"Who was I now—woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices."

Intersections of Lesbian and Trans Experiences in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*

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1. Introduction[1]

Both contemporary U.S. American[2] culture and LGBTQIA+[3] discourse center lesbians' connection to cisness[4] and/or womanhood (Disclosure: 2020), with acknowledged sources such as the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (n.d.) defining lesbians as women who love other women. The persistence of anti-trans rhetoric both in society at large and in some lesbian communities and the positioning of trans rights against rather than alongside lesbian liberation exacerbate this paradigm. As a consequence, 'lesbian' and 'transgender' are considered two separate acronyms under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. However, equating being a lesbian with being cisgender,

1 This text is an edited and abridged version of chapter three of my M.A. thesis titled "*I Defend My Right to Be Complex." A Cultural Literary Exploration of Gender Non-Normativity in Lesbian Communities from the 1900s until Today*.

2 Land acknowledgement: What today is most widely known as the United States of America is the occupied ancestral home of over five hundred different Indigenous tribes. Through treaties, forced removal, enslavement, and murder, white colonizers have enacted extensive violence on Native Americans. I acknowledge the colonial history of this violence, Indigenous people's continued resistance, and the sovereignty of the First Nations.

3 An acronym that stands for 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic' people. The '+' represents additional non-normative identities that belong to the queer community.

4 'Cisgender,' abbreviated as 'cis,' refers to 'people who are not trans,' who have normative gender experiences, and/or whose sex assigned at birth aligns with their experiential gender (Serano n.d.).

gender-normative, and/or a woman obscures the rich history of gender diversity in lesbian communities. Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* is one of the most pivotal novels depicting lesbian and trans experiences; yet, it is often discussed as *either* a lesbian *or* a trans narrative, where 'lesbian' stands in for a focus on sexuality and 'trans' for a focus on gender. In lesbian readings of *Stone Butch Blues*, experiences of gender non-normativity are frequently neglected, undermined, or explained by sexuality (Prosser 1998: 137). Trans readings, on the other hand, are sometimes regarded as 'corrected' readings that are more illuminated or progressive than lesbian readings. Such divisive approaches miss the connections between lesbian and trans experiences and between gender and sexuality. Examining *Stone Butch Blues* as an example of the convergence of lesbian and trans identity, I will argue that people in lesbian spaces have challenged cis-normativity[5] and exemplified an overlap of lesbian and trans identities by embodying gender and sexuality in complex ways, exceeding the binary norms of the then-dominant society, finding their own language and community, and empowering their place in the margins.

I will offer a brief overview of political, social, and cultural paradigms that situate the novel and its characters in their historical context before examining different experiences of gender non-normativity in *Stone Butch Blues*. For this purpose, I will first look at Jess' experiences of multiple marginalization, gender expressions in the local lesbian community, femme/butch dynamics, and characters' relationship to transition and passing. Then, I will show the ways Jess integrates her complex experiences and becomes empowered to take political action through imagination and intra- and inter-communal solidarity, before concluding my analysis.

To locate non-normative gender and gender expression in my chosen texts, I use Clare Sears' framework of 'trans-ing analysis' to investigate "the boundary between normative and nonnormative gender […] away from […] *figure* to […] *practices*" (2015: 9, my italics). This method expands 'trans' to understand gender non-normativity in broader contexts and influenced by factors such as class and race. By engaging in what Qwo-Li Driskill calls a "radical disruption of master narratives" (2016: 7) and Sears terms "trans-ing" evidence, I am able to expand definitions of 'lesbian' and 'transgender,' examine these terms within and against larger paradigms, and grasp their continued, non-linear legacy that creates a possibility to "imagine a future"—an "opening" (Muñoz 2009: 1, 9)—and to portray a more holistic picture of trans and gender-non-normative possibilities within lesbian communities.

5 Bauer et al. define 'cis-normativity' as "the expectation that all people are [cis], that those assigned male at birth always grow up to be men and those assigned female at birth always grow up to be women" (2009: 356). Cis-normativity is connected to 'binarism,' the view that there are only two sexes and genders (Merriam-Webster n.d.), so that it also marginalizes intersex and non-binary trans people.

My analysis of the novel serves only as a case study and cannot represent universal or comprehensive accounts of lesbian and/or transgender experiences. What's more, this text focuses mostly on the butch characters, and the sexualities and genders of the femmes in *Stone Butch Blues* deserve an equally thorough exploration. By potentially including trans experiences in my analysis that today might fall within trans masculine and non-binary categories, I do *not* suggest that these groups are all lesbians or 'really women.' Anti-trans movements commonly use such rhetoric to delegitimize trans people and their access to equal rights and health care,[6] and this violent history can make it difficult to have complex discussions about trans people in lesbian spaces. Some trans masculine and non-binary trans people identify with the term 'lesbian,' but this applies *only if they themselves say so*. My queer and trans methods of analysis help me avoid imposing definitions and anachronistic interpretations and instead allow me to explore the experiences of people who moved in lesbian and trans spaces and who expanded lesbian existence regardless of their identification.

1940s and 1950s: Lavender Scare, McCarthyism, and Witch Hunts

The 1940s and 1950s saw a shift away from the sexological and psychoanalytical discourse of the previous decades and toward an emphasis on social categories (Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 2014: 261). This change in language mirrored the increasing hostility lesbian, trans, and gender-non-conforming people[7] experienced (ibid.). Under the then-current administration, the political ideologies of McCarthyism instigated 'witch-hunts' against communist sentiments, LGBTQIA+ communities, and other marginalized groups (Feinberg 1997: 4; Nestle 1981: 129), constructing them as national "security risks" (Johnson 2004: 3) and affecting those who belonged to multiple groups disproportionately. Part of this 'Lavender Scare' were "very strict" cross-dressing laws that required individuals to wear at least three pieces of clothing corresponding to their sex assigned at birth (Sears 2015: 4). Because of the ambiguities of sex, gender, gender expression, and gender perception, these laws were interpreted and enforced in arbitrary ways and were part of "political […] strategies […] that *produced* new definitions of normative gender" (Sears 2015: 5, my italics). Despite efforts to suppress gender 'aberrations,' such laws merely "drove cross-dressing practices into private spaces while increasing

6 J. K. Rowling's essay "J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking Out on Sex and Gender Issues" (2020) and the book *Irreversible Damage. The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (2020) by Abigail Shrier are exemplary for such harmful rhetoric.

7 'Trans and gender-non-conforming' (TGNC) is an umbrella term for a variety of gender-non-normative experiences. While I use it largely interchangeably with 'trans' and 'transgender,' TGNC seeks to additionally emphasize the broad spectrum of non-normative genders outside of or adjacent to binary and/or medical transness.

their visibility under the sign of criminality" (ibid.: 97). Trans and gender-non-conforming people thus experienced simultaneous invisibility—and therefore lack of supportive structures, agency, and power—and hypervisibility—and therefore physical violence and public scrutiny.

As a part of 'going underground' within these complex dynamics, many queers found community in bars, which became sites of frequent police raids. Other social developments influenced lesbian communities: The Supreme Court's decision to rule the "Separate but Equal" doctrine illegal in 1954 allowed for a mixing of Black and white communities while the legacy of segregation maintained distinct Black and white lesbian cultures, and still persistent racism subjected queer people who were Black, Indigenous, and/or of color to intersecting discrimination. The 1940s through the early 1960s were thus a time of violent policies but also of generative potential, challenged laws, and grassroots activism that would flourish in succeeding decades (Feinberg 1997: 3–4; Johnson 2004: 3).

2. Gender Non-Normativity in *Stone Butch Blues*

Leslie Feinberg's[8] *Stone Butch Blues* reflects the political climate of its time, and its characters experience their non-normative sexualities and genders amidst and against these complex social, cultural, and legal structures. First published in 1993, the novel chronicles the life story of Jess Goldberg, a Jewish working-class butch who explores her gender, sexuality, and relationship to femme/butch and trans communities in Buffalo and New York between 1940 and 1980. On the following pages, I will examine different parts of the novel in more detail and show how the protagonist Jess' character develops through encounters of difference and alliances, demonstrating the interconnectedness of trans and lesbian experiences.

"Everybody's other:" Young Difference and Multiple Marginalization

Born in the 1940s, Jess becomes aware of her differences at an early age. The second chapter—the first chapter that starts chronologically with the character's beginnings—establishes Jess' non-normativity with its first sentence ("I didn't want to be different." Feinberg 2014a: 13), emphasizing not only Jess' outcast status but also her aversion toward it: "I longed to be everything grownups wanted, so they would love me" (ibid.). Jess connects fitting in to being loved, so that others' taunting "refrain" of

8 Leslie Feinberg's website states that Feinberg preferred 'zie/hir/hirs' and 'she/her/hers' pronouns, although Feinberg used different pronouns in different contexts and has stated that the intention behind the used pronouns is more important than the kind of pronoun used (Feinberg 2014b).

"[i]s that a boy or a girl?" becomes a source of grief in her life (ibid.). Both her family and childhood community in Buffalo 'confirm' Jess' otherness through interpersonal violence, and Jess internalizes shame for her difference through these encounters at an age when she is still unable to name her experiences of gender and oppression, leaving her confused and isolated.

Because she is a butch from a Jewish working-class family, additional factors of marginalization exaggerate Jess' gender non-normativity. As an adolescent, Jess drops out of school and works in the factories alongside mostly straight cis men. Although she enjoys the job and comradery with some of the butches in the factory, this mostly cisgender male environment subjects her to ridicule and harassment (ibid.: 87, 97) and therefore represents an experience of intersecting marginalization based on gender, sexuality, and class. For example, after witnessing job inequalities, Jess shows up to support the workers' union, yet she feels "shame" because "the foreman probably heard [her] voice rising alone in song" (ibid.: 84). This shame highlights unequal class power dynamics between workers and bosses, and it also emphasizes Jess' gender-based fear to be 'discovered' or ridiculed for her high voice—to her colleagues, it is a typically considered 'feminine' trait that seemingly contradicts her masculine gender. In another scene, Duffy, a cis-heterosexual man who is a union organizer and forms a friendship with Jess, does not understand the masculine women who work alongside Jess in the factory and who are married to men (ibid.: 91). Jess responds that "they are he-shes, but they're not butches," suggesting that butches and "he-shes" primarily share non-normative gender rather than sexuality. This emphasizes the distinctness of working-class genders and ways of identification, the importance of gender for butches, and a specifically lesbian connotation of the term 'butch.' Lesbian sexuality was often visible only through non-normative gender expression which became disproportionately linked to working-class status, interlacing these factors in lesbian communities, with especially "butch and fem as an organizing principle" that "[pervaded] all aspects of working-class lesbian culture" (Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 2014: 154).

The marginalization Jess experiences for being Jewish similarly adds to her feeling of otherness. Jess' last name, Goldberg, renders her recognizably Jewish and thus contributes to her visible difference (Prosser 1998: 181, 190). Jess' family is subjected to ostracism for being Jewish, as well (Feinberg 2014a: 19); yet these experiences do not encourage them to empathize with Jess but rather heighten their rejection of her difference. Jess' mother, for example, expresses her shame for Jess' gender: "I was so ashamed. […] I'm sick of people asking me if she's a boy or a girl" (ibid.: 13–14). Jess' family already faces marginalization, so they do not want to become subject to additional scrutiny because of their child's gender. Jess' Jewish and working-class background thus exaggerates her perceived gender and sexuality difference, adds pressure to conform in other areas of her life, and contributes to her isolation, making her "sick of being everybody's other" (ibid.: 249).

"People like me:" Community, Exploration, and Regulation

Jess moves out of her parents' house in the early sixties and discovers the local lesbian scene, where the femme/butch culture of the preceding decades is still prevalent. Jess finds refuge in the bar Tifka's, feels joyful to have found a place with "people like [her]" (ibid.: 156), and begins to see the bar community as her family. Other butches introduce Jess to femme/butch mannerisms and become her mentors and role models (ibid.: 27). Like Jess, the femmes and butches she meets express and name their non-normative gender in complex ways. For example, many of the older bar butches adopt shortened, gender-ambiguous versions of their names to better fit their gender, such as Butch Al, Old Butch Ro, Ed, and Rocco. Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis explain that "most butches had a nickname which was appropriate to their presentation of self" that was "not exclusively male" (2014: 260). Reclaiming insults as self-descriptors similarly becomes language through which Jess can recognize the butches' non-normative experiences. When used by "people who hate our [butches'] guts" (Feinberg 2014a: 324), words like 'bulldagger' and 'he-she' target the intersections of her non-normative gender, gender expression, and sexuality and reinforce shame: "All my crimes were listed. I was guilty as charged" (ibid.: 40). Yet, when the butches use words like 'bulldagger' and 'he-she' to describe themselves and others, they do so in neutral, loving, or empowering ways (ibid.: e.g. 28, 30, 90, 299). She even asserts her identity as a 'he-she' against onlookers' assumptions that she is a "gay man" (ibid.: 324), highlighting both the importance of that identity to her and the fluid and volatile nature of being gendered. Reclaiming insults and leaning on kinship-based understanding allows her to envision a future: "I could look at the old bulldaggers and see my own future" (ibid.: 27).

Clothing is one of the most essential ways the butches and femmes express their genders as it carries the potential to be armor against violence, an alleviation to gender dysphoria,[9] and externalization and empowerment of gender difference.[10] Because clothing and style can be visible markers of queerness, they become one of the most visible and imminent sites of attack. Harassers remove Jess' and the other butches' clothes to 'reveal' their 'real' gender, literally 'stripping' them of both agency and protection (ibid.: 5, 12, 34, 39–40). Jess deems her genitals "the important half" (ibid.: 12) because she knows others see them as 'evidence' for her 'true' gender and as a challenge to her butch identity. Then-contemporary regulation of clothing through cross-dressing laws (Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 2014: 276) made especially visibly

9 Gender dysphoria describes "the discomfort and/or distress that trans people experience when they are unable to live as members of the gender/sex that they identify as or desire to be" or when others refuse to recognize trans people's self-determined gender (Serano n.d.).

10 Cf. chapter three, "'A Weekend Wasn't a Weekend If There Wasn't a Fight:' The Tough Bar Lesbians of the 1950s," in Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (2014).

gender-non-conforming people even more vulnerable to harassment, and its regulation confirms the power of clothing as self-expression and self-determination. Despite—or maybe because—these attacks are so closely linked to physical experience, clothes become crucial to butches and femmes and highlight that the daily violence they experience occurs based not only on their sexuality but most significantly on gender, gender expression, and others' perceptions of their gender. At the same time, the characters' non-normative genders are self-evident beyond clothing. At Old Butch Ro's funeral, for example, Jess and Ed wear a "blue suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie" (Feinberg 2014a: 124) despite family members' insistence that the butches wear dresses. Jess' observation that "[w]earing dresses was an excruciating humiliation" for the butches because it "ridiculed who they were" (ibid.) emphasizes the importance of clothing as self-expression. Instead of negating the butches' genders, though, the dresses form a contrast to and consequently highlight the butches' masculinity, so that the dresses become "painful *drag*" (ibid.: 125, my italics). The external violence the butches experience affirms their positions outside of then-contemporary dominant gender norms and frequently becomes an equally brutal internal violence, such as self-harm, therefore contributing to their erasure.

"An act of sweet imagination:" Femme/Butch and Gender Deviance

The butches in Jess' community express their frustration with putting their experiences into words both in the context of dominant society and in community with femmes. Frankie says that she has "never talked about [certain butch-related experiences] to a femme," and Jess similarly longs for the company of other butches to feel understood and express herself authentically: "I needed my own words—butch words to talk about butch feelings" (ibid.: 301). This suggests that butches and femmes have distinct languages and gender experiences. Yet, the femmes in *Stone Butch Blues* do not represent the normative counterpart to butches; on the contrary, they also have individual ways to express their genders that challenged then-dominant mainstream conceptions of (cis-)gender. In an interview with Amber Hollibaugh, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha confirms this: "even though we [femmes] do not cross from our assigned-at-birth gender to the 'other' gender—the way transgender is often thought of—we still chose to live a different gender" and are "read as being as queer as a drag queen" (Hollibaugh 2000: 249). Although 'femme' and 'butch' signify distinct genders and sexualities, then, they both represent a deviation from gender norms, and it is exactly these "differences and [...] alignments that fire the femme-butch dynamic" (Dawkins 2015) and become the basis for an intimate connection. For example, Jess forms a bond with Mona, a femme sex worker, who challenges then-contemporary norms for women both with her gender expression and with her job. Jess and Mona relate to each other because they both face gender-based violence and scrutiny, even if this presents

in different ways (Feinberg 2014a: 33–35). Femmes and butches share an intimate understanding of each other's genders and sexualities. Amber Hollibaugh, a pro-sex "dyke" and "high femme lesbian" who was a part of femme/butch culture in the 1960s and onwards, explains that "at least in my partnerships, one of us has a penis. But that's not even interesting to them [gay cis men and others outside of lesbian communities]" (2000: 3). "Penis," here, does not necessarily refer to flesh but may represent the male, masculine, non-binary, or other non-normative gender and/or gender expression of her partners. Similarly, the femme/butch couples in *Stone Butch Blues* find creative ways to explore sex and intimacy that allow them to express their transgressive genders and sexualities, making sex "an act of sweet imagination" (ibid.: 74).

"I've been thinking about it, too:" Medical Transition and 'Passing'

Some members of the lesbian community in Buffalo medically, legally, and/or socially transition. Although many butches 'pass"[11] as men either intentionally or accidentally, not all identify as such; however, not all identify as women, either.[12] For some, masculinity corresponds to their gender, for others, being read as men is a safety issue; and the butches have different reasons and goals for their social, legal, and/or medical transitions. Rocco is initially the only person Jess meets in the lesbian bar scene in Buffalo who takes testosterone. Even though Rocco has a beard and 'passes' as a man, bar members refer to Rocco as "she" (Feinberg 2014a: 102, 156). Contemporary trans discourse may interpret this as disrespectful of Rocco's gender; however, because Rocco's former lover—who deeply respects Rocco—refers to Rocco as "she" and "woman," these terms may instead reflect Rocco's complex gender and continuous place in the lesbian community. When other members of the bar scene transition[13] and/or use different pronouns, Jess and her friends respect

11 'Passing' describes the instance when "a member of a marginalized/minority group is perceived to be, or blends in as, a member of the dominant/majority group" (Serano n.d.)—in this case, when others assume trans people to be cis and/or their experienced gender. This concept can be harmful as it displaces the responsibility of gendering from the onlooker onto the trans person and disregards that non-binary trans people can hardly 'pass' in a society rooted in the conception that only two binary genders exist.

12 Because some butches 'pass' as men, they face accusations of heteronormativity from both dominant and queer communities. Such views disregard the continuous place of butches as queer, lesbian, and gender-marginalized people: "to recognize their [butches'] masculinity and not their queerness distorts their culture and consciousness and negates their role in building lesbian community" (Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 2014: 183). Regardless of its individual embodiment, then, *butch* always necessarily represents a non-normative gender, gender expression, and/or sexuality.

13 *Gender transition* is individual and does not (necessarily) refer to a medical process. Instead, transition can be social, legal, medical, and/or internal; it is not linear or within a finite 'pre-'

this: When Grant says, "'You know Ginni? She got on a sex-change program, now she calls herself Jimmy," "Edwin glared at Grant" and corrects Grant: "He asked us to call him he—remember? We ought to do it" (ibid.: 155), and Grant immediately adapts and refers to Jimmy correctly. This conversation emphasizes the intimate understanding of self-expression and gender complexity and the mutual respect and solidarity in Jess' lesbian community. Although the four friends initially express reluctance towards Jimmy's medical transition, they can also relate to him. Jess shares that she has considered taking hormones; Ed admits she "knew what [Jess] was talking about," and Grant had been "thinking about it too." (ibid.) While they share this sentiment, the butches all have different experiences: Jan, for example, clarifies: "I'm not like Jimmy. […] I'm not a guy." The butches' differences emphasize the diversity of gender experiences in the Buffolonian lesbian community. Grant's subsequent questions—"How do you know that? How do you know we aren't? We aren't real women are we?"—and Edwin's answer—"I don't know what the hell I am"—(ibid.) highlight the displacement and confusion these butches feel because of the lack of understanding towards their non-normative genders.

Hearing about experiences like Rocco's allows Jess to explore her gender in new ways. Jess eventually decides to take testosterone to alleviate her gender dysphoria and to avoid violence (ibid.). During this time, Jess becomes involved with Annie, a cis-heterosexual woman who reads Jess as a cisgender man. Annie makes homophobic comments in front of Jess (ibid.: 211–212), who is hurt and soon leaves Annie because of these comments. Jess' reaction highlights her continued identification with lesbian communities and with being read as visibly queer. After a few months of "*passing as a man*," she feels isolated and laments that it is "*strange to be exiled from your own sex to borders that will never be home*" (ibid.: 6). Instead of giving Jess comfort, 'passing,' to her personally, feels inauthentic: "I discovered that passing didn't just mean slipping below the surface, it meant being buried alive. […] I was no longer me on the outside" (ibid.: 186). She feels isolated in her new experience and grieves her belonging to lesbian spaces: although being read as a man might provide physical safety, it does not reflect Jess' experienced gender, so that she now feels a different kind of internal, emotional, and mental violence.

This predicament encourages Jess to weave her own narrative that does not fit with linear, binary, and/or medical ideas of transness: "Who was I now—woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked" (ibid.: 241). Instead of seeking fault in herself, Jess recognizes the fault in binary systems and in the individuals who reproduce these systems. She embraces her gender ambiguity and empowers her own definitions of trans, butch, and lesbian identity in which her discomfort with being

and 'post-' paradigm. Transition—and particularly medical transition—is not a requirement for being trans.

read as a man and her decision to stop testosterone do not negate her masculine gender but highlight its distinctly queer and non-normative nature.

"I miss Buffalo:" Integration and Celebration

In the later parts of the novel, Jess moves to New York City and discovers the local transgender community, which allows her to integrate her trans and lesbian experiences (ibid.: 271). Jess meets Ruth, a neighbor who is a transgender woman and who understands Jess because she experiences similar harassment on the street. Ruth introduces Jess to other trans people and renews her trust in vulnerability and community (ibid.: 259, 266, 274, 278). While Jess' time in Buffalo allows her to explore and accept her sexuality, her move to New York City allows her to do the same with gender through finding others who have similar experiences. Buffalo, then, represents the lesbian community, and NYC represents the trans community. Rather than a decision *for* transgender and *against* the lesbian community, Jess' move to NYC signifies her integration of these two: although Jess lives in NYC, she "[misses] Buffalo" (ibid.: 274), and at the end of the novel, Jess returns to Buffalo to make amends, strengthen the bonds with her community and friends there, and remember the lessons she learned in Buffalo before she goes back to New York City.

This visit to Buffalo also shows how much Jess learns to question her own assumptions and to be open to experiences different than hers. Despite her frustration with the rules and stereotypes that narrow her own expression, Jess initially also applies them herself. When Jess first hears that her friend Frankie, who is a butch, is in a relationship with another butch, Jess "couldn't deal with it" (ibid.: 219). Jess' admission that she wonders "who's the femme in bed?" (ibid.: 300) highlights her lack of understanding of lesbians who did not fit the then-prevalent femme/butch subculture. While femme/butch culture provided homes and mentorship to gender and sexual deviants, it also propagated a code of lesbian conduct and behavior (Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 2014: 16, 238). Many lesbians felt pressured to conform to this: "no matter […] whether assuming a role identity felt like a natural expression of her being or something imposed, she needed to adopt a role. They were a social imperative" (ibid.:152). Even Jess and the Buffalonian bar scene thus reproduce a social code: "Two butches could be friends, but never lovers; the same was true for two fems" (Feinberg 2014a: 152). While femmes and butches certainly challenged cis-heterosexual norms, then, they also established their own subcultural norms that made any femmes, butches, and queer people who did not fit these codes additionally non-normative in these contexts. During her visit, however, Jess apologizes to her friend Frankie for her previous prejudice about Frankie's butch/butch relationship. Jess externalizes her own prejudice, and this becomes the basis for an open conversation with her friend. The latter challenges Jess' narrow attitude: "What you meant was who does the fucking and who gets fucked? Who ran the fuck? That's not the same as

being butch or femme, Jess" (ibid.: 300). Frankie's definition of 'butch' complicates its relationship to sexuality and dislodges its placement in opposition to 'femme'. As such, Frankie conceptualizes 'butch' primarily as a queer gender or gender expression and questions cultural and subcultural expectations. "I'm sick of hearing butch used to mean sexual aggression or courage. If that's what butch means, what does it mean in reverse for femmes?" (ibid.) Instead of discouraging femme/butch dynamics, Frankie challenges narrow conceptions and reminds of their subversive roots that celebrate sexual and gender non-normativity against the cis-hetero mainstream. Jess reflects on her own complex gender, sexuality, and the interrelation between the two, explaining: "what gets it for me is high femme. It's funny—it doesn't matter whether it's women or men—it's always high femme that pulls me by the waist and makes me sweat" (ibid.). Jess realizes that her own sexuality as well as the label 'femme' transcend sex assigned at birth and feel more connected to gender and/or gender expression. Frankie thus helps Jess expand her own ideas about lesbian existence and to recognize her own complexities.

"And yearning:" Imagining Language, Future, and Political Action

Finding language for herself and learning from others with different perspectives empowers Jess to envision a queer, gender-expansive future with space for people like her. She asserts that she cannot talk about her experiences because she lacks language that reflects them: "'There's things that happened to me because I'm a he-she that I've never talked about to a femme. I've never had the words. […] I'm choking to death on what I'm feeling. I need to talk and I don't even know how." (ibid.: 301) Although Jess' lack of words is "choking" her "to death," it also encourages her to find her own language. Jess subverts questions that reinforce binaries and instead uses them to reflect—and liberate—herself: "Who was I becoming? I couldn't answer those questions, but even asking them was a sign to me that tumultuous change had been boiling just below the surface of my consciousness" (ibid.: 241). Right after this realization, Jess has a dream in which she finally surfaces from "deep, murky water" to inhale, and this empowerment of her own in-betweenness relieves "pressure" from her. When she surfaces from the water, she is met with "sun," a "breeze," and "laughter" (ibid.). Reminiscent of José Esteban Muñoz's 'queer utopia,' Jess finds liberation in her queerness, and this ultimately allows her to see a future, a "light shimmering above" her (ibid.). Frankie and Jess' conversation echoes this sentiment. They state a world that embraces butches is "not here yet" (Muñoz 2009: 1), but Jess asks: "What would our words sound like?" (Feinberg 2014a: 301) Living in the in-between—imagining, questioning—becomes a way for the butches to connect in the present and see beyond its violent reality. Jess and Frankie contemplate the realization of this queer utopia through and tied to nature: "'What would our words sound like?' […] I looked up at the sky. 'Like thunder, maybe'" (ibid.). The two butches share

an intimate, tender moment: "Frankie pressed her lips against [Jess'] hair. 'Yeah, like thunder,'" Frankie agrees and adds, "And yearning" (ibid.). Frankie also hopes for a queer future: the word "yearning" carries the wish for a queer utopia. This word resonates with Jess, too: "I smiled and kissed the hard muscle of her biceps. 'Yearning,' I repeated softly. 'What a beautiful word to hear a butch say out loud'" (ibid.). The words "smiled," "kissed," "softly," and "beautiful" emphasize the tenderness between the butches. Jess' affirmation of Frankie's use of this word implies the underlying codes in the lesbian community at the time: its utterance counters expectations for butches to be tough and emotionally guarded. Jess returns the sentiment ("I repeated *softly*", my italics) and finds it liberating. The act of imagining and Frankie's plea to "hammer out a definition of butch that doesn't leave me out" (ibid.: 300) become a way to form the future in the present—"not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future" (Muñoz 2009: 1). Through this exchange, the two butches learn the importance of alliances in lesbian communities, even—and maybe especially—when their experiences differ. Frankie asks, "Am I so different from you?," Jess answers, "You have to decide that. To me we're still kin" (Feinberg 2014a: 300), affirming a definition of community that embraces differences, mutual support, and empathy. This personal exchange becomes an opportunity for structural change that "promises a future" for sexual and gender deviants like them.

Once Jess accepts these overlapping parts of herself—her butch lesbian and trans self; her working-class and Jewish heritage—she advocates not only for herself but also others like her. During the last pages of the novel, she spontaneously speaks at a "gay demonstration" (ibid.: 324), surprised by her own boldness. This moment becomes an opportunity for Jess to discover herself against the shame her environment has taught her: "I felt so sick to death of my own silence that I needed to speak. […] I just needed to open my throat for once and hear my own voice" (ibid.). Because she has realized that marginalized groups have been "taught to hate people who are different. It's been pumped into [their] brains. It keeps them fighting each other" (ibid.: 255), Jess advocates for alliances between marginalized people, between femme/butch communities from previous decades and then-contemporary lesbians in her speech. This moment becomes a pivotal shift towards Jess' reclamation of her power: "courage is […] not just living through the nightmare, it's doing something with it afterward. […] It's trying to organize to change things" (ibid.: 324). As part of this sentiment, Jess accepts her former co-worker Duffy's offer to join a worker's union—an offer she previously rejected (ibid.: 326). With Jess' involvement in the queer and the labor movement at the end of the novel, she reclaims her outsider status and her intersecting identities, believing in her own agency and solidarity. Because of her multiple marginalized identities, Jess recognizes structures of oppression and decides to fight them in a holistic, intertwined way rather than viewing them as separate or avoiding them to conform to a more respectable image. Accepting and integrating her gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and

class, then, allows Jess to find empowerment in political activism and to counter some of the violence, shame, and ostracism Jess has experienced.

3. Conclusion and Outlook

As an "anti-racist white, working-class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist" (Pratt 2014), activist, and gender historian, Leslie Feinberg shares many parallels with Jess. Feinberg experienced heightened visibility, violence, and erasure during the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond, and zie challenged the then-current status quo to create spaces for multiply marginalized people. Similar to Jess, Feinberg was influenced by the interconnectedness between gender and class. Moving between genders, classes, and other identities—particularly in public spaces—functioned as a necessary safety measure and as an opportunity to gain access to gatekept spaces, language, and education, which for Feinberg was a way of community building against dominant systems (Hallwalls 2014). The fluidity between Feinberg's and Jess' life challenges the distinction between not only 'trans' and 'lesbian' but also author and protagonist and fiction and non-fiction: "Like my own life, the novel defies easy classification […]. [T]his book is a lesbian novel and a transgender novel" (Feinberg 2014a: 336). By embracing this fluidity, Feinberg empowers the complexity of hir overlapping experiences: "I defend my right to be complex" (Feinberg 1998: 33).

I hope that my analysis shows that we cannot separate trans and lesbian communities but must recognize their overlap. *Stone Butch Blues* highlights that trans and gender-non-conforming people have frequently been pivotal to lesbian culture and emancipation and that femmes and butches are often at the forefront of this liminal space. Feinberg's characters show that even amidst shared experiences, these identities can be lived, experienced, and named in diverse ways. Any variation in experience, rather than suggesting a disconnect, highlights that their identities are simultaneously similar and different; in line with Yanyi's "great secret of lesbianism," these experiences exist alongside each other, next to each other, in solidarity, rather than "[echoing] sameness" (2019: 62). What remains constant are the oppressive structures that erase these characters and their complex trans and lesbian experiences, but also lesbians' and TGNC people's continuous resistance and (re-)imagination.

Race, class, and other sites of privilege and marginalization co-produce gender and gender perception. While intersecting discrimination can significantly contribute to the characters' struggles, their perspectives of multiple marginalization also help them to empower their right to be in existing spaces and to create a place outside of them, expanding and individualizing both trans and lesbian identification. Undermined by society at large and sometimes their own communities, characters challenge, expand, and reclaim the dominant meaning of terms and spaces

and create alternative methods of identifying themselves and each other, envisioning new ways of existing at the intersection of trans and lesbian experience. These visions translate to political action and advocate for alliance-based approaches that center shared oppressors rather than shared identities and that seek liberation for all oppressed people.

Of course, this analysis of *Stone Butch Blues* is only one piece of a vast body of research, archive, and possibility. I hope that more scholars will add to this work and explore TGNC and lesbian experiences across different countries, time periods, and languages. In the sentiment of Feinberg's protagonist, I envision a future where feminists fight for all gender-marginalized people; where gatekeepers cannot keep us from ourselves; where difference is an opportunity, not a threat; and where society recognizes trans and gender-non-conforming people as integral to lesbian communities. As such, I long for a future that not only tolerates but celebrates our complexities.

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