

Friction in the interstices: Emotion and landscape in *Stone Butch Blues*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the role of emotion in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. Widely understood as one of the first modern transgender novels, *Stone Butch Blues* depicts the bodily changes of its protagonist, Jess Goldberg, from living as a "he–she," to passing as male, to living as neither male nor female. This article analyzes how Jess's body, identity, and feelings shape and are shaped by the spaces ze encounters throughout the novel. Finding that Jess experiences emotions as bodily boundaries and metaphorical geographies, I draw from the work of Sara Ahmed to argue that Jess's decision at the novel's end not to pass as female or male is a choice to push back at the gendered norms of hir world through a body and politics shaped by emotion. Turning to contemporary trans* – transgender, transsexual, and trans – movements for social change, I argue that Jess's politics of bodily and emotional abrasion can help in the development of a trans* politics of emotion.

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1. Introduction

Widely seen as one of the first modern transgender novels – the *Village Voice* argues it gave legs to the word "transgender" – Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* is renowned for its moving description of a life lived across and between genders.¹ Rather than depicting the transition from one sex to another, the focus of many transsexual memoirs, the book narrates the indeterminate bodily path of its protagonist, Jess Goldberg, from living as a "he–she," to taking testosterone and "passing" (being read in social settings as a man), to deciding to live as neither female nor male. After its 1995 publication, it received both the American Library Association Gay & Lesbian book award and the LAMBDA Literary Award. Many queer, transsexual, feminist, and transgender activists value the book for its detailed account of the hardships experienced by a protagonist whose body never quite fits gender norms. Indeed, almost two decades later, Feinberg's novel continues to inspire activists worldwide; while it appears on numerous "must-read" lists, including that of *Ms.* magazine, queer theorist and activist Eve Sedgwick speaks most tellingly to the novel's enduring appeal when she describes it as "the most galvanizing book I've encountered about the alchemical transformations among pride, shame, and defiance" (Feinberg, 1993: 563).

While many value *Stone Butch Blues* for its role in a burgeoning transgender movement, Sedgwick's description underscores a key

component of the text: emotion. The title highlights the role of emotion in the narrative, for "stone butch" indicates both the bodily state of indeterminate masculinity of its protagonist, Jess Goldberg, and the texture of hir emotional experience, a "stone" that hardens hir surface such that ze cannot speak hir emotions, hir "blues."² Indeed, because Jess's blues do not enter directly into the novel's dialogue, they emerge in another way, through the novel's space. Throughout this article, I trace this emergence, exploring how Jess's emotions shape and are shaped by space throughout the novel, mapping out a shifting geography of feelings. This analysis helps me develop a better understanding of who Jess becomes and the ways that hir identity emerges through the place – emotional, physical, bodily – ze builds in the world. This analysis also helps me develop a larger argument for another trans-formation: a politics of trans affects, or trans emotions, that embraces abrasion as a means to effect change.

1.1. *Stone Butch Blues* and trans geographies

A number of writers have taken up the themes of emotion, space, and structure in *Stone Butch Blues* and transgender geographies more broadly. Ann Cvetockovich (2003: 76–79), reading Jess's character as a lesbian butch, focuses on the ways that public

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¹ See Cat Moses's "Queering Class: Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*" for more on the ways the book was the "first to embrace 'transgendered' as an identity" (74). The *Voice* quotation appears on p. 563 of the novel.

² I use the neologisms hir, and ze as gender-neutral pronouns throughout this article. In somewhat common usage within transgender and queer communities in the U.S., these pronouns reflect a linguistic (and often bodily) choice not to be legible as either male or female. To note, the use of "stone butch" dates back to at least the 1950s U.S. as a term to describe butch, or masculine-appearing women, who penetrated their lovers but are not penetrated by them.

feelings – responses to homophobia – and private ones, such as those expressed in a belated letter to an ex-girlfriend – commingle in the novel as part of a larger archive of lesbian feeling. Cressida Heyes (2007: 54) critiques the novel's embrace of freedom of gender expression for its neglect of the larger social structures, such as normative heterosexuality and white bourgeois patriarchy, that inform and shape the kinds and legibilities of gender expressions available to Jess. And Jay Prosser takes up a critical passage in the novel in order to argue for a connection between Jess's embodiment and a key geographical element of the book: home.

Occurring after Jess has been on testosterone long enough to have developed numerous masculine secondary sex characteristics, the moment when ze decides to stop injecting hormones, and therefore stop passing, orients Prosser's reading:

I drew one cc of hormones into a syringe, lifted it above my naked thigh – and then paused. My arm felt restrained by an unseen hand. No matter how I tried I could not sink that needle into my quadriceps as I'd done hundreds of times before. I stood up and looked in the bathroom mirror. The depth of sadness in my eyes frightened me. I lathered my morning beard stubble, scraped it clean with a razor, and splashed cold water on my face. The stubble still felt rough. 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. [...] But 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.

(Feinberg, 1993: 221–222)

For Prosser (1998: 187), this moment exemplifies how Jess “makes the fantastic transformation, the intermediate space of crossing, her [sic] lived reality”.³ Moments later, when Jess describes hir chest surgery as “a gift to myself, a coming home to my body,” Prosser reads into Jess's narrative trajectory a more geographic path; for Prosser, Jess's decision to stay hir transition and stop taking hormones is a decision to make of hir bodily between-ness a place called home (Feinberg: 224).

The bodily borderland that Prosser (1998: 185) reads in Jess is not one he valorizes. Arguing that “transgender” does gender without inhabiting it through being, Prosser divides transgender from transsexual through ontology, finding that for “the transsexual,” unlike a transgendered person, “passing is becoming, a step toward home” that “aligns gender identity with social identity” (184). Prosser's reading troubles me in that it binarizes transsexual/transgender in a way that mirrors the divide of nature/culture, such that transgender reads as cultural and transsexual as natural, erasing how the sexing of bodies is profoundly cultural, not to mention the plentiful materialities of gender. But Prosser's reading also troubles me in that the alignment of gendered body and social identity he prioritizes elides the promises of an alternate politics, one grounded not in the indeterminacy of transgender bodies, but rather in the indeterminacy of the social.

Aren Aizura, writing about the promises of borders and homes, argues that Prosser's “politics of home ... replaces the liminality of transgender with a restorative political narrative.” Pointing to Prosser's arguments that transsexuals should be able to “enlist the binary of sex assignment” in order to fight for health care coverage

or change birth certificates (Prosser, 1998: 204), Aizura (2006: 295) notes that “for Prosser, ‘home’ is doubly inflected as the task of finding a home in the body, and being able to find a home in the state”. Critiquing the ways that the “home as the vehicle and endpoint of social inclusion reveals its proximity to liberalism ... and capitalism” (296), and underscoring how the language of home is a language of race and nation, Aizura asks “what more resistant meanings ‘home’ might produce if it were unshackled from nationalism and binary gender?” (303).

Aizura's argument contributes to a larger literature critical of the politics of home. As Sara Ahmed notes in *Queer Phenomenology*, homes are related to migration, a diasporic moving through space; “homes are effects of histories of arrival.” She argues that “diasporic spaces do not simply begin to take shape with the arrival of migrant bodies; it is more that we only notice the arrival of those who appear ‘out of place’” (2006: 9). For Ahmed, the arrival of those who are ‘in place,’ who are already ‘home,’ tends to be forgotten. Doreen Massey (1994: 171) also questions conceptualizations of home, noting that home has been crafted as “singular and bounded,” but that homes, especially at “times of estrangement and alienation,” are multiple in a way that enables new perspectives and new understandings of who we are. And Kath Browne, Gavin Brown, and Jason Lim note that while many people see home “as a place of comfort, ... a place to be oneself,” “for many lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and trans identified people, ... home can be uncomfortable and alienating, shaped by assumptions of heterosexuality” (2007: 3).

Critiques of home in relation to sexuality and race link to another burgeoning body of scholarship: trans geographies. Petra Doan (2010), writing about her difficulty as a transgendered woman in accessing both public and private spaces – bathrooms, elevators, classrooms – reveals the “Tyranny of Gender” inherent in many, if not most, of the spaces she shares with others. Sally Hines (2010: 609) adds to this in analyzing how various trans persons' negotiations of identity in LGBTQ community spaces reveal a false binary between ‘transgressive’ and ‘normative’ in other more specifically queer geographical literature, positing that “queers’ of all genders can be decidedly ‘normal’, and that what (or who) appears to be ‘normative’ may actually be pretty queer”. Hines's analysis contradicts a common theme in queer theories equating gender transition with transgression, while also contributing to a larger discussion of the problems with what Lisa Duggan (2002) has termed “homonormativity”. Catherine Nash echoes Hines when she argues that scholarship invested in “the ‘queering’ of space finds itself trapped by its dependency on sexual object choice,” a narrowness that much of trans theory, in taking up “differently gendered and embodied ways of being” helpfully challenges (2010: 590). These interventions reveal how transgender navigations of both space and place challenge us to think gender, sexuality, and geography differently.

1.2. Difference, home, and liminality

Stone Butch Blues pushes us to understand space as the place where we can read and feel transgender emotions. The emotions in the novel are specific to Jess's experiences as a white, working-class person in the Northeastern U.S. in the 1950s to the 1980s, but we readers experience them in and through its landscapes. The bodily home central to Prosser's and Aizura's arguments is a key element in these landscapes – there are multiple moments when Jess describes “coming home to my body” through chest surgery (117, 224). However, the novel's more literal homes illustrate how home participates in a broader narrative of that connects place and feeling. For example, late in the novel, after having sanded the floors, furnished, and made comfortable a new apartment in New

³ To note, with hir voice permanently lowered and hir chest made flat through surgery, Jess cannot become easily legible as female again, and thus hir decision to stop hormones is a decision to be indeterminately gendered.

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