

Building our own Homes:

Frustrated Stereotyping in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*

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Strange to be exiled from your own sex to borders that will never be home.

– Leslie Feinberg (*Stone Butch Blues* 11)

Abstract Resumen

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Leslie Feinberg's ground-breaking 1993 novel *Stone Butch Blues* is one of the first American literary texts to tackle the subject of transgender subjectivity -- in fact, it is often credited with spawning the transgender-rights movement. The novel follows the childhood and early adulthood of its narrator, Jess Goldberg, as she negotiates the boundaries of sex, gender and sexuality that structure her world, and lives the often violent consequences. The novel is positioned at the site of all sorts of intersections – not least, Jess exists at the intersection of transgender and androgyny in the overarching realm of a disruptive third gender position. Jess's body refuses categorization as either butch woman or transsexual man, thus disrupting various forms of stereotypical gender and sexual categorization, as well as the theoretical essentialist / constructivist binary. While her body exists in a fictional text, it is a more realistic or possible body than many other literary characters occupying disruptive sex / gender positions (Jeanette

Winterson's fantastic Villanelle in *The Passion*, for example), and therefore it offers a very potent transgressive gender model. Interestingly, Jess's body is contained in a highly conventional narrative structure – (realist) fictional autobiography. The content of *Stone Butch Blues*, though, does frustrate expectations by refusing to fulfill itself as the transsexual “coming home” story it appears to be (as critic Jay Prosser argues). The novel thus consciously evades stereotyping of any sort – gender, sexual, or even generic.

Stone Butch Blues is a realist novel, “written so as to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen” (Abrams 174). Indeed, the genre seems very conventional and stable in relation to the body that inhabits it. Feinberg's choice of genre affords a sense of verisimilitude that imbues the text with an intimacy and immediacy. Realism is thus a politically-inflected choice of genre. It makes the harassment Jess suffers credible, and illustrates the interlocking oppressions that keep Jess and her friends on the margins of society – and, as individuals already straddling gender and sexual categories, they are perfectly placed to depict this intersection. Feinberg is able to tackle classism, racism, capitalism and the transphobia that exists within the burgeoning gay rights movement, and although she does so in a way that is perhaps overly idealistic, she does at least bring the interconnectedness of the issues to light, which gender theorist Kate Bornstein describes as “groundbreaking” (149). In addition, the novel is written in the first person, which only adds to the novel's immediacy.

Although the novel's genre is highly conventional, its content frustrates generic expectation. Prosser identifies in the text elements of the transsexual autobiography, or “coming home” narrative in which a problematically-gendered individual comes to embrace his or her true sex as the narrative concludes. And these “narratives with plots centered on embodied

becoming” (Prosser 487) offer a challenge to queer theory’s standard argument of gender performativity:

Transsexual subjects themselves have traditionally figured their transition as a final going home, a trajectory that is only worth its risks, complications, and intense pain (somatic and psychic) because it will allow one to finally arrive at where one should have always been: the destination, the *telos* of this narrative (being able to live in one’s “true gender identity”) is all. Gender is not so much *undone* as queerness would have it as *redone*, that is, done up differently. (Prosser 487)

This passage highlights the potentially divisive opposition between queer and transsexual political / theoretical interests; the implication is that gender positions like Marjorie Garber’s third term, which ‘undo’ the concept of binary gender – and further, that represent “an undertheorized recognition of the necessary critique of binary thinking, whether particularized as male and female, black and white, yes and no, Republican and Democrat, self and other, or in any other way” (Garber 10-11) – are at odds with transsexual subjectivity, which ‘redoes’ gender instead of ‘undoing’ it. *Stone Butch Blues* is rife with what Prosser calls a “yearning for home both in the body and in community” (490) that is common to transsexual coming-home narratives. Early on, Jess explains that it is “strange to be exiled from your own sex to borders that will never be home” (11). She is a “lonely exile” (5), and her subsequent experiences with hormones and surgical alterations – not to mention her search for community in the bars, the labor movement and amongst Aboriginal women – are all attempts to find a home for herself in a hostile world. But, as Prosser notes, Jess eventually refuses her transsexual identity: “Jess turns back in her transition, thus refusing the refuge of fully becoming the other sex and the closure

promised by the transsexual plot. She chooses, instead, an incoherently sexed body, ending up in an uneasy borderland between man and woman, in which she fails to pass as either” (488). Jess accepts, finally, the gender position of the third. The text refuses to consummate the transsexual autobiographical master narrative, and Jess, like the text, is left seemingly without a home – that is, without the sense of home afforded by uncomplicated male or female identity. As we will see, Jess’s home is necessarily more complex than that; indeed, it is in the evolving *nature* of the home that *Stone Butch Blues* evades categorization as a conventional transsexual coming-home narrative. Feinberg’s project is not, as Judith Halberstam would have it, the “refusal of the dialectic of home and border” (170), but rather the interrogation and perhaps rehabilitation of these concepts. Prosser argues,

... [T]he journey – simply the act of leaving home or the familiar – brings with it the recognition that home (the body/identity) is made up, a construct, and thus, along with the narrative of gendering, to be relinquished. Yet in spite of its resistance to taking up a recognizable textual and sexual place, there threads through *Stone Butch Blues* a distinctly unqueer yearning for home both in the body and in community; while the trajectory is the same ... its meaning is radically different, its narrative point of view an insider’s, its grounds not a theoretical premise but subjective experience. (489-490)

The tendency to read Jess as a flawless example of postmodern gender theory (Butler, Halberstam, et al) is repudiated by her incessant desire for home, and by the horrific violence she faces in her day to day life as a result of her failure to pass as either sex.

Jess is cast as a gender outlaw from early childhood on – one of her earliest memories is the “constant refrain: ‘Is that a boy or a girl?’” (13). Although she “didn’t want to be different,”

and says she “followed all their rules, tried my best to please” (13), she is unable to pass as female, even as a young child, which again repudiates the notion that gender performance invariably constitutes gender reality. Argues Prosser,

Stone Butch Blues cannot be read without our accounting for the subjective experience of being transgendered, without our ‘risking essentialism.’ We need to take this risk even if, or perhaps especially when, the task involves drawing on categories that we have come to believe require deconstructing *a priori*: experience, the body, sex, feeling. (490)

Prosser’s argument calls to mind Diana Fuss’s assertion, in *Essentially Speaking*, of the falsity of the essentialist / constructivist binary. She writes, “It is difficult to see how constructionism can *be* constructionism without a fundamental dependency upon essentialism” (4) – that is, social forces cannot exist unto themselves without a point of origin and without already-existing bodies to work on. In Fuss’s scheme, and in Feinberg’s, the two go hand in hand. Jess presents herself as transgendered from the start, despite her own best efforts to perform as female (and later, as male). The consequences are immediate: as a child she is taunted and stripped by a gang of neighborhood boys. As a teenager coming out in the gay bars of Niagara Falls, she’s harassed by the police, escaping the beatings and rapes she will later suffer at their hands only because of her young age. And at school she is gang-raped by six members of the football team – all this in the first forty pages of the novel, and all of it is written with a stomach-turning intensity. The character of Jess, and the novel as a whole, can thus be read as something of a lived critique of postmodern gender theory. The challenges Jess faces in inhabiting her own body counter the unabashed joy Winterson’s creation Villanelle takes in hers; the postmodern playfulness of Winterson’s deployment of androgyny seems unavailable to Jess.

However, Jess's problem is not merely one of performance – ironically, she learns to perform the male gender well enough to pass successfully as a man, though she was unable to pass as a girl in her childhood days. Still, she finds herself isolated and unhappy. Her decision to physically alter herself is telling. Jess wakes from a dream in the middle of the night: “In the dream I had a beard and my chest was flat. It made me so happy. It was like a part of me that I can't explain ... I didn't feel like a woman or a man, and I liked how I was different” (143). Later, Jess and several other butches – desperate for jobs – try on ‘feminine’ wigs in the hopes of landing jobs in department stores. But they are unsuccessful: “The wigs made us look like we were making fun of ourselves” (143). As subversive repetition in the Butlerian sense, this gender play is more humiliating for the butches than it is empowering. Instead, Jess and Ed decide to begin taking hormones and attempt to pass as men. Their reasons are external: the economic necessity of keeping a job, and the desire for safety; they are thus excluded from the female-to-male transsexual label, which assumes an internally-located desire for a ‘true’ gender. In this as in all gender categories, Jess is on the outside. In any case, as Cat Moses argues, “The very terms FTM and MTF are inadequate – Feinberg might argue – in their suggestion that anyone whose gender expression falls outside of either ‘F’ or ‘M’ is moving towards the expression of the ‘opposite’ gender” (74-75). Jess explains, “I keep thinking maybe I'd be safe, you know?” (144). Her lover Theresa leaves her when she begins to pass as a man, but even she admits that Jess would “probably be killed on the street or take [her] own life out of madness” (153) if she did not take the hormones.

Androgyny, for Jess, might be a difference that she likes, but it brings with it an immense lack of choice in her life. This, of course, is a reversal of Winterson's optimistic deployment of androgyny, which is representative of postmodern gender theory, and which culminates in

Villanelle's assertion that "What you are one day will not constrain you on the next. You may explore yourself freely and, if you have wit or wealth, no one will stand in your way" (*Passion* 150). Unable to live as a woman, unable to pass as a man without physically altering her body, and unable to survive in the androgynous body she finds most comfortable, Jess is not freed by androgyny, but trapped. "What the fuck am I going to do, Theresa?" she asks her lover. "Tell me, what can I do?" (151). Prosser argues,

Stone Butch Blues requires that we reconstitute the transgendered narrative, that we re-learn how to read narratives of gender in their specificity and break from our tendency to trace them over and over again onto the same master (anti-) narrative of Queer Theory. For *Stone Butch Blues* represents transgender as embodied and deeply painful, features pivotal in differentiating it from the queer anti-narrative of gender-crossing. Whereas queerness has written of transgender in terms of homosexual gender masquerade and performativity – tropes which are intended precisely to denaturalize the sexed body – Feinberg's transgender foregrounds the suffering of gender-crossing, its costs, its limits, and, above all, its embodiment. And whereas the transgender of queerness loosens the narrative structure of gender through sexuality, Feinberg's transgender affirms the materiality of gender, its essential place in the narrative of this identity. (490)

Again, we are reminded of the theoretical tension between transgender and queer. And, as Prosser reminds us, the playfulness of postmodern gender theory has grave consequences for the bodies living it – consequences Butler and similar theorists do not address in any material or embodied way. Certainly for Jess, gender crossing is only partly voluntary. Although her physical transformation is self-enacted, her gender expression leads to problems of attribution

over which she has no control. For her, gender crossing is not empowering, nor does it offer her choice. In fact, it isolates her from the community she so desperately seeks.

After Theresa and Jess break up, Jess stays with Gloria and her two children. But the deep relationship she develops with Kim and Scotty is ended by her hormone treatments. “I’d have to say goodbye to Kim and Scotty soon. Gloria would never let me see the kids once I started to change” (164), she realizes. Although she finds a job and enjoys relative safety in places like public bathrooms that have previously been sites of danger and harassment, Jess is more alone than she ever has been. She no longer fears for her physical safety, but she comes to realize that passing as a man cannot solve all her problems: “I still lived in fear, only now it was the constant terror of discovery” (173). And although she is able to hold down a job as a mechanic’s apprentice, she finds that “having a job was the good news. But there wasn’t much else to do or anyone to do it with. That was the bad news” (174). Jess has several deceptive relationships, and still feels alone: “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” (185). She says to Edna during their brief relationship that “I feel like a ghost ... Like I’ve been buried alive. As far as the world’s concerned, I was born the day I began to pass. I have no past, no loved ones, no memories, no me. No one really sees me or speaks to me or touches me” (213). Jess’s choice of words is strikingly similar to Butler’s – Jess, who feels like a “ghost,” has become one of Butler’s “spectres of discontinuity and incoherence” (*GT* 23):

‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations or coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire ... The specters of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relations to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly

prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the 'expression' or 'effect' of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice. (*GT* 23)

Significantly, it is only when Jess is passing as a man that she feels her identity is threatened – that she is disappearing. As Cat Moses argues in an essay on the novel, “Jess struggles alone to construct a self amid a social milieu dominated by alienation, fragmentation and loneliness. She discovers that resistance to oppression – and the refashioning of a resisting self – are lonely and losing battles outside of a resistance community” (78).

Finally, Jess decides to stop the hormone treatment, although she continues to appreciate the effects of her breast reduction surgery:

As much as I loved my beard as part of my body, I felt trapped behind it. What I saw reflected in the mirror was not a man, but I couldn't recognize the he-she. My face no longer revealed the contrasts of my gender. I could see my passing self, but even I could no longer see the more complicated me beneath the surface (222).

Jess relinquishes the safety of passing to return to her original androgynous state – the complicated self that exists somewhere in the third gender space between male and female. She concludes, “Who was I now – man or woman? 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” (222). And her decision to return to a state of ambiguous gender is presented as a creative opportunity – the “space of possibility” (Garber 11) afforded by assuming the third gender position is the source of her excitement: “I wanted to find out who I was, to define myself. Whoever I was, I wanted to deal with it, I wanted to live it again ... Fear and excitement gnawed at me” (224-225).

Significantly, Jess's attempt to discover herself is accompanied by a move to New York. And although Jess's fear is well-founded – she begins again to experience the harassment and violence that passing allowed her to avoid – she is able to build her own home, and her own life in New York. She says, “one day I looked around at my apartment and realized I'd made a home” (236).

Jess develops a close friendship with her neighbor, gets a job, and begins to reconnect with old friends. Most significantly, however, she works to assemble for herself a history of transgendered people and their liberation movement, much like Feinberg's own work in *Transgender Warriors*. And the novel ends optimistically, with Jess becoming active in a (somewhat idealistically) pluralist queer rights demonstration. She ultimately finds her fulfillment as a self-identified “he-she” – a ‘home’ identity that, by its very existence, disrupts binary gender. As Prosser argues, *Stone Butch Blues* is about:

the complex struggle for sexual embodiment, for gendered becoming, not for their playful denaturalization. At an angle to queerness, which has inscribed gendered unbelonging and mobility as subversive and celebratory, *Stone Butch Blues* ultimately recognizes the power of the lure of an albeit illusory home, corporeal and communal, even though home is not realized as it is in transsexual autobiographies. (490).

Jess finds her home in a complex web of gender, class, race and sexual identifications – but that home is as contingent as it is real. Judith Halberstam criticizes Prosser's article for the ways in which it “pits queer theory against transgender identity in a polemic: queer theory represents gender within some notion of postmodern fluidity and fragmentation, but transgender theory eschews such theoretical free fall” (147). She argues that instead, the androgyny found in *Stone Butch Blues* “represents both essential and constructed genders, both performative gender

and genetic embodiment” (148). And Jess only finds a home for herself when she exists between genders, both in her essential and constructed selves – as Fuss has shown, this is not a contradiction. Cat Moses agrees: “Gender, for Feinberg, is an expression of something that is both ‘always already there,’ and fluid” (81). This is the central theoretical intersection of the novel.

Physically, Jess’s ‘home’ emerges when she begins taking hormone treatments, and her androgyny becomes a physical reality as well as a part of her gender expression. “Beard stubble roughened my cheeks. My face looked slimmer and more angular. I stripped off my T-shirt and BVD’s. My body was lean and hard. My hips had melted away ... I took a hot, soapy shower, enjoying the feel of my hands on my skin. It had been so long since I’d been at home in my body” (171). Similarly, she considers her breast surgery “a gift to myself, a coming home to my body” (224). Remaining physiologically female is impossible for Jess, and existing as a man is equally problematic. It is only when the two combine in her body that she finds her home – a condition that confirms her position in the third gender category. Significantly, Jess’s home is a new creation of her own. She does not return to her original physical state, nor does she embrace a wholly masculine home – an important frustration of the conventional transsexual coming-home narrative. Instead, she (re)creates herself and, in effect, comes homeⁱ to an uncanny body. Freud explains, “The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar ... [It is] frightening precisely because it is *not* known and [yet] familiar” (“The Uncanny” 220). He concludes that “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (“Uncanny” 241). Jess, then, has been frightened of the prospect of life as an androgyne – indeed, the fear of it (and the physical and emotional

violence such a life entails) drove her to alter her body with surgery and hormones to pass as a man. But when she is able to face her fear and ‘return’ to her androgynous self, she has a coming home, of sorts, to her uncanny body. She has always, from childhood, apprehended herself as androgynous. In Freud’s schema, the repression of that original self resulted in the fear of the uncanny, which Jess overcomes as she makes peace with, and finds her home in an uncanny body.

Stone Butch Blues makes very clear the dangers and pitfalls of any kind of stereotyping labels, while simultaneously displaying a desperate longing for labels and language of its own. Jess knows that she is different from other children at a very young age, and she quickly discovers the power of naming. She says, “No one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me. That’s what made me afraid it was really bad” (13). Her fear is based in the experiences her family has already had with derogatory naming. Two teenagers shout “Kikes!” (19) at them through their window as they light the Shabbas candles. Their neighbor Mac is labeled a “scab” by the community: “Just the word itself was enough to make me shy away from their house. You could still see traces of that word on the front of their coal bin, even though it had been painted over in a slightly different shade of green” (16). Language is both powerful and indelible – and Jess internalizes the desire to name, asking the crows and dogs she plays with, “are you a boy or a girl?” (17). Later, at high school, her classmates taunt her: “is it animal, mineral or vegetable?” (24). Eventually, she comes across one of the labels she will use to describe herself most often throughout the text: he-she. “Suddenly a wave of foreboding swept over me. I felt nauseous and dizzy” (20). The only word she has for herself is synonymous, her father says, with “weirdo” (20).

With a (provisional) name for herself and a burgeoning self-awareness as a he-she, Jess

visits her first gay bar and is told she can ask any woman to dance – “but only the femmes” (28). The women in the bar are divided by the butch/femme labeling system, with all the behavioral conventions that go along with it. In this imperfect system, Jess identifies as a woman, a he-she and a butch, and the communities that arise around these labels are the only things that keep Jess alive long enough to mature. But the validity of all of these labels are quickly called into question. First, Frankie confides to Jess that she is sleeping with Johnny, another butch. Jess reacts with disgust and silence. “The more I thought about the two of them being lovers, the more it upset me. I couldn’t stop thinking about them kissing each other. It was like two guys. Well, two gay guys would be alright. But two butches? How could they be attracted to each other? Who was the femme in bed?” (202). Although Jess eventually reconciles with Frankie, her horror at the breakdown of the language and labels she uses to construct her own identity is telling. “What makes you think you’re still a butch?” (207) she asks Frankie sarcastically. Frankie replies to the already-passing Jess with the same question. If a butch who loves other butches and a woman passing as a man can both lay claim to the term “butch,” and both exclude the other from it, the meaning of the word itself is in doubt. And as Cat Moses argues, the subsequent police torture that she endures “literally forces Jess into a state anterior to language” (80). Silence becomes her only mode of communication.

Jess’s argument with Frankie also illustrates one of the potential pitfalls in theorizing androgyny as the third gender. Judith Halberstam argues that the idea of the third “tends to homogenize many different gender variations under the banner of ‘other’” (28), and in *Stone Butch Blues* effects of this homogenization are made manifest. Jess initially cannot accept the idea of two butches being attracted to each other, and her rejection of Frankie leaves the former friends estranged for years. In Jess’s estimation, she and Frankie are completely different, and

she feels threatened by any sense of their similarity. The differences between Frankie and Jess must not, at this stage, be overlooked by homogenizing them into a single subject position. There are many other examples of the dangers of overlooking the diversity of the gender expressions that exist outside of the male / female binary, notably Grant, who is wracked by a silent misery. Frankie speculates, “I think she’s horrified by something inside of her she thinks is twisted, like maybe she fantasizes about being with strong old bulls, or men or something” (274). The problem, perhaps, is that Grant cannot reconcile her butch identity with a desire for men or other butches. Is there room in the third gender position for a woman who desires men?

Jess’s decision to pass as a man and her subsequent breakup with Theresa bring similar questions to light. As the butches in the bar discuss their friend Jimmy’s recent sex change, there is the following exchange:

[Jan said] “I’m not like Jimmy. Jimmy told me he knew he was a guy even when he was little. I’m not a guy.”

Grant leaned forward. “How do you know that? How do you know we aren’t? We aren’t real women, are we?”

Edwin shook her head. “I don’t know what the hell I am.” (144)

The group wrestles with the question of defining the term “woman,” and deciding what kind of language to use to describe themselves, grasping, it seems, for a third option. Their entire conversation is marked with uncertainty.

When Jess tells Theresa about her decision to pass as a man, their discussion is similarly confused. Theresa says, “I’m a woman, Jess. I love you because you’re a woman, too. I made up my mind when I was growing up that I was not going to betray my desire ... I just don’t want to be some man’s wife, even if that man’s a woman” (148). Here, the label “man” is expanded to

include even women. It is a complete breakdown of the binary gender system; nonetheless Theresa makes her decision by trusting its integrity. She adds, “if I’m not with a butch everyone just assumes I’m straight. It’s like I’m passing too, against my will. I’m sick of the world thinking I’m straight. I’ve worked hard to be discriminated against as a lesbian” (151). This is a joke, but a rather macabre one in light of Jess’s many beatings and rapes. It is as if Theresa’s lesbian label is contingent upon her surroundings, and to maintain her identity she must leave Jess. Theresa’s dilemma – is she still a lesbian if Jess becomes a man? – illustrates exactly how empty this terminology can become.

Feinberg also clearly illustrates the ways in which stereotypes can be used to divide a community against itself. Frankie questions the ways in which the standard definition of butch seems to cast femme women as ineffectual: “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?” (274). This passage alludes to the concurrent trend within segments of the feminist community in the 1970s and early 1980s to disdain butch/femme roles and labels as inherently sexist – a condemnation that is presented as naive, harmful and divisive in *Stone Butch Blues*. Jess meets a pseudo-progressive woman who claims that butches “hate themselves so much they have to look and act like men” (5-6), and it is true that when she passes as a man, Jess is expected to join in the subjugation of women – though Jess, of course, resists this. Jess vehemently denies the woman’s claim with stories of transgendered people (who, in this instance, she appears to equate with butches), who have existed as respected and even revered members of different societies throughout history. As Jess’s pseudo-progressive acquaintance proves, the liberating rhetoric of the gay and women’s rights movements marginalize many. Jess says,

We thought we’d won the war of liberation when we embraced the word gay.

Then suddenly there were professors and doctors and lawyers coming out of the woodwork telling us that meetings should be run with Robert's Rules of Order ... They drove us out, made us feel ashamed of how we looked. They said we were male chauvinist pigs, the enemy. It was women's hearts they broke. (11)

Obviously, the word "gay" solved no problems for the community of which Jess is a part. This, combined with the breakdown of terminology that occurs throughout the text, encourages a degree of scepticism about the efficacy of words as labels.

However, *Stone Butch Blues* is rife with a counter-current of desire for a language – clearly, many of the emotional wounds Jess and her friends endure are rooted in the fact that they don't have the language to simply accurately describe themselves. Jess is searching for some kind of certainty; a language, a history and a home. She tells Ruth, "I wish we had our own words to describe ourselves, to connect us" (254). And slightly later, when she's reminiscing with Frankie, Jess explains:

Sometimes I feel like I'm choking to death on what I'm feeling. I need to talk and I don't even know how. Femmes always tried to teach me to talk about my feelings, but it was their words they used for their feelings. I needed my own words ... I feel like I'm clogged up with all this toxic goo, Frankie. But I can't hear my own voice say the words out loud. I've got no language ... I've got no words for feelings that are tearing me apart. What would our words sound like? ... Like thunder, maybe. (275)

Feinberg's project, in many ways, is to capture that thunder. In *Transgender Warriors*, Feinberg embraces the term "transgender,"ⁱⁱⁱ and uses it to define herself: "I am transgendered. I was born female, but my masculine gender expression is seen as male ... It's the social contradiction

between the two that defines me” (TW 101). Even though transgender is a better label than any other Feinberg has considered, linguistic boundaries still exist: “there are no pronouns in the English language as complex as I am” (TW ix). *Transgender Warriors* offers a cross-cultural history of transgendered people, and a material analysis of their oppression.ⁱⁱⁱ Winterson, Jeanette. *The Passion*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987. Like Jess, the book is suffused with a melancholic (in both the vernacular and Freudian senses) longing for home. Butler formulates a gender application of Freud’s theory of melancholia from his article “Mourning and Melancholia,” and explains,

The melancholic refuses the loss of the object, and internalization becomes a strategy of magically resuscitating the lost object, not only because the loss is painful, but because the ambivalence felt toward the object requires that the object be retained until differences are settled. (GT 78-79)

Clearly, the loss of binary gender is both painful and disorienting; Jess’s desire for home can perhaps be read as an internalized longing for the ‘home’ she has lost (or has never had), but the pain that accompanies that loss is obvious.

The word transgender, in any case, is presumably chronologically unavailable to Jess. She identifies, finally, as a he-she. In an argument about Jess’s passing, Theresa shouts, “You’re a woman!” Jess responds:

“No, I’m not ... I’m a he-she. That’s different.”

Theresa slapped the table in anger. “That’s a terrible word. They call you that to hurt you.”

I leaned forward. “But I’ve listened. They don’t call the Saturday-night butches he-shes. It means something. It’s a way we’re different. It doesn’t just mean we’re

... lesbians.” (147-148)

Jess, like Feinberg, defines herself in the space between male and female; in the third gender position, though, as this passage makes clear, there are still complex questions to be answered about who can be included in that category. Again, when Jess finds her voice at the end of the novel and makes a speech at the rally, she explains, “I’m not a gay man ... I’m a butch, a he-she” (296). In this final acceptance of androgyny, Jess says, “I felt my whole life coming full circle” (301). She is returning to a time when “nature held me close and seemed to find no fault with me” (17), but she is returning in a different, perhaps uncanny, form – surgically altered and still affected by hormonal treatments. Moses argues, “In claiming a voice and a history, Jess inserts the transgendered body into resistance strategy” (92). As a he-she, Jess finds her voice and a home of her own making. Moses contends, “Feinberg privileges the expression of a self outside of gender, not the subversive performance of gender,” which recalls Bornstein’s individualistic definition of gender (41), but ignores how marked all of Feinberg’s characters are by gender – whatever relation they may have to it. But echoing Fuss’s thesis in *Essentially Speaking*, Moses adds, “It is implied that Jess will achieve fulfillment only when the performance of gender and the expression of self coincide” (91) – as they do at the end of the novel. In this way, Butler’s theory of gender as performance is combined with a form of essentialism that allows Jess to finally find fulfillment. Jess cannot be said to exist outside of gender; her entire life is marked by her difficult relation to that concept. But she does exist outside of the male / female stereotypical gender binary. In the space of the third gender position, she is androgynous and transgendered – a transgressive (and progressive) presence in a transgressive (and progressive) text.

Notes

ⁱ. Significantly, the German word Freud uses to describe the uncanny is “*unheimlich*,” which translates as

“unhomely.” Freud writes, “*Heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*” (“Uncanny” 226). The linguistic distinction, in German, at least, between homely and unhomely is therefore nonexistent – an interesting precedent to the term’s application in postmodern gender theory, with its continual deconstruction of binaries of all sorts.

ⁱⁱ According to Feinberg, transgender activist Virginia Prince coined the term in its active form, “transgenderist” in 1987 or 1988 (TW x). The active use of the word is, rather unfortunately, now rarely used.

ⁱⁱⁱ Feinberg is no historian and her analysis is sometimes unsophisticated, but then, that is not precisely the project of the book, which is best read as a survival tool and as a call for political and social change.

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