

# “Shake up imaginations and develop alternatives”<sup>1</sup>

## The Reception and Translation of *Stone Butch Blues* in France

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This novel by Leslie Feinberg is a cult book, a unique and moving reading experience. We are happy that it has finally been translated into a beautiful edition, we have been waiting 25 years for this event.<sup>2</sup> (Violette & Co via Hystériques & AssociéEs 2019)

Leslie Feinberg's work, which is a reference in queer literature in the United States and beyond, has not received the welcome it deserved in France for a long time – until the last few years. This is evidenced by the very late translation, in 2019, of her landmark novel *Stone Butch Blues*. However, *Stone Butch Blues* is not without many aspects that could appeal to a French-speaking audience. Let's think about its queer and feminist perspective, its intersectional scope and its links with autofiction. Successful French writers such as Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon and Edouard Louis also trace the trajectory of working-class women or homosexuals in their autofictional narratives. However, where Annie Ernaux's and Edouard Louis' narratives insist on a detailed description of the working-class family environment from which they come, it is more particularly the world of the factory, the fractures and the struggles it engenders, that Leslie Feinberg describes in *Stone Butch Blues*, as well as the weight of the stigmatizing gaze of society on the protagonist Jess. It is only in the microcosm of the illegal lesbian bars in the 1960s and New York City in the 1970s, where

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1 “Bousculer les imaginaires et développer des alternatives...” (Feinberg 2019: 8) All translations have been done by myself with help from DeepL.

2 “Ce roman de Leslie Feinberg est un livre culte, une expérience de lecture unique et bouleversante. Nous sommes heureuses qu'il soit enfin traduit en français, dans une très belle édition, cela faisait 25 ans que nous attendions cet événement.” (Violette & Co via Hystériques & AssociéEs)

the protagonist is able to develop an identity liberated from the weight of the heteronormative shackles. The reference to autofiction<sup>3</sup> is not insignificant here. Even if *Stone Butch Blues* does not correspond to this type of narrative, it contains many elements summarized by Leslie Feinberg himself in his afterword to the 2003 edition with this sentence: “Never underestimate the power of fiction to tell the truth.” (Feinberg 2014: 337)

In spite of all these elements likely to interest a French-speaking public, why is the reception of *Stone Butch Blues* in France so late? France, let us recall, where Olympe de Gouges published her *Declaration of the Rights of Women* in 1793 and Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* in 1949. This is the question I want to answer in the next pages, trying to understand which factors could have blocked the French reception, translation and publication of *Stone Butch Blues*, and what at last has led to a new reception of Leslie Feinberg’s work in France in the recent years. In order to better understand the stakes of the reception in France, it is important to look at the specific evolution of the feminist movement since the 1970s on the one hand, and the literary and intellectual field on the other; and the societal changes that have occurred in recent years. In this context, the stage performance of writer Virginie Despentes reading the ‘Letter to Theresa’, the novel’s opening chapter, in July 2018 in Avignon is particularly revealing of the beginnings of the new reception in France. Finally, I will briefly present the French edition of *Stone Butch Blues* and the challenges this book raises for translation.

## 1. Feminism in France since the 1970s

To better understand the factors that may have delayed the reception of *Stone Butch Blues* in France, it is worth looking at the evolution of the feminist movement after the 1960s and the dissension that emerged in the 1970s. The French feminist movement commonly referred to as the ‘second wave’ was born after May 1968. Angry at having been relegated to the margins of student struggles, French feminist women aimed to fight against the invisibility of women and for the equality of men and women within society. The Movement of Women’s Liberation (*Mouvement de libération des femmes*, MLF) created at that time is characterized on the one hand by its rejection of heterogeneity in the meetings and on the other hand by an inventive and provocative activism of which we retain in particular certain actions and key sentences like “One man out of two is a woman” or “There is one more unknown than the Soldier, it is his woman” (Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel 2020: 492–409). These two sentences summarize well the conflicts within the second wave

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3 On autofiction cf. Grell 2014.

French feminism and the questions that quickly emerged: Should the French feminist movement seek the equality of women by considering their plurality? Or should it be based on a homogeneous, idealized conception of women in opposition to men? The proponents of French universalist feminism, the dominant movement within the MLF at that time, insisted on the importance of an equality that does not deny the difference of the sexes, even celebrating it in order to put forward the 'woman', the feminine writing as a counterweight to an oppressive patriarchal world. Born of this movement strongly marked by Lacanian-inspired psychoanalysis, Antoinette Fouque<sup>4</sup> soon founded the publishing house *des femmes* and the bookshops of the same name (ibid.: 505–506). She even went so far as to buy the rights to the name 'MLF – Women's Liberation Movement', the destiny she aimed at from then on.

Facing this idealized conception of the woman, the materialist feminism insisted for their part on the structures that founded the oppression of women, as, for example, heteronormativity according to writer and essayist Monique Wittig. This approach was far from unanimous within the MLF, creating increasingly strong internal dissension until their break-up at the end of the 1970s (Eloit 2020: 142–143). Thereafter Monique Wittig decided to exile to the United States, where she continued to develop very fruitful theses, but remained massively rejected by the French feminists in the 1970s and 1980s. According to them, Monique Wittig's thought, insisting on the important role of the lesbians in the liberation of women, was 'separatist' insofar as it threatened the unity of women in their fight for their liberation and equal rights (ibid.: 142–144).

It's worth noting that these debates between universalists and separatists were not limited to French feminists. They can also be found in the United States with some differences. In Feinberg's novel, there are several references to the rejection of butches and femmes within the American feminist movement of the 1960s/1970s and the movement's distance from the considerations of working-class people. In *Stone Butch Blues*, Theresa and Jess are confronted by a radical gay and feminist movement that rejects butches who are perceived as machos and femmes who are regarded as alienated: "They told her she was brainwashed. 'I'm so bad,' Theresa thumped the table. 'They told me that butches were male chauvinist pigs!'" (Feinberg 2014: 144). Finally, according to Theresa, the rejection of butches and femmes stems from a conception of 'woman' constructed in opposition to 'man' as the embodiment of patriarchal power, without any analysis of the mechanisms of this power: "Why? She

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4 Antoinette Fouque is considered part of the 'differentialist' movement within the MFL. Differentialists emphasize 'feminine specificity' as the driving force behind the renewal of humanity, rather than the equality of men and women in the Beauvoirian tradition. Their concept of 'women' is as uniform as that of the 'universalists', and therefore opposed to the demands of lesbian feminists who want their experiences and needs to be given more recognition (Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel 2020: 402–403).

thought about the question. 'I think it's because they draw a line – women on one side and men on the other. So women they think look like men are the enemy. And women who look like me are sleeping with the enemy. We're too feminine for their taste.'" (ibid.:144-145)

Within French feminism, the claim to universalism was gradually accompanied by a French withdrawal and a rejection of what was seen as 'American' particularism (Eloit 2020: 144–145). Then came the fear of an imported American gender war (Fassin 2007: 15). In the next decades, this perception has delayed the publication and reception of major Anglophone works on gender, including the works of Monique Wittig and Judith Butler: Monique Wittig's essay *The Straight Mind*, published in 1991 in the United States, where she decrees that "[l]esbians are not women" (Wittig 1990: 57),<sup>5</sup> was only published in French by Editions Balland in 2001 in the LGBTI\* collection *Le Rayon*. Philosopher Judith Butler's most well-known book, *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990 in the United States, was only published in 2005 in France. As part of the inward-looking attitude of the French academic world, gender studies also took a long time to become part of the French academic scene (Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel 2020: 558).

Since then, the circulation of ideas has accelerated and only few French feminists still reject what they sometimes complacently call 'gender theory'. Judith Butler is regularly invited to conferences in France and the twentieth anniversary of Monique Wittig's death in 2023 has given rise to many laudatory articles in the French press (Wittig Studies 2023). And one can even find *La pensée straight* at the still existing bookshop *des femmes*.

Contrary to the prevailing monolithism of the 1970s and 1980s, French feminism after 2010 is characterized by a plurality of approaches, where activists from the suburbs of 'Ni putes ni soumises' (neither whores nor submissive) rub shoulders with the *femen* or *La Barbe* (The Beard), campaigning for parity and against sexism in the public sphere (Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel 2020: 625–643).

The virulent debates around marriage for all in 2013 helped federate LGBTI\* struggles against virulent homophobic reactions from Catholic movements close to the extreme right. A good ten years later, it is no longer fashionable to openly display one's opposition to marriage for all in France. But while the former French

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5 "What is woman? Panic, general alarm for an active defense. Frankly, it is a problem that the lesbians do not have because of a change of perspective, and it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women. P.S.: No more is any woman who is not in a relation of personal dependency with a man." (Wittig 1990: 57)

Prime Minister of 2024, Gabriel Attal, has no qualms about coming out as gay, homophobic and transphobic violence continues and is even on the rise.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The literary field and the publishing of *Stone Butch Blues* in France

*Stone Butch Blues* is the voice of someone who is living oppressions, resistance and pride. (Feinberg 2014: 359)

All the above mentioned advances have constituted a particularly favorable ground for the reception of *Stone Butch Blues* in France, where it was already circulating in English in a restricted milieu.<sup>7</sup> How did this book come to be translated and published in France? What were the determining factors? I would like to take a brief look at how the publishing industry has evolved in recent years, given the economic situation on the one hand, and the importance of social issues on the other.

These last few years, the French publishing world has been characterized by an enormous quantity of publications, but also by the disappearance or the repurchase of small publishing houses like Editions Balland, which has published *The Straight Mind* (*La pensée straight*) by Monique Wittig in 2001.<sup>8</sup> And the constraints of the market make many publishers more cautious. The publishing world, which is still highly concentrated in Paris, is hardly conducive to the publication of niche texts with print runs of just a few thousand copies (Grunenwald 2021: 21–22).

Simultaneously, feminism, long perceived as 'unsellable' by many publishers, is no longer a taboo subject in France, especially since the deflagration caused by the #MeToo movement after 2017: "[W]e had to argue with the publisher to be able to write 'feminist' on the back cover. No one was interested, it was a repellent. Twenty years later, nobody can tell you that anymore", said Virginie Despentes, author of the feminist essay *King Kong Theory* and the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy in an interview (Charon 2018).

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- 6 In its annual report 2023, the association SOS homophobia notes a 28 % increase in LGBTI-phobic physical assaults between 2021 and 2022, or one every two days in France. Transphobic acts have also risen sharply (SOS homophobie 2023).
  - 7 Only French speakers with a good command of English had access to the novel before its French translation, as with many other feminist or queer works whose lack of a French translation Noémie Grunenwald notes in her essay on feminist translation (Grunenwald 2021: 21).
  - 8 The Editions Balland website states that Sabine and Marc Larivé acquired the publishing house in 2014. The LGBTI\* collection *Le Rayon*, which was created in 1999 by writer Guillaume Dustan and featured works by Monique Wittig, Dorothy Allison, Sam Bourcier and Paul B. Preciado, had already ceased publication in 2003 (Naguschewski 2021: 254–257).

It is in this context, which is both favorable to the circulation of ideas and precarious in terms of publishing, that a new reception of *Stone Butch Blues* has begun in France, leading to the French translation of this novel by a collective of volunteer translators. Thanks to a fundraising campaign,<sup>9</sup> the French edition was published by Hystériques & AssociéEs in 2019 after years of work.<sup>10</sup> Hystériques & AssociéEs is a small, independent and committed publishing house that publishes texts that have left their mark on the feminist, lesbian and/or trans movement, including texts by Leslie Feinberg, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Dorothy Allison, and it also organizes events around published works.<sup>11</sup> In the next chapter, I will discuss the French translation of *Stone Butch Blues* and the strategic choices made by the translation collective. However, for now, I will focus on the context in which the French edition was published. This context echoes the themes of Leslie Feinberg's novel and gives it renewed relevance.

At the same time that the translators collective was finalizing the translation that was finally published in 2019, the writer Virginie Despentes was invited by David Bobée and Rébecca Chaillon to the Avignon Theater Festival in 2018 for a feminist staged reading during which she read, among other things, Jess' letter to Theresa with which *Stone Butch Blues* begins. This reading of a French translation of the novel's first chapter was a great success and gave rise to a show called *Viril* with the actress Béatrice Dalle and the rap artist Casey, performed in many French-speaking venues until 2022 (Terriennes, Mourgère and Charrier 2021).

The show, which presents feminist texts from Valerie Solanas to Paul B. Preciado or Audre Lorde that were sometimes unknown to the general public and often combative, was characterized by its intersectional perspective and its questioning of masculinity (Charon 2018). In doing so, the show not only deconstructed gender, but implicitly contained a call to fight, to resist oppression and reject all forms of gender violence. As Virginie Despentes pointed out in her aforementioned interview with the newspaper *Libération*, the call was made audible by the #MeToo explosion in France, enabling free expression.<sup>12</sup>

9 The appeal for funding can be found on HelloAsso (2019).

10 The 2014 edition of *Stone Butch Blues* is available for free online in its 2019 French translation at both LeslieFeinberg.net and Hystériques et AssociéEs. A printed version of the first French edition is now sold out. A new edition was published in October 2024, but is not yet available online.

11 This newest feminist movement in France has adopted a more intersectional and activist approach. It is characterized by the renaissance of feminist and queer places of exchange, such as the Violette & Co bookshop, which reopened in 2023, and the emergence of 'post #MeToo magazines' like *La Déferlante. La revue des révolutions féministes*.

12 Pavard, Rocherfort and Zancarini-Fournel insist on the #MeToo 'moment' which "evokes both an event, an emergence, and its inscription in a longer period of political, social and cultural transformation." (2020: 666)

Fig. 1: Virginie Despentes reads the words of Leslie Feinberg.  
 Source: franceinfo, 16 July 2018, © S. Jouve/Culturebox.



One could object that #MeToo has largely remained focused on heterosexuals and has only had a marginal impact on LGBTI\* (Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel 2020: 670). But by highlighting the words of victims of abuse, revealing the system put in place by harassers to prevent their victims from seeking redress, and uncovering the impunity that perpetrators have long enjoyed, #MeToo underscores the structural violence of patriarchal and heteronormative power that Leslie Feinberg's book denounces. Whether it's the mistreatment of women workers in the Buffalo factory or the homophobic and transphobic violence endured by Jess and his fellow workers, the evocation of violence hanging like a sword of Damocles over the protagonist is deeply embedded in the story. In this respect, the French edition of *Stone Butch Blues* and Virginie Despentes' public reading in Avignon extend the #MeToo moment to all victims of sexual and gender-based violence, including LGBTI\* and racialized people. Virginie Despentes emphasized the universal scope of *Stone Butch Blues*, starting from a singular experience at the heart of the story: "It's both very specific: lesbian, proletarian, butch in 50s America. But once you read it, any rascal can understand what you're talking about. It's universal." (Charon 2018)

In the first chapter, the letter to Theresa, the book insists that the violence is suffered collectively, but each of us must face it individually, often helpless: "I remember when we got outside to the parking lot you stopped and put your hands lightly on my shoulders and avoided my eyes. You gently rubbed the bloody places on my shirt and said, 'I'll never get these stains out.'" (Feinberg 2014: 5) In the last chapter, the book closes with the butches and other LGBTI\* speaking out publicly at a demonstration in New York and Jess realizing that she is neither alone nor powerless in the face of this violence:

"I know about getting hurt", I said. "But I don't have much experience talking about it. And I know about fighting back, but I mostly know how to do it alone. [...] I don't know what it would take to really change the world. But couldn't *we* be bigger? Isn't there a way we could help fight each other's battles so that we're not always alone?" (ibid.: 324)

This desire to stop suffering, to denounce and organize in the face of oppression, is one of the mainsprings of the feminist revival that followed #MeToo, also in France, where people from all walks of life now recognize themselves.

At the crossroads of fictional narrative and activism, the topicality of *Stone Butch Blues* is no longer questioned in France in 2018–2019. In this sense, by its militancy, its will to change society and not to be satisfied with withdrawal or individual solutions, this novel continues to inspire us.

### 3. The challenge of translating *Stone Butch Blues* into French

If the socio-cultural conditions of the early 2020s were particularly favorable for publishing *Stone Butch Blues* in French, translating it was not without challenges. As indicated in the previous section, the translation and publication are the result of many years of work, in keeping with Leslie Feinberg's non-commercial activist approach reaffirmed in the 2014 edition (Feinberg 2014: 352–357). In it, Feinberg provided guidelines for translation (ibid.: 358–359), which the translation collective has scrupulously respected, only adding a note regarding the encountered difficulties of translation and the work process. In this section, I will review certain aspects of the French translation of *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg 2019: 5–9). This will include the translation of community-specific terms and the syntactic differences between the source and target languages.

Feinberg's story is at once deeply rooted in an era that shapes the characters, from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, a specific social environment, that of the Buffalo factory and then the New York printing workers, and a LGBTI\* community, a community of butches and femmes especially, from underground bars to New York City Pride. These areas are reflected in the language used, which conveys a range of associations in English. For the French translation of terms specific to the LGBTI\* environment, around which Jess gravitates, the translation collective often chose terms used in the corresponding communities in France (Grunenwald 2021: 59–62).<sup>13</sup> This is especially true for 'butch' and 'femme', which are translated

13 Grunenwald, editor at Hystériques & AssociéEs, who has translated several queer-feminist works into French, recommends using community-approved terms for translation. Grunenwald (2021: 59) emphasizes the ephemeral nature of certain choices.

in French as 'butch' and 'fem' (used in France to avoid confusion with the French term *femme*, meaning 'woman') when they are nouns.<sup>14</sup> In the transition from one language to the other, certain expressions such as 'butch' have lost the negative connotation they originally had in English before being re-appropriated by the minorities themselves, giving them a positive meaning. The residual negative connotation of 'butch' is thus largely absent from the French term 'butch'. In order to recall these remaining negative connotations in English and to place the terms in their socio-historical context, the translation editing collective has added footnotes explaining the original meaning and evolution of the specific English terms and suggesting alternatives to the French term retained for translation:

Butch: lesbian using codes of masculinity in her appearance or behavior. In English, butcher means *butcher* (*boucher*) and can refer to a particularly virile man. The term has been used as a lesbophobic insult but also as an identity claimed by masculine-looking lesbians. Butches transgress gender norms by adopting behaviors usually reserved for men. They are particularly visible as lesbians, and therefore particularly exposed to repression and violence. In French, the closest terms would be *camionneuse* or *jules*. (Feinberg 2019: 23)

While the term *camionneuse* might have better captured this negative connotation, 'butch' was the obvious choice given the butch/femme dynamic at the heart of the book, the current usage of the term, and the title of the book itself. The problem of the specific connotations of terms in English and French is particularly evident in the translation of 'he-she'. This term, which Jess uses in the story to refer to herself,<sup>15</sup> has a negative connotation because it was originally used to stigmatize trans or non-binary people, or anyone who didn't fit the normative criteria of gender. The sequence in the second chapter, in which Jess' parents disdainfully explain that the person they are referring to is none other than a "he-she", illustrates just how negative the term can be in its original usage: "What's a he-she?" My sister demanded to know. I was interested in the answer too. 'It's a weirdo,' my father laughed. 'Like a beatnik.' [...] Suddenly a wave of foreboding swept over me. I felt nauseous and dizzy." (Feinberg 2014: 15)

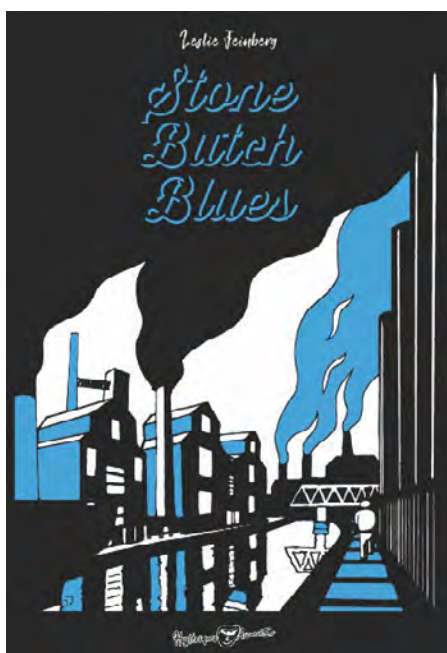
The term chosen for the French translation *il-elle* (Feinberg 2019: 22), which is syntactically and semantically very close to 'he-she', has no negative connotation in

14 The translation collective made case-by-case choices for the adjectives 'butch' and 'femme', reflecting the meaning of these terms in the precise context of the story, as Grunewald shows: "young femme gay men" has been translated as 'young effeminate gays', since in this case 'femme' is used as an adjective and refers to an effeminate man." (Grunewald 2021: 62)

15 For example: "*All of us he-shes were mad as hell when we heard you got fired because you wouldn't let the superintendent touch your breasts.*" (Feinberg 2014: 2, italics in original) "I marveled at the idea that straight people could stand up for me, or for any he-she." (ibid.: 99)

French. It is reminiscent of *iels*, a neologism used in French that entered the Petit Robert French dictionary in 2021 as an inclusive pronoun (Bimbenet 2021), corresponding to the English ‘they’/‘dey’ or ‘ze’. These choices, as well as the different connotations of the terms in different languages in light of their historicity, show how difficult it is to translate *Stone Butch Blues*, as with many other works that refer to a specific environment that remains dependent on the usage in force at a given time (Grunenwald 2021: 52).

Fig. 2: Cover of the French edition of *Stone Butch Blues*, published in 2019 by Hystériques & AssociéEs.



Another difficulty in translating *Stone Butch Blues*, highlighted by the translation collective in its “Notes”, is the relative neutrality of the English language, which the author deliberately pushes to the extreme in this first-person narrative and cannot be translated into French as it is: “the French translation forces us to mark the masculine or feminine all the time in this first-person narrative” (Feinberg 2019: 8).

These linguistic peculiarities are clearly visible when comparing the original *Stone Butch Blues* version with its French translation, for example in the following excerpts (the peculiarities are italicized):

I *hung back* for a moment. Her smile told me she already knew she had my complete attention. Even when we were filling out forms in the foreman's office, I still felt *floored and flustered*. Theresa never stopped affecting me just that much. The foreman noticed, but he must not have cared because he *assigned me* to work on the line near her. (Feinberg 2014: 127)

Je *suis resté* à la traine un moment. Son sourire me montrait qu'elle savait déjà qu'elle avait toute mon attention. Même après, pendant qu'on remplissait les formulaires dans le bureau du contremaître, je me sentais encore toute *confuse et troublée*. Theresa n'a jamais cessé d'avoir cet effet-là sur moi. Le contremaître l'a remarqué, mais il n'a pas dû y prêter attention parce *qu'il m'a affectée* à la rangée juste à côté d'elle. (Feinberg 2019: 191)

In this passage from *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess' gender, as the first-person narrator, is not specifically characterized in English. Only Theresa and the foreman are assigned a specific gender through the use of the personal pronouns 'she' and 'he' and the possessive adjective 'her'. Jess meanwhile is referred to by 'I' which is a gender-neutral personal pronoun. In French, gender is not limited to personal pronouns, but also applies to adjectives, past participles, and nouns, requiring the translation collective to assign an exact gender to Jess. To avoid an overly binary interpretation of the book, the collective made the following choice: While in the first sentence, the past participle remains in the masculine (*resté*), it is then agreed in the feminine (*confuse et troublée*). The fact that the feminine agreement refers to Jess' feelings, while the masculine agreement refers to an action, is purely coincidental; the collective deliberately chose to vary the agreements throughout the book:

To that end, we used both the female and male gender when Jess was talking about herself/himself, varying the proportions depending on the moment in the story. When other people address Jess, we've used the gender in which they perceive him/her. (Feinberg 2019: 8; see also Grunenwald 2021: 63–64)

The final agreement of the past participle *affectée* thus emphasizes the point of view of one character, the foreman. By asking Jess to stand in the women's line, he is making an undeniable gender assignment. Depending on the passage, the adjectives and past participles used to describe Jess are sometimes feminine and sometimes masculine in the French translation. These shifting agreements throughout the book reflect Jess' hesitations and shifts, and also play cleverly with the vagaries of the French language, sometimes using proximity agreements and changing generic plurals. Summarizing the approach taken by the translation collective, Grunenwald concludes: "This can be seen as a militant adaptation that deliberately upsets the habits of the target audience and the language. But it's also a deontological desire not to impose French distortions on the text written by Feinberg." (2021: 64)

This translation strategy allows for a nuanced portrayal of the focus in the book, highlighting Jess' perception of himself and how others perceive him. This emphasizes the contrast between Jess and the world around him, and the constructed and imposed nature of gender assignment. It is worth noting that Jean Genet had already employed this technique in 1948 in his book *Notre Dame des Champs*, in the story of the character Divine, using both feminine and masculine pronouns (Louar 2008).

As demonstrated, the decisions made by the translator collectives are not easy; they derive both from the singularity of Leslie Feinberg's novel and from the desiderata of the French language at a given moment, highlighting certain problems inherent in the translation of queer and feminist texts (Grunenwald 2021: 63–64, 110). The translation of Jess' changing chords serves to indicate how the protagonist is perceived by those around him and to convey his variable feelings and absence of a fixed gender identity. These translation choices may appear to us to be subjective and historically marked – at the end, they reveal an approach of feminist translation:<sup>16</sup>

There is never a definitive translation, and a translator always makes choices. Refusing to have the 'final word', feminist translato-logies destabilize, and even overturn established translato-logical paradigms. These paradigms are anchored in a gendered conceptualization of creation and language, which hierarchizes and de-politicizes the translation process. (Mozziconacci, Thomas and Saïdi 2020: 6–7)

## 4. Conclusion

Translating as feminists involves reclaiming texts that have been taken from the feminist movement. This is not just to assert motherhood, but primarily to situate them within a specific history and movement, allowing them to regain their voice and present it to an audience that will appreciate it fully. (Grunenwald 2021: 49)

The challenges faced during the French translation of *Stone Butch Blues* are not solely due to the inherent translation difficulties between French and English. They also highlight the fact that France is lagging behind in developing a more inclusive and

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16 Feminist translation aims to make feminist and queer works accessible to a wider French-speaking audience while highlighting the challenges of translating from the source language to the target language (Mozziconacci, Thomas and Saïdi 2020).

neutral language. This is despite Monique Wittig having written a novel in 1964 that extensively used the neutral pronoun *on* in *L'Opoponax*.

The translation collective's choices for the French version of *Stone Butch Blues* demonstrate a desire to introduce this work to a French-speaking audience. Through a comprehensive set of annotations, the aim is to familiarize readers who may be unfamiliar with the world of butches and femmes or the historical context described in Feinberg's book, while also making the translation choices more transparent. At the same time, the translation emphasizes the constructed and non-immutable nature of gender assignment, taking a stance in current debates around gender. The translation and French edition update Feinberg's narrative and attest to the evolution of feminism in France over the past 30 years.

From the first edition of *Stone Butch Blues* in 1993 to its French publication in 2019, more than a quarter of a century has passed. During this time, the reception of Anglo-Saxon works that openly criticize the heteronormative foundations of modern Western societies was largely held back by the gradual withdrawal of second wave French feminism. Additionally, there was a fear of importing American struggles that might challenge the gender balance supposedly unique to France. The #MeToo movement shattered the notion that was previously held, which is directly echoed in Leslie Feinberg's novel through the violence of the testimonies. Virginie Despentes' reading of the letter to Theresa as part of the *Viril* show is a clear example.

However, it is important to note that the first French translation and edition of *Stone Butch Blues* came into being thanks to militant, voluntary, and collective work, despite the more favorable context for the novel's reception. The non-commercial aspect of this book's translation and publication is a direct extension of the story itself. It calls for us to look beyond individual trajectories and focus on common struggles. The book blends fiction with reality: "This book that you hold in your hand is for us a jewel, a tribute to struggle, resistance and solidarity. Thanks to Leslie for giving us this magical text. The team that completed this edition" (Hystériques & AssociéEs 2018).

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## Figures

Fig. 1: Virginie Despentes reads the words of Leslie Feinberg. Source: *franceinfo*, 16 July 2018, © S. Jouve/Culturebox. [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/spectacles/theatre/beatrice-dalle-et-virginie-despentes-defendent-leurs-convictions-sur-le-ring-davignon\\_3286699.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/spectacles/theatre/beatrice-dalle-et-virginie-despentes-defendent-leurs-convictions-sur-le-ring-davignon_3286699.html) (last accessed 30 July 2024).

Fig. 2: Cover of the French edition of *Stone Butch Blues*, published in 2019 by Hystériques & AssociéEs. Source: <https://hysteriquesetassociees.org/sbb/> (last accessed 29 March 2024).

