldberg's life, from early childhood through to mid-life. Growing up a gender nonconforming child that could not fit in, Jess discovers home in bars that welcome LGBT patrons. She encounters a lively community of butches and femmes, where "it was OK to ask a woman to dance" (Feinberg 2014: 25), and becomes a butch who loves femmes. Jess' relationship to Theresa, her femme lover, is central to the novel but ends when Jess begins to transition. In this

1 I would like to thank Mali Bowers, Nikki Treanor, and k kater for their patience, care, and support in editing this paper in its various iterations.

time of passing as male, Jess encounters an unknown world of loneliness and secrecy, feeling alienated from her community. She decided to (re)turn to a new state of gender nonconformity, to being a 'he-she', with the addition of irrevocable hormonal changes: a low voice and surgically flattened chest. In this gender ambivalent presentation, Jess feels more at home but is consequently more at risk for abuse. Soon, Jess develops a deeply loving, but non-sexual, relationship with her neighbour Ruth, a trans femme. Femmes, Theresa and Ruth and many others, are central to the novel but have often been overlooked in its reception. My interest in this reparative re-reading (Sedgwick 1997) of *Stone Butch Blues* is to work against "the relegation of femmes" as "second class citizens" (Henson 1997: 66). I read the novel as an homage to femmes, as they support and care for Jess throughout. Feinberg offers care not only to her protagonist, but to the reader, in making space for (self-)care and vulnerability: the trigger warning at the top of the novel is an acknowledgement of the trauma with which many readers arrive at the novel. This space for (self-)care is extended into the generously spacious layout of the novel, its wide line spacing and short paragraphs allowing the reader to linger on the page, pause, and take a breath (Schwarz 2022).

My analysis, chronicling Jess' journey towards vulnerability and softness, presupposes Jess' desire for those traits, though I do not intend to mark hardness or stone subjectivities as lacking in any way. In Jess' life, however, a desire for softness transpires often, with "melt the stone" (Feinberg 2014: 4) prevailing as a key phrase in the novel that establishes vulnerability and mutability as desirable qualities for Jess (Rodness 2020). Jess' stoniness is not one of her inherent characteristics, rather, she has had to become stone as a means for self-preservation – one that is mutable through loving contact with femmes (ibid.). It is this contact, this care offered by femmes, that helps Jess to allow her stone to melt, that I discuss in this text.

Theoretically Framing Femme Care

To start with, I would like to give a brief overview of femme history and theory as a background for my conceptualisation of femme care and the ways in which femme and femininity have been theorised. Femme subjectivity emerged in the 1940s and 1950s alongside the butch in working class lesbian bar culture in the US (Nestle 1992). Both were primarily sexual identities, often but not always tied to a desire of the other. Since then, femme has come to describe a diverse range of erotic, sexual, and gender identities that revolve around queering femininity and the femme figure as an embodiment of power in vulnerability and receptivity. This includes femmes who identify as (cis or trans) women as well as femmes with a female-to-femme transition experience (Fuchs 2020). In 1992, Joan Nestle published the first, seminal femme anthology that influences femme studies to date. Nestle's anthology

filled a femme-shaped hole in the literature by amplifying femme narratives and bringing together stories, letters and essays from and about femmes. She describes femmes and butches as gender pioneers, arguing that the "butch deconstructs gender" and the "femme constructs gender", by utilising "her own special ingredients" to create "an identity with which she can live and love" (Nestle 1992: 16). In fact, as Jane Ward argues, these de_constructions of gender are not individual endeavours but rely on gender labour, that is, "the act of giving gender to others" (Ward 2010: 240) by supporting their "masculine authenticity", offering "moments of realness" and compensating "for gendered shortcomings" (ibid.: 246) – but Ward also argues that this often occurs at the cost of any engagement with femmes' own genders and gendered needs. Ward's voice provides an important critical perspective on the gender(ed) labour often provided by femmes, highlighting the care labour inequalities in relationships between femmes and transmasculine people (including trans butches).[2] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha further criticises how femmes shoulder the burden of care labour and the expectation of unlimited resources and energy in many queer and left political organising contexts, whereby femmes of colour, disabled femmes, and working class or poor femmes are hit especially hard by one-sided demands and a lack of reciprocity and respect (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Part of this critical discussion, too, is Ulrika Dahl's (2017) work that reminds us that while traditional straight femininity is often located in the private sphere, femmes have been part of public cultures in lesbian bars and feminist and queer movements. Thus, Dahl argues that femme embodiment extends "beyond the (imaginary) bedroom" (2017: 45), removing femme-ininity and vulnerability from the private sphere. In fact, as femmes, butches, and queers are excluded from public cultures (Warner 2002), their making of a counterpublic through the public cultures described by Dahl, allows them to disrupt the trapping of femininity, vulnerability, and care in the private sphere.

Following Erinn Gilson, I understand vulnerability, as it plays a central role for femme subjectivity and femme theory, to describe an "openness to being affected and affecting" (Gilson 2011). This sentiment is also captured in Andi Schwartz's theorisation of the "soft femme", figured through earnestness and authenticity (Schwartz 2020). However, vulnerability has also been constructed in opposition to resistance, as "the site of inaction" (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016: 1). To understand vulnerability instead as the "action of resistance itself" (ibid.) allows me to suggest a consideration of the femme as emerging outside and against the binary of vulnerability and resistance. The figuration of femme subjectivity resists victimisation often attached to vulnerability. Instead, femmes embrace and indeed derive power from vulnerability. Being able to figure oneself vulnerable in turn relies

2 For a study on gendered labour in couples of women and trans men, I also recommend Carla A. Pfeffer's work (Pfeffer 2010).

upon resisting the oppressive shame resulting from living within heteropatriarchal structures. Vulnerability, here, is understood as a desirable, difficult achievement (Cvetkovich 2002).

Vulnerability is central to my conceptualisation of femme care, as it is both attached to the traditionally feminine carer and to those who require care. This false distinction between carer and cared for is disrupted through femme care, as I show below. The distinction is false, as Eva Feder Kittay proposes, because care ought to be perceived as a resource to enable inclusion, rather than focussing on dependence, as "all human life" is based on dependence (Kittay 2011: 53). She states that elevating the needs of the cared-for "reveals that the subordinated do have a voice" (ibid.). While care is traditionally located in the private sphere, my approach to femme care in *Stone Butch Blues* offers a concept of care that is private and public at the same time. It is private because it is personal, offering emotional resources and supporting processes of healing from trauma. Simultaneously, it is public, because femmes remove femininity from the private sphere, refusing the personal to be private. Instead, femme care conceptualises the personal as political, and thereby, public, as it provides resources to ensure emotional and physical survival in a heteronormative society that is hostile to queer genders and sexualities. Femme care is, then, compassionate but assertive; it refuses the patriarchal devaluation of femininity and vulnerability. Moreover, femme care often exceeds the personal and private aspects of queer relationships and relationalities, as femmes have been and continue to be at the forefront of political struggles and organisation, creating queer and trans spaces, and doing community work. I insist on this caveat so as not to misleadingly reduce my concept of femme care to personal relationships and in order to further disrupt the false distinction of public and private.

Femme Care, Vulnerability, and Healing in *Stone Butch Blues*

In Jess' development, I find traces of her relationships with femmes and her lessons learned, that restructure Jess' difficult journey of trauma and coping as a result of femme care. I propose that femme enables differential concepts of care because femme both prioritises solidarity and accessibility as motivations for care and dislocates care from the private sphere. Through open communication and caring assertiveness that disrupts patriarchally sanctioned femininity, femme moves care into the public sphere. Femme transforms care through acting as enabler, rather than simply provider of care – and thus disrupts the hierarchy of carer/cared-for. While enabling can have negative connotations (one might 'enable' an addiction or other harmful behaviour) I use this term with a challenge to normativity: the femme enabler, here, provides tools for softness and vulnerability in spite of the heteronormative and gendered expectations that prevent this.

In this section, I explore Jess' journey of healing through disclosure. Disclosure is a central theme in the novel and marks the stages of Jess' character development – from an inability to share her trauma to Jess standing on stage and speaking her truth to a large crowd. Disclosure, here, is not simply a way for Jess to fit herself into a box that can easily be read by the world, but it is a difficult journey of becoming who she wants to be. Ann Cvetkovich calls disclosure "a queer process" as "the forms in which silence is broken are complex" (Cvetkovich 2003: 100). Indeed, Jess' journey of disclosure is complex, as she navigates the differently gendered care she receives from both femmes and butches, taking what she needs and developing her own praxis of care.

To begin chronicling this journey, I want to share a scene illustrating how Theresa adapts her practice of care to fit Jess, to provide support. Following a violent night at the police station, after Jess was arrested during a raid at a bar, Theresa picks Jess up from the station. Instead of asking if Jess is okay or expressing her worries directly, Theresa acknowledges Jess' pain, by "*gently rubb[ing] the bloody places on [Jess'] shirt and [saying], 'I'll never get these stains out'*" (Feinberg 2014: 5, italics in original). Theresa understands Jess' lack of experience in communicating her feelings and needs, and offers indirect words, that, as Jess says, "cut through [her] fog much more clearly than direct ones"[3] (Feinberg 1995: 136). Jess can better understand Theresa's feelings of care this way (Weaver 2014), and Theresa intends to give Jess space to be while subtly communicating her emotions, foregrounding compassion and accessibility. In moments like this one, the nuances of gendered care practices become clear, expressing the enabling influence Theresa's caring has on Jess' ability to receive care, and in that allows Jess to find strength in her vulnerability and move towards a practice of disclosure.

Jess' perception of herself is disturbed by the trauma she has endured, resulting in a desire to hide away. In two paralleled sequences, Feinberg shows how femmes help Jess appreciate her visibility and find strength in disclosure. The first instance is when Jess is with Theresa:

> Theresa ordered home subscriptions to the morning and evening papers. One day she left a copy of *The Ladder* on the couch. It was a magazine put out by a group called the Daughters of Bilitis. I didn't know who Bilitis was. I'd never seen anything about women like us in print before. "Where'd you get this?" I shouted to her. She called back from the kitchen, "In the mail." "You got this sent to our address in the mail? Was it wrapped? What if someone in the building saw it?" After a long silence, Theresa came in with a hand mirror and held it up to my face. "Did you think you were a secret?" (Feinberg 2014: 133)

3 This sentence is cited from the 1995 edition, as it did not make it into the 2014 revised version. Still, I wanted to include it as it so thoughtfully illustrates Jess' foggy, traumatised state of mind.

This scene illustrates Theresa's fearlessness, her unconditional support for Jess' visibility, and her encouraging, practical approach to enable Jess' healing. Theresa cares for Jess, but rather than letting Jess fester in her hiding place, Theresa's caring assertiveness, in challenging Jess to acknowledge her visibility, coaxes Jess to perceive herself differently. By showing Jess her face, Theresa encourages Jess to understand her visibility and let go of a fear of exposure and disclosure – because Jess is already visible.

A comparable situation happens later in the novel, when Ruth shows Jess a painting of her face. The painting is "a watercolor of a face filled with emotion, looking up at a host of stars. It was a beautiful face, a face [she]'d never seen before. It was [her] face" (ibid.: 293). In seeing her face from Ruth's perspective, Jess becomes more able to see her own beauty. Having suffered a severely violent attack that left her jaw broken and sewn shut for weeks, this painting unlocks a slow journey to recovery for Jess: Her sense of self and self-worth are strengthened. In this instance, Ruth allows Jess to perceive herself differently, to let go of past shame and oppression, and take a step towards healing.

These scenes directly speak to each other, as the imagery conveys the different types of care Jess receives from Theresa and Ruth. Both provide femme care, encouraging Jess to allow herself to be vulnerable. Theresa gives Jess the gift of truth, she shows Jess what others see, while Ruth gives her the space to heal and a sense of safety, showing Jess what she sees. As Feinberg contemplates similar occasions at different life stages for Jess, it becomes clear how femme care progresses the novel. The femmes help Jess be less afraid of disclosing difference and to challenge the force of trauma in her life. Whilst Jess is scared and wants to hide when she finds Theresa's magazine, she later finds beauty and pride in seeing herself in Ruth's painting. The femme care Jess receives in the novel helps her find healing in her disclosure, because femme care is self-preserving, a care that is accessible, compassionate, and foregrounds solidarity and vulnerability through open communication and a caring assertiveness.

Jess' Development – From Lying to Speaking Her Truth

Throughout the novel, Feinberg shows Jess as struggling with communicating her trauma and her needs, inciting her feelings of alienation and regret. In encouraging Jess to disclose her trauma, Feinberg's femmes aim to induce her healing. However, if healing begins from disclosure, the practice of breaking the silence must consider confrontation and flashbacks incited through triggers (Carter 2015). Disclosure has its limitations, but simultaneously carries the potential to induce processes of healing foregrounding the ability to live with trauma and to develop close connections (Cvetkovich 2003). As a butch, trans-masculine person, Jess locates herself between

male and female genders, still experiencing proximity to womanhood in her queer gender. In her time of passing as male, Jess struggles to communicate feelings, as her masculinity is expected to generate only rationality (Rich 1979). A pertinent example for her loneliness in this time is her conversation with Ben, a co-worker who confides his trauma in Jess, who he knows as Jesse, about his time in prison and, it is implied, the assaults he survived there. As Ben begins to ask Jess to share about herself, Jess encourages him to share more about himself instead:

> There's something about you, Ben, that's good and that I trust. And I'm wondering: how did you turn out this way? How did you get from all your hurt to the man you are now? What changed for you? What decisions did you make? (Feinberg 2014: 199)

At first, this sequence might seem sincere, with Jess asking Ben to open up and offering her care, and Jess might actually have intended to bond with Ben, to find a way out of her protective layer of loneliness. However, her fear dominates and through taking an interest in Ben, Jess removes and protects herself from disclosure, she lies by omission, adhering to the exact pattern Adrienne Rich describes the liar to follow:

> Instead of trying to describe her feelings in their ambiguity and confusion, she asks, "How do you feel?" The other, because she is trying to establish a ground of openness and trust, begins describing her own feelings. Thus the liar learns more than she tells. (Rich 1979: 413)

Rich attributes to this a fear of losing control, which Jess exhibits strongly. Her fear of disclosure keeps her silent, lest she be exposed. Jess' fear, thus, prevents the development of meaningful connections she yearns for. To build strong relationships, through establishing "a ground of openness and trust" (ibid.), Jess must reciprocate and share her inner life with her interlocutor. After Ben carries on sharing, he repeatedly asks Jess to reciprocate, but she refuses: "I was afraid and so I betrayed him. 'There's not much to tell,' I said" (Feinberg 2014: 199), until finally, saddened, angry, and hurt, Ben gives up. This disclosure of fear to the reader marks a crucial turning point for Jess' journey of disclosure. Rich explains that the liar "does not say I was *afraid*, since this would open the question of other ways of handling her fear. It would open the questions of what is actually feared" (Rich 1979: 418). Thus, in acknowledging to herself and the reader that her lying stems from fear, Jess moves significantly closer to examining and overcoming her fears as expressed through rejecting disclosure. Considering how Jess listens with empathy when her friends speak, and how she cares when her friends are hurt, the importance of Theresa and Ruth showing Jess to care for herself must not be underestimated. Supporting Jess' self-awareness enables Jess to disclose and thus to connect with others. Femme care, therefore, sup-

ports Jess' self-preservation, encouraging her to build those connections. The aim of femme care is not to help Jess overcome trauma in order to function in a neoliberal sense, but rather to refuse the neoliberal imperative of resilience and learn to live with trauma through collaboration, collective support, and connection (Bimm and Feldmann 2020) – rather than betraying her friends and herself as she did with Ben.

In the final chapter of the novel, Jess finds her words and begins to experience joy in vulnerability and disclosure. Just before the novel ends, Jess courageously climbs on stage at a rally, and speaks of her life, discovering the joy in vulnerability. As she hears other voices speak of their traumas, sharing their pain, urging the protestors to fight violence against the queer community, Jess understands:

> And suddenly I felt so sick to death of my own silence that I needed to speak too. It wasn't that there was something in particular I was burning to say. I didn't even know what it would be. I just needed to open my throat for once and hear my own voice. And I was afraid if I let this moment pass, I might never be brave enough to try again. (Feinberg 2014: 324)

The urge to speak overcomes her suddenly and powerfully, with the realisation that her pain can no longer stay repressed. The yearning for connection and solidarity ultimately leads Jess to speak. She speaks up for herself but also for the others standing at the figurative margins, or on the literal other side of the road, who feel removed from the movement. Jess admits: "I know about getting hurt. […] But I don't have much experience talking about it." (ibid.) With this admission, Jess becomes vulnerable in front of strangers; for the first time in the novel, Jess shares part of her trauma publicly. In this chapter, the joy emanates from the page, as Feinberg allows Jess to be open with others, to affect and let herself be affected (Gilson 2011). The joy comes from a woman proclaiming "Good for you, sister" and a man congratulating: "That was really brave to get up there and say that", and finally, the joy stems from Jess regaining hope: "[Y]es, it was possible to still hope. This rally didn't change night into day, but I saw people speaking and listening to each other" (Feinberg 2014: 324, 325).

Jess begins her speech by disclosing her gender, a disclosure that ultimately enables her to speak freely and become part of a community yet again, as a "young butch", Bernice, invites her to a lesbian dance (ibid.: 325). This scene stands in contrast to earlier in the novel, where Jess' disclosure on Ruth's doorstep, one of their first encounters, led to a rejection from Ruth, who did not want to experience the "double-trouble" (ibid.: 278) of two trans people being exposed together; compared to then, and the many instances in which disclosure equalled exposure, leading to jobs lost and relationships ending, Jess' disclosure now enables access to a lesbian dance, access to a community of lesbians even, as Bernice offers to "all go in together" (ibid.: 325).

Finally, when Jess shares her experience with Ruth, Feinberg again demonstrates to the reader the femme's caring, compassionate communication.

> "I spoke, Ruth. There was this rally in Sheridan Square and they let people get up and talk and I did. I spoke, Ruth. In front of hundreds of people. I wish you could have been there. I wish you could have heard me." Ruth wrapped her arms around me and sighed. "I have been hearing you, honey," she whispered in my ear. "Once you break the silence, it's just the beginning." (ibid.: 325–326)

The repetition of "I spoke" amplifies the significance of Jess' voluntary disclosure, a powerful speech act building on the femme care Jess received throughout the novel. Jess expresses the desire to be heard by Ruth. However, Ruth proclaims that she has been hearing Jess, fully aware of Jess' urgent need to break her silence. This moment illustrates Ruth's awareness of Jess' emotional experience, despite Jess' previous silence. As she helps Jess understand that "it's just the beginning", Ruth reassures Jess to continue, aware of the impact of disclosure. Hence, the femme acts as enabler again, encouraging Jess to persevere. The emotions Jess associated with vulnerability were more often pain than joy, and that pain stuck to her (Ahmed 2004). It stuck in that it informed her thinking and actions, being constantly alert to the fear of exposure. This traumatic response resulted from her experiences with police violence, which generated a notion of risk interconnected with disclosure and suppressed the positive possibility of vulnerability. Contrastingly, in this sequence, Jess demonstrates an understanding of vulnerability as developed by femmes, joyful and enabling healing, and turned her fear of exposure into voluntary disclosure, as an opportunity to regain power over her narrative.

Femme (for Femme) Care, Butch (for Butch) Care?

I develop femme care in reading *Stone Butch Blues*, though not without thinking about butch care. Femme care, as a distinct relational and behavioural concept, does not necessarily stand in opposition to butch care, rather, I aim to theorise how femmes care for Jess in their own way. Of course, butches care, too, for femmes and for each other, just as femmes care for Jess and for other femmes. To this end, I briefly turn towards femme for femme care and butch for butch care and hope to show how Feinberg evades the gendered trappings of attaching patriarchal masculinity and femininity to hir femmes and butches.

To outline a more exhaustive concept of femme care, the ways femmes care for one another must be considered. In this following sequence, Theresa is unafraid and draws strength from her femme-ininity. Her friend Justine is being assaulted by police officers when Theresa and Georgetta step in:

> "Take your hands off her," Theresa told the cop. Her voice was low and calm. "Leave her alone." Theresa walked slowly toward the cop with the high heels at her sides. […] Georgetta took off both her stilettos and held one in each hand. She walked over to Theresa. They exchanged a look I couldn't see and stood side by side. […] Justine grabbed Theresa and Georgetta's arms and pulled herself to her feet. When Justine wobbled, Theresa wrapped one arm around her waist to steady her. The cop unholstered his gun. "You fucking slut," he sputtered at Theresa. "You fucking perverts," he shouted at all of us. Another cop pulled on his arm. "C'mon, let's get out of here." Slowly, the four cops retreated. I exhaled as the cops drove away. Theresa and Georgetta held Justine in their arms as she cried. (Feinberg 2014: 139–140)

Theresa and Georgetta act as fearless protectors and engender strength to disperse the police while weaponising the high heels that signify their femininity as well as their gender transgression. Simply by being there, Theresa and Georgetta enable Justine to help herself as she pulls herself up on their arms and finds her feet. In holding Justine, they allow and encourage vulnerability and help Justine release her tears. This act of care foregrounds vulnerability and uplifts femme solidarity. Their femininity, which the cops try to force into submission, rather than making them weak, was the source of their strength, their heels, rather than holding them back, become tools to fight back. Though she later discloses fear, Theresa steps up and shows up for Justine. Her strength becomes amplified through vulnerability, exaggerating her fearlessness, allowing her to chase the police away. In their defiance, Theresa and Georgetta engender a queer femininity that is rooted in resistance and refuses the patriarchal reduction of femininity to weakness.

I also would like to offer an orientation towards how butches care in Jess' life and how Jess changes her care praxis in relation to her butch friends. As the novel progresses, instances of butches caring for their friends and partners are abundant. Often, this takes the form of having each other's backs in a fight or offering security after a police raid. There are several instances when Jess encourages open conversations among her friends, increasing as the story progresses. This is not to say that Jess takes on Theresa's femme care and begins to care like a femme. Rather, Jess begins to develop her own way of caring, her own way of communicating with her butch friends. In a scene toward the end of the novel, Jess tries to initiate one such conversation with Frankie, but Frankie rejects her, saying: "You don't need words with me Jess, I know" (ibid.: 301). But Jess, rather than feeling shame and going into hiding, as she had done in the past, persists and replies:

> I do need words, Frankie. Sometimes I feel like I'm choking to death on what I'm feeling. I need to talk and I don't even know how. Femmes always tried to teach me to talk about my feelings, but it was their words they used for their feelings. I needed my own words – butch words to talk about butch feelings. (ibid.)

This scene marks the beginning of Jess' active disclosure. Jess acknowledges that in order to preserve herself, she must begin her journey of healing, and disclosure seems to be just the way for her to do this – or else choke "to death". This moment illustrates precisely the enabling properties of femme care, as Jess recognises how the femmes' efforts aimed at supporting her, while also realising that femme care was not the care she could give herself. Instead, finally, in articulating the need to develop her own language, Jess begins to do just that – which in the last chapter culminates in her speaking up at a rally and publicly disclosing her gender journey and her trauma, having found "butch words to talk about butch feelings".

The instances of femmes caring for femmes and butches caring for butches illustrate differences as well as similarities in their caring praxes. Feinberg is quick to disrupt the traditional narrative of gendered care and intimacy by developing Jess' caring habits as the novel progresses. Zie paints a vivid image of the interdependence of femmes and butches in this community. Rather than illustrating a feminine and a masculine way to care and putting those onto femme and butch characters in the novel, Feinberg allows the characters to contain multitudes. Feinberg's femmes can talk and listen, but they can also fight, and butches can have each other's backs, and find their own language, too. The importance of femme care, then, for my reading of *Stone Butch Blues*, is that Feinberg's appreciation of femmes is rooted in the way they encourage Jess in developing her own language, to find a butch way to embrace vulnerability, and ultimately to find strength in disclosure rather than in spite of it.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, I have developed a concept of femme care in re-reading Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, and chronicled the development of Jess' caring praxis as it was influenced by femmes. Care materialises in the novel through multiple avenues, and the femme characters are essential to this manifestation: they hear Jess' desire for softness and support her in finding butch ways to care for herself and others. Jess' journey of disclosure, from an inability to share towards speaking her truth to a large crowd, is particularly pertinent for Jess' development. Finding her voice and beginning to disclose her gender, her embodiment, and her trauma become a tool for Jess to reclaim her narrative: Rather than letting social presumptions define her, she finally, carefully begins to show herself truthfully. With this, Jess can connect with others, build and rediscover community, and resist the isolating force of cisheteronormativity.[4] Rather than attributing this development entirely to femmes

4 Here, I wanted to add a caveat: that Jess need not always disclose, that sometimes silence protects her from violence – but her lack of disclosure has not protected her in the past, nor can I assume that it would in the future. Jess was attacked, violated, humiliated on many occasions,

and femme care, I would like to invite the reader to think on what might define butch care, and where the similarities and difference between butch and femme care might lie – but those considerations exceed the scope of this text. To conclude, I would like to reiterate that while I highlighted how femmes care, in an accessible, compassionate way and foregrounding solidarity and vulnerability, *Stone Butch Blues* celebrates the relationality of butch and femme subjectivities, without deriving one from the other. Instead, Feinberg's novel appreciates the different gendered experiences and praxes of care without undermining their validity. Ultimately, *Stone Butch Blues* exemplifies the gravity of caring communities and self-care as acts of resistance and indeed survival for queer people who live with or against the oppressions bound up with neoliberal capitalism.

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she has always been visible, and her brief experience of living stealth hurt her more than it protected her. Still, for others, like Ruth, silence and living stealth have offered safety; and disclosure, while powerful, can also trap the marginalised in a visibility politics that serves only the principle of social control (Foucault 2020).

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