# Cruising Towards Care

## Leslie Feinberg and Lou Sullivan in Conversation

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### Introduction

Feinberg and Sullivan never met, yet their writings, politics, and commitment to preserving joy converge in complementary, and at times contentiously, generative ways. While both authors' perspectives vary significantly, the potential for trans happiness that comes alive in their works provide alternative pathways in loving and resisting in challenging times. In particular, the complex and layered narratives of transitions, intimacies, and communities give readers strong footholds to reframe their own sexual and gendered politics under more nuanced lenses. In this article, I argue that despite the sometimes despairing or nihilistic discourses that are found in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* and Lou Sullivan's diaries, there is also a warm future that emanates from the texts, and extends beyond pink or blue in the landscape of trans politics.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that there are differences in the writing intention and publication of *Stone Butch Blues* and Sullivan's diaries. While Feinberg wrote hir novel with the intention of having a wide audience and readership, Sullivan began journaling from eleven years old, and only began editing his journals for publication towards the end of his life (Martin and Ozma in Sullivan 2019: 12). While Feinberg's text was purposefully created to tell a certain story, Sullivan's text captures "the messiness of a life actually lived" (Gonzalez 2019: 62), and thus inadvertently layers gendered experiences with political efforts over a thirty-year period.

Despite these differences, I argue that Feinberg and Sullivan nevertheless complement one another. Though there are some tensions between their philosophies, ideologies, and actions, putting their works in conversation with one another provides fruitful reflections of trans subjectivities and solidarities in our pasts, in our presents, and for our futures. I contend that Sullivan's diaries and *Stone Butch Blues* are linked through their representations of struggle. As Malatino (2020: 3) suggests, feeling bad might be an inherent part of trans experience, but feeling bad is not a

proclivity to not pursue happiness. Moreover, Butler's (2004) assertion that precarity is a necessary form of consciousness raising and community building is also relevant in the context of these texts.

Thus, I argue that Sullivan's diaries and Feinberg's novel exemplify how negative affects might be what kept them going. Neither Jess, the central character of *Stone Butch Blues*, (or Feinberg hirself) nor Lou really 'win', but their fictional, autobiographical and political writings tell us that liberation is a struggle that requires a lineage where the past, the present, and the future are required to be in consistent conversation: for us to learn, unlearn, remake, and reimagine liveable lives as trans people.

In this article, I first provide contextual background to how this article came about. Following this, I tease out the lines of convergence and divergence between Feinberg and Sullivan's texts. I conclude this work by underscoring the values of fostering and maintaining communities, however difficult, in developing a legacy of trans narratives and subjectivities. Overall, this article is an attempt to capture the power of resisting and existing otherwise, and aims to inspire us to practise solidarity, reciprocity and mutual aid through the lenses and lives of our trans pasts.

## Background

> We were both becoming genders we were never supposed to be, and we found home together. We built these homes, first, in each other. (Malatino 2020: 71)

I write this article for my beloved friend, Matt Kennedy. Matt and I used to be partners, and I am still lucky to have him in my life. I bought him his first copy of *Stone Butch Blues*, and he introduced me to Lou Sullivan's life and work. It is no surprise to say that we fell in love through and alongside queer theory and trans studies, and fell out of love doing the same thing. Yet, even in the times we didn't speak, there was still some serendipity: we both got tattoos of portraits of Lou, for example. I never stopped loving Matt, and owe a great deal to him; his wealth of knowledge, his curiosity, and his deep care for his community – even if it comes with tension and difficulty. Not only that, but Matt made me the trans person I am today, along with Leslie and Lou. We initially intended to write this article together, but circumstances did not allow. However, writing about the complex politics of Feinberg and Sullivan, and how they commit to care, without Matt somewhere in the text felt wrong. In writing this article, I want to hold space for Matt, as an exercise in reciprocity and demonstrating what trans care looks like in practice.

Moreover, writing about the complex politics of Feinberg and Sullivan together feels like a rare opportunity to meditate on and demonstrate how trans people learn to love each other (ibid.: 43). Malatino asks particularly worthwhile questions in *Side Affects* (2022) which are: How do trans people come to love and care for each other in the midst of contested experiences of transness, divergent politics, and general differences in personality? How do trans people love and care about each other when they are ex-partners, or when they find each other annoying, or when their social identities and circumstances prompt jealousy, apathy, disregard, and tension? In writing this article I have contemplated what Lou Sullivan and Leslie Feinberg might have made of one another, and what kind of t4t[1] politics might have emerged had they crossed paths. How would they have managed their difference? Where would their commitments to the liberation of trans people have intersected and allowed them to bridge a variety of differences in gendered and sexual politics? But also, how might we, the wider trans community, learn to find our histories and ourselves through and alongside others? I attempt to explore the above questions in brief here, yet acknowledge that the answers to these questions can never be fully settled on, and remain dynamic and open, just as trans identities, subjectivities, and bodies are fluid and susceptible to constant change.

## Internal Affects: Complicating (De)Transition Narratives

Lou Sullivan and Leslie Feinberg are arguably two of the most important figures for contemporary trans activisms. However, what interests me as a researcher who happens to be trans (or, a trans person who happens to be a researcher), is the lack of available literature – and debatably, community discourses – which discuss the non-linear paths of transition in which both Feinberg's character Jess and Lou himself take. In the case of both Jess (who Feinberg modelled on hirself) in the novel, and how Lou charted his life through his diaries, the peaks and troughs of gendered lives being made, deconstructed and reconstructed again, often on their own terms, are made clear.

What such narratives offer, I argue, is a means of resisting transnormative "futural narratives of transition" (Malatino 2020: 27), and they present opportunities to foreclose the current dichotomies constructed around transition and trans legitimacy. I argue that the socio-political climate, both in Ireland and globally, frames medical transition as formulaic, pathological, and/or institutionalised, and signifies an unambiguous movement from one gendered experience to the other. This framework of medical transition insists on static gender identification, maintains gender

1 The abbreviation ›t4t‹, meaning ›trans for trans‹, is used when a trans person has or seeks a romantic or sexual relationship with another trans person.

binarism, pathologisation and disavows experimentation, curiosity, and play in relation to gender. In contrast, the incongruent and discordant ways in which Jess and Lou move throughout their fictional and real worlds, reveal a more nuanced interpretation of how transition (in all its modalities) takes place.

Jess' experience of being perceived as a butch lesbian in *Stone Butch Blues* is perhaps one of the most visceral literary representations of gender violence. From early on in the novel, Jess is subjected to verbal abuse from their peers. They are met with questions such as "Hey pansy, are you a boy or a girl?" (Feinberg 2014: 11), or an even more dehumanising, "is it animal, mineral or vegetable?" (ibid.: 20) However, Jess' gender presentation does not just elicit taunts from other children, but they also experience this line of questioning from other adults (ibid.: 10). Moreover, Jess' parents grieve their child's alleged inability to perform their gender 'correctly'. After finding Jess wearing their father's clothes, Jess is taken to a psychiatric institution, where their treatment is through both medical and social interventions (ibid.: 16–18). Following their discharge from this hospital, they are enrolled in "charm school", where "*every girl who enters leaves a lady*" (ibid.: 19, emphasis in original). As such, there is a complementary relationship between the social and the medical, whereby gender normativity is not just desirable, but developable.

Similarly, Sullivan's documentation in his early diary entries from 1961 to 1969 suggest experiences of internal conflict with regards to his gender identity:

> When I was around 7–11 years old, my favorite play would be 'boys'. We all had boy names, set up pretend surroundings, and acted like boys. (Sullivan 2019: 32)
> Sheila look at yourself + face yourself. See what's in you and don't try to put anything else in it. Because then you destroy what you are and you tamper with God's work. (ibid.: 37)
> I wish I was a boy! (ibid.: 38)
> I wanna look like what I am but I don't know what someone like me looks like. (ibid.: 40)
> I am not wearing nylons anymore + am gradually eliminating my dependency on having a purse. (ibid.: 52)

These entries highlight affectual variance: from playfulness to shame, from desire to confusion. We can liken these to Jess' experiences as a young adult in *Stone Butch Blues* which also capture feelings of shame and confusion, but also comfort in masculinity. However, for the character of Jess, and Lou's real lived experience, comfort in masculinity is not always an easy road, and is often limited by external social forces.

Moreover, Feinberg (via Jess) and Sullivan both reveal the messiness and often contradictory nature of gendered feelings, and capture the realities of being trans that do not fit into neat (medicalised) discourses and transnormative narratives. Transnormative narratives (Kennedy 2023; Johnson 2016) often leave little room for

nuance, tension, confusion, deliberation, and regret. Instead they organise both trans legitimacy and access to the technologies of medical transition through medicalisation and pathologisation (Drabinski 2014; Meyerowitz 2002). In response, a hierarchy emerges in which trans individuals whose narration satisfies the diagnostic elements of medical transition under pathologisation are legitimised (Boe et al. 2020; Vipond 2015). As a result, trans individuals who refuse this narrative of medical transition or do not desire medical transition are rendered suspect, unintelligible and often stigmatised (Bradford and Syed 2019; Konnelly 2023).

One of the most significant aspects of *Stone Butch Blues* which resists normative interpretations of transness is the plot trajectory in which Jess halts taking testosterone mid-process due to feelings of contention in their identity. Through the imposed linearity of pathologised medical transition and rigorous social expectations of gendered expression, we see that Jess struggles with how their gendered experience is denied multiplicity, ambiguity, androgyny, and non-conformity as they transition. In Jess' narrative, we uncover their desire for an alternative modality of transition, one that is less insistent on staticity. Instead, there seems to be a desire to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016): "I didn't get to explore being a he-she, though. I simply became a he – a man without a past" (Feinberg 2014: 241). Through Jess' narrative we come to realise that transition itself cannot be a salve to the societal pressures of gendered expectations that they experience. Feinberg takes up passing as a concept in order to illustrate the slippage between non-conformity and assimilation:

> At first, everything was fun. The world stopped feeling like a gauntlet I had to run through. But very quickly I discovered that passing didn't just mean slipping below the surface, it meant being buried alive. I was still me on the inside, trapped in there with all my wounds and fears. But I was no longer me on the outside. (ibid.: 186)

Jess realises that their "passing" as a man is subsequently their "identities unbecoming" (Prosser 1998: 185). In response, Jess decides to halt their medical transition which is framed only as a complete assimilation into manhood not an exploration of the potentiality of the material body.

Similarly, Lou Sullivan for a time feels the pressures of internal gendered conflicts that are amplified by societal norms that are determinedly anti-transition. Thus, there is a temporary return to living his life as a woman, and re-adopting the name 'Sheila': "I've returned from SF feeling pretty free of my gender conflict […]. I must pursue my own ideal of the perfect male/female balance + try not to oust one for the other" (Sullivan 2019: 171). However, as Sullivan's diaries continue, it is clear that life as 'Sheila' is unfulfilling: "Now as a female I feel empty inside but feel freer to relate to others" (ibid.: 175). Not only does this demonstrate the dynamism

of gendered feelings, but also the severe negative impacts of being committed – or perhaps, stuck – in the wrong subjectivity.

Furthermore, Sullivan's experience of feeling empty while being interpreted as a woman is uniquely tied to his sexuality. His partner at the time, J, is cited as the reason for not pursuing his transition: "I always felt had J not been around […] I would definitely go towards being male that I'd even hoped somehow he'd get out of my life so I'd be free to be a man" (ibid.). This mediation on transition as relational to sexuality is also emphasised in *Stone Butch Blues* by Jess' friend Grant who also transitions and urges: "How's it going to be with women? I mean, who would ever go out with us?" (Feinberg 2014: 176)

While both Sullivan and Feinberg's Jess engage in what could be read as detransitioning, their narrative trajectories resist the current interpretations of such experiences as being wholly constitutive of a negative affect. I am thinking here with trans author Torrey Peters, whose novel *Detransition, Baby* (2021) demonstrates that regret has the potential to be generative. In the context of both Sullivan and Feinberg's Jess, the incongruent and discordant modes of transition through which they explore their genders are textured by trans asociality (Awkward-Rich 2022), joy, confusion, happiness, and connection.

Jess' decision to stop taking hormones enables them to establish identification with a group of people whose "sex [they] couldn't figure out" (Feinberg 2014: 32). We are given this insight into Jess' identification through a dream scene close to the conclusion of the novel:

> There were people who were different like me inside. We could all see our reflections in the faces of those who sat in this circle. […] I felt my whole life coming full circle. Growing up so different, coming out as a butch, passing as a man, and then back to the same question that had shaped my life: woman or man? (ibid.: 329)

In contrast, Lou reorients his identity to define himself as a gay man:

> The reasons I decided in 1976 not to pursue transsexualism were 1. Because I was too unsure of myself to take on that major change, 2. I hadn't reconciled my female-male conflict, +3, because J said he would leave me + I didn't believe I could go on in life without him. All three of those reasons no longer hold through. I think I'm finally seeing myself in perspective. (Sullivan 2019: 211)

Lou goes on to pursue top and bottom surgery with vigour. He relishes in the sociality of manhood and takes immense pride in having consolidated this identity: "Can't wait to get my other ball!" (ibid.: 353)

Despite their differences in narrative trajectories, both Sullivan and Feinberg's Jess unmake the assumption that medical transition is linear and abstracted from

experiences of exploration, confusion, and potential pauses and foreclosures. Moreover, their life stories present a framework of interpreting experiences of transness that are in relation to medical transition rather than constituted wholly by the act of transitioning itself. For example, in the final chapter of *Stone Butch Blues*, though Jess has undergone top surgery, they reveal to Duffy that they have stopped taking hormones (Feinberg 2014: 327). Duffy responds that Jess looks "less scared but more hurt" (ibid.), which Jess affirms. It is perhaps due to the fact that throughout their life, Jess' sense of self has been shaped by the trauma inflicted upon them at the hands of cisgender people which causes them to consistently feel scared and desire a type of safety through masculine presentation. However, even within their efforts to receive gender-affirming care, Jess is treated poorly by the medical professionals in the hospital in which they get top surgery:

> "Can I get something for the pain?" They walked away. […] One of the nurses came back. "Look," she said, "I don't understand any of this. But I can tell you this hospital is for sick people. You people make some arrangement with Constanza [the doctor that performs their surgery] on the side, that's your business. But this bed and our time is for sick people." (Feinberg 2014: 190–191)

Thus, even though Jess follows the correct procedures to 'do transgender' (Connell 2010) aesthetics correctly, their body, gender identity, and ultimately their subjectivity is perceived and marked as deviant by cisgendered society.

This is further intensified later in the novel when Jess is attacked for their gender non-conformity. Left beaten and bloody, they fear receiving medical treatment: "Maybe if I went alone and they didn't make me take off my T-shirt they might help me" (Feinberg 2014: 283). Moreover, the nurse's insistence that Jess fills out a police report causes them great anxiety: "I was still a gender outlaw – any encounter with the police might end up with me in their custody […]. The emergency room was so chaotic no one noticed me leave" (ibid.: 284). Again, there is evidence of the trans experience being constrained by cisgender norms on either side; expected to undergo medical transition, yet punished for pursuing it.

In a similar vein, Sullivan's diaries demonstrate an ambivalence around medical transition, and a deep commitment to gender non-conformity:

> I just want a mastectomy + to get sterilized + continue living this half + half life. I don't feel this surgery would make me a better man or woman, but I know it would make me a better person. I don't believe I can successfully live as a man or as a woman. (Sullivan 2019: 166)

Sullivan's entry echoes Susan Stryker's articulation of her gender identity as impossible to align with cisgender norms, and therefore can be considered, in practice,

to be unavoidably nonbinary (Stryker 2017: xi). While nonbinary identities are often associated with androgynous body ideals (e.g. Galupo, Cusack and Morris 2021), both Sullivan and Stryker's experiences suggest that nonbinary may actually be better used as a political umbrella category in the face of cis (and in some cases, trans) normativities.

In both the cases of *Stone Butch Blues* and Sullivan's diaries, it is clear that questions of intimacy, desire, and sexuality are intertwined in the politics of the authors. I argue in the following section that intimacies, both social and sexual, are intrinsic in the journey towards liberation.

## Intimacies: Socio/Sexual Liberation

Though it is different to live as a butch lesbian than it is to live as a trans fag, what Feinberg (via Jess) and Sullivan teach us through their writings is that social liberation of trans people is innately tied to their sexual liberation. Though Feinberg was predominantly interested in class liberation, not only in *Stone Butch Blues*, but in their political writing and activism, intimacy is a central focus of the novel. *Stone Butch Blues* focuses on the more traumatic aspects of intimacy – sexual violence, heartbreak, and so on – and, arguably, frames sexuality and intimacy in a pessimistic light. On the other hand, Lou's diaries are steeped in sexual desire that ranges from Beatlemania to BDSM. While there are many moments of euphoria and ecstasy associated with the erotic in Sullivan's journals, it might better serve to characterise both Feinberg and Sullivan's writings (and lives) as ambivalent and complex, and often layered with 'bad' feelings (Malatino 2022).

Sullivan often articulates his identity through the lens of sexuality and embodiment. As Gonzalez (2019: 73) argues, "in the construction of the body his appearance requires, Lou is most concerned with sexuality and sexual love". That is, Sullivan's (self-)validation of his trans masculinity was connected to being desired as a man, and desiring other men. While Lou's relationship with J was stunted by Lou's masculinity, his (largely sexual) relationship with Ray serves to affirm his gender identity through intimacy. When Sullivan first meets Ray, he tells him "[he] was into guy's clothes and [his] big fantasy was to go to a gay bar + get a guy who thought [he] was a guy to take [him] home" (Sullivan 2019: 199). In turn, Ray reveals that he is also interested in wearing women's clothing. Their relationship flourishes through their shared kinks and desires, and Ray fully embraces Sullivan's gender identity through their sexualities and intimacies: "I had my fake cock (stuffed sock) in my jockey shorts + rubbed it against his cock + ass and he really liked it" (ibid.: 219).

This is sharply contrasted to Jess' experiences as a stone butch: an identity which is "an enigmatic core of lesbian sexual and social practice" (Halberstam 1998: 124). 'Stone butch' has traditionally referred to butch lesbians who disallow reciprocal

touch in their sexual and romantic relationships with other women, most often femmes (e.g. Halberstam 1998; Rodness 2020). However, as Maltz (1998: 274) argues, stone butch subjectivity involves queering masculinity in ways which 'haunt' the sex/gender binary. Further, in my interpretation, I suggest that stone butch subjectivities may serve to both uphold and critique normative erotic politics in tense and ambivalent ways. That is, the stone butch is simultaneously active and agentic (that which is associated with masculine norms), yet refuses pleasure as a masculine subject (which is antithetical to stereotypical masculine/feminine sexual relationship dynamics in that those who are masculine assumingly receive the most pleasure). As Cvetkovich argues, writing about not wanting to be touched can be seen to "celebrate the hard-won experience of sexual pleasure without denying its roots in pain and difficulty" (2003: 4). However, this is not to say that Jess does not experience or desire intimacy despite their stone butch identity. Rather, there are moments throughout the novel in which Jess' subjectivity is tightly bound to being touched: "The loneliness became more and more unbearable. I ached to be touched. I feared I was disappearing and I'd cease to exist if someone didn't touch me" (Feinberg 2014: 200).

Similarly, Sullivan's desire to love and be loved as a man are also integral to the forging of his trans subjectivity: "I deserve to press a man against my solid hard chest, feel his against mine, and have him feel mine against his" (Sullivan 2019: 229).

Fischman argues that "touching and being touched parallel the process of knowing and being known" (2023: 2). In the case of the fictional character of Jess, and the real-life Lou Sullivan, I argue that trans subjectivity is (at least in part) forged through desire for intimacy and closeness with others as there is potential to validate the self through mutual affection and/or eroticism.

However, it is not just erotic or romantic desire which scaffolds trans subjectivity. For example, Sullivan's relationship with Ray is not purely sexual; rather, Lou connects with Ray in how he queers the sexual and gendered norms that are often inscribed onto relationships between men and women. Sullivan charts how Ray's interest in crossdressing, as well as his ability to be emotionally vulnerable with him, strengthens his feelings for him:

> I wished he was mine. I knew it was out of line + 'feminine' to feel that way, but this guy is such a goddamn perfect sex partner […] and despite what he says, I believe he *likes* to talk to me. And he's right talking like that is a feminine thing because he has to relate to me on the same level, which may make him feel feminine, which is why straight men don't like to do that. Suddenly we're like 2 human beings going to have sex instead of a man + a woman going through a dating ritual. (Sullivan 2019: 220)

Though not quite a t4t relationship, Lou and Ray's connection is forged through their ability to exist otherwise, outside of the hegemonic relationships of how one should look, act, and love. While these private moments of desire are essential to Lou's identity and body becoming who he desires to be, he is nevertheless still limited by this libidinal and romantic interest in men when it comes to accessing medical care:

> In to see Dr. Wardell Pomeroy at the National Sex Forum […], he said he only had one question in all this: why am I trying to force myself to be a heterosexual man + like women […]. I set him straight fast said I'm NOT AT ALL trying to be a hetero man, I WANT to be a gay man! […] I waited in the lobby about 5 minutes […] then they told me they all agreed I should try hormones. But I should go at it gradually and I should put any surgery 'on the back burner'. (ibid.: 220–221)

Though the doctors all agree that Lou is a transgender man, they cannot conceive of someone being transgender *and* queer, and expect, through his transition, that he will reinscribe heteronormativity into his life. Arguably, their refusal to recommend Lou for a mastectomy and phalloplasty in this instance could be seen to be an attempt to limit his queerness via limiting his becoming body. This is also further complicated later by his relationship with T, who refuses to have anal sex with him. Lou expresses that "this constant reference to my female parts is his way of denying he's involved with another man" (ibid.: 304).

However, Lou does eventually receive this gender-affirming care, and ruminates on whether or not his future lovers will fuck the small remainder of his vaginal opening, or his asshole. However, the ambivalence of Sullivan's erogenous terrains (Gonzalez 2019: 75) is not something which negatively consumes Sullivan, but rather marks the beginning of finally getting to live a life which he has desired: "[m]ore than anything, Lou's life's work was to find a form for the desire that animated his body" (ibid.: 77). Though trans sexuality has largely been overlooked and misrepresented within academia (e.g. Davy and Steinbock 2012), life narratives such as Sullivan's provide rich and valuable entry points into both understanding and theorising trans sexuality. In particular, in my view, Sullivan's narratives support the notion that trans desire is uniquely bound up in trans liberation, whereby the potential of erotic exploration on trans terms directly opposes harmful representations of transness that emerge in both institutional and cultural discourses (e.g. ibid.; Bettcher 2014). In this regard, the (eroticised) spaces – both physical in bars and clubs, and textual/virtual through the FTM Newsletter – offer Sullivan sexual and social gratification, as he 'cruises' towards a liveable life for himself (e.g. Muñoz 2009; Butler 2004; Browne et al. 2021; Banerjea and Browne 2023).

Though *Stone Butch Blues* can be seen as having a far more troubling relationship with sexualities and the erotic, it nevertheless captures beautiful portraits of intimacies through friendship and kinship. Whether sharing food, being accountable for

wrongdoing, or saying nothing when nothing should be said, the mutual love and care shared by Jess and the other characters with whom they develop bonds demonstrates the complexities of community. I argue that *Stone Butch Blues* clearly captures the difficulties in "how best to care for each other, with our differing abilities, idiosyncrasies, and traumas, with our hard-to-love thorns intact and sometimes injurious (to ourselves and each other)" (Malatino 2020: 2).

The most obvious example of this is Jess' relationship with Ruth, a neighbour turned lover. Not only does their relationship with Ruth allow them to begin to heal from past traumas, it also opens up a new life for Jess in that it gives them both a new language and lineage to emerge from. Through the development of their relationship, Jess unlearns stigmas about both themselves and the wider LGBTQIA+ community. Through the love that they receive from Ruth, Jess stops taking hormones and learns to understand their identity and body in more expansive ways beyond the limitations of the binary, and dichotomies of butch and femme. For example, they realise that the breakdown of their relationship with their friend, Frankie, was due to their own internalised shame around butchness: "I always wanted all of us who were different to be the same. I can't believe I rejected a butch friend because she took a butch lover" (Feinberg 2014: 296). Ultimately, it is through Ruth's care and kindness that Jess can begin to repair their relationships with others and themselves, as Ruth provides both space and support for Jess to develop their own sense of accountability and agency.

Despite the stark contrast on perspectives of intimacy between *Stone Butch Blues* and Sullivan's diaries, it is nevertheless possible to see the commonalities between the two texts in terms of how they underscore how connections with others and community building are instrumental in trans lives. Not only is this "communization of care" (e.g. Aizura 2017) essential in the sustenance of trans community, but it also extends to trans liveability – that is, living a life beyond survival. Trans folks across time and space, through creating alternative networks and practices of care, have "co-constituted, interdependent subjects to repair, rebuild, and cultivate resilience in the midst of, and in the aftermath of, experiences of overwhelming negative affect" (Malatino 2020: 43). That is, through interaction with individuals that share similar struggles, trans people can make a self that feels whole, in the face of a world that tries to ensure we are fragmented.

## Conclusion: Interactions, or Making the Self through Others

I have discussed in this article how internal and external gendered and sexual politics shape and structure trans lived experiences, from how one feels about one's body, to how one might act (or not act) with their becoming embodiment. As demonstrated above, the thread which links the internal and external factors which influ-

ence the development of trans identities and subjectivities is the interactions with others, particularly those who might share the same "essence" (e.g. Malatino 2020: 43; Povinelli 2008: 511). That is, the ability to see ourselves in others helps us to understand ourselves in new ways that can be simultaneously challenging and exciting.

A clear example of this in *Stone Butch Blues* is when Ruth gives Jess a copy of *Gay American History*, a text which chronicles and represents the diversity of LGBTQIA+ communities and identities that Jess has not borne witness to before. Thus, not only does Jess' relationship with Ruth have a positive impact on their life, it also helps to broaden their horizon and situate themselves in a lineage of powerful solidarity and resistance: "just finding out that it was ever different, even if it was long ago, made me feel things could change again" (Feinberg 2014: 296). Similarly, Sullivan's affinity with Jack Bee Garland (which emerged from his archival work and biography writing on Garland) helped him to develop his own sense of self: "I like to call him 'her' because it reminds me of where I came from and how lucky I am […]. I feel like I want to have all the surgery to go all the way in memory of Jack Garland" (Sullivan 2019: 334). Arguably, it is through the telling of trans stories which helps Sullivan, as well as Jess, develop a sense of futurity as they become more comfortable in their trans identities and embodiments. Further, in both *Stone Butch Blues* and Sullivan's diaries, (female) masculinity is a form of hope and safety, which contrasts with hegemonic sexual and gendered politics, including some radical feminist criticism (e.g. McCarry 2007; Robinson 2003). That is, bearing witness to trans masculinity being practised by others can turn ambitions into actions.

In a similar vein, my own relationship to the works of Leslie Feinberg and Lou Sullivan, as well as my relationship to Matt, has helped me to create and recreate my trans identity and subjectivity. Through the work of our trans ancestors, through loving one another, and through building our communities, we can feel "the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (Muñoz 2009: 1). Though we remain susceptible to harm, to conflict and to violence, and will continue to experience the side affects (Malatino 2022) of such, together we can "imagine a world worth living in, a world worth fighting for" (Feinberg 2014: 330), and develop our "own interpretation[s] of happiness" (Sullivan 2019: 40). To conclude, being trans in and of itself is not a radical act; but rather the revolutionary lies in our insistence on living, on loving, and being there for one another in a seemingly impossible world.

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