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University of Northern Iowa

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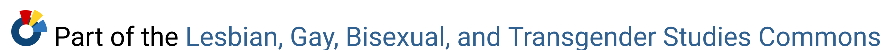
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DROWNING IN LONELINESS AND WRITING THE BLUES: CREATING LESBIAN SPACE IN THE NOVELS OF RADCLYFFE HALL AND LESLIE FEINBERG

A Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Laura Ellen Goetz

University of Northern Iowa

May 1997

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DROWNING IN LONELINESS AND WRITING THE BLUES: CREATING LESBIAN SPACE IN THE NOVELS OF RADCLYFFE HALL AND LESLIE FEINBERG

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

Feminist theory has long been concerned with identity politics, and feminists have grappled with the ideologies and identities of race, sex, gender, and sexuality, to name only a few. Psychoanalytic theorist Teresa Brennan and postmodern theorist Judith Butler combine feminism with their respective fields in their quests to figure out how subjectivities are created, and why some people are objectified or created as objects, while others are created as subjects. Literature is an excellent vehicle for studying subject/object creation and identity politics, because it often mirrors "real" life, because literature can have such an impact on the lives of those who read it, and because it can tap emotions and possibilities which theory cannot. Through the portrayals of the lesbian (and transgender, in the case of Stone Butch Blues), protagonists' lives, the ways in which they are othered by people occupying subject positions, and the ways in which they resist that othering, Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness and Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues provide numerous examples of the workings of subject and object creation. They also illuminate possibilities which the theories cannot quite grasp, such as how to live a life which promotes the erasure of dichotomous thinking and living. The novels and theories are also excellent tools with which to explore facets of identity such as lesbian, butch, femme, and transgender, in an attempt to show that it is possible to expose the fiction of individual identity in order to dismantle our current oppressive systems of living and create a liberating, rather than an oppressive, world.

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This study by: Laura E. Goetz

Entitled: Drowning in Loneliness and Writing the Blues: Creating Lesbian Space in the Novels of Radclyffe Hall and Leslie Feinberg

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4/16/97
Date

Dr. Susan E. Hill, Chair, Thesis Committee

4-16-97
Date

Dr. Martha J. Reineke, Thesis Committee Member

4/16/97
Date

Dr. Catherine A. F. MacGillivray, Thesis Committee Member

5/19/97
Date

Dr. John W. Somervill, Dean, Graduate College

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION 1

Definitions 5

Theoretical Constructs: Spatial Creations and Constrictions 8

Conclusion 17

CHAPTER 2. SPACE OCCUPIED BY STEPHEN AND JESS 20

Introduction 20

Reception of the Texts 21

From Inverts to Lesbians 23

Tomboys 25

Mirror, Mirror 30

Conclusion 36

CHAPTER 3. BUTCH/FEMME ROLES, COMMUNITY & RELATIONSHIPS 38

Introduction 38

New Women and Lesbian Visibility 40

Roles and Relationships 46

Conclusion 58

CHAPTER 4. TRANSGENDERED NARRATIVES 60

Introduction 60

Transgendered Lives 62

Desire 70

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Conclusion 74

CHAPTER 5. CHASING THE SPACE OF INFINITE POSSIBILITY 76

Introduction 76

The Personal is Political 78

Creating Lesbians 84

Conclusion 86

REFERENCES 89

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Feminist theory has long been concerned with identity politics, and feminists have grappled with the ideologies and identities of race, sex, gender, and sexuality, to name only a few. Appropriately, these constructs have been scrutinized in the real world, in the hope that understanding how identities are created, and why some identity constructions are privileged and others are denigrated, would lead to solutions to the problems of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Literature also provides ample material for examining the aforementioned constructs, because it often mirrors "real" life, because literature can have such an impact on the lives of those who read it, and because it can tap emotions and possibilities which theory cannot. Therefore, I have chosen to use the psychoanalytic and postmodern theories of Teresa Brennan and Judith Butler to examine the lesbian and transgender subjectivity of the protagonists in Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness and Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues. More specifically, I will use these theories to explore facets of identity such as lesbian, butch, femme, and transgender (terms which will be defined in the following section) in these novels, in an attempt to show how Brennan's and Butler's theories can illuminate the meanings of Hall's and Feinberg's texts, and how the texts can help us understand those theories.

Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness is about a woman named Stephen Gordon who is born into an upper-class English family near the turn of the century. We follow Stephen through her life as her father first guesses her inversion and, much later, after unnecessary grief, Stephen finally realizes she is attracted to other women. Stephen

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"comes out" in an era in which the idea of a fixed lesbian identity does not exist. In fact, Hall's novel contributed to the formation of sexuality as the most important part of an individual's identity (Ruehl 1985). Sexologists such as Havelock Ellis, who wrote about the condition of the innately and fully homosexual congenital invert, began the discourse about inversion and the conflation of sexuality with one's overall sense of identity. As Sonja Ruehl suggests, Hall's literary discussion of sexological theories opened up the subject of inversion as one which other authors and the general population could discuss; in other words, sexuality was no longer left to the sexologists. As such, that aspect of one's self became discussed more among the general populace, leading to the politicization of sexuality in terms of which behaviors, writings, art, were deemed appropriate, acceptable, or even legal.

By the 1960s, sexual identity was considered an important factor around which people defined themselves and others, and was firmly entrenched in the political and legal spheres. Michel Foucault was one of the first theorists to study the historical shift in which people went from thinking about engaging in certain sex acts without using those sex acts as a basic tool with which to define themselves, to our current era in which sexual identity is so crucial in defining who we are (History). Persons who defined themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) were discriminated against in myriad facets of society. Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues, although written in the 1980s, follows the life of Jess Goldberg, a lesbian who comes out in a 1960s working-class bar community, who eventually realizes she is a transgendered person. Within the homophobic 1960s through the 1990s, Jess faces discrimination, first due to

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her lesbian status and then because of her transgendered identity. While Hall's novel paved the way for future lesbian novels, I believe that Feinberg's book creates a path along which people within self-defined LGBT communities can travel and talk about the implications of transgender in LGBT politics.

On an academic level, I want to study these texts because it is important to show that postmodern and psychoanalytic theories can be useful in the study of literature and in determining how to create a more just world. I want to make such theories more understandable to a wider range of people and show that while the theories can be difficult to read and comprehend, they have activist potential. Both Judith Butler and Teresa Brennan help us understand our places in the world, and the reasons why some bodies matter and some do not. I want to show ways in which what Brennan calls an economy of scarcity has been helpful in my own understanding of why people oppress each other. My hope is that by applying these theorists' work to accessible texts such as Hall's and Feinberg's, I can show the difficulties lesbians face when they try to create and maintain safe spaces.

As a lesbian who was a tomboy and who has had a lifetime of firsthand experiences of feeling othered because of my gendered identity, I understand, on a fundamental level, what these protagonists are going through; this is a major reason why I chose to devote a year of study to these texts. The book which has been at the forefront of my mind since I first read it in October 1995 is Stone Butch Blues; it would have been even had I not been working with it for this thesis. LGBT issues such as same-sex marriage, gay and lesbian parenting, and LGBTs on television, to name only a

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few, predominate in the collective psyche of our nation right now; as a self-described lesbian, I realize the dangerous societal positions of LGBT people. We are bombarded by heterosexuality virtually every second of every day, yet fundamentalists and other hatemongers preach that LGBT sexuality actually dominates our culture. Such lies and hatred motivate me to highlight how oppressed these lesbian protagonists have been, then use that information to make people think about why that happens, and how we can fix it without pandering to mere assimilation into the current oppressive culture.

I want my thesis to spark people's interest in both texts, but in Feinberg's especially, because it is tremendously important in terms of understanding categories of sexual identity such as butch/femme in working-class lesbian history, because of its protagonist who mixes sex and gender in non-traditional ways, and especially because of the ways in which it illustrates how we other and are othered by people within our own cliques as well as by society at large. Feinberg's book has shifted my outlook on the world, and I want it to do so for others. This thesis is a political endeavor which will enable me to deal with some of my anger and concern about the tenuous place occupied by lesbians in this culture; it will inspire me to political action, and I want it to spur others to fight prejudice and hate wherever they find it, so that no longer will any Stephens feel compelled to give up their Marys, nor will there be any more horror stories like those of Jess Goldberg or any of the other characters in that novel. The first step in completing this task is to name and explain the theories utilized in this thesis.

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Definitions

I am interested in the spaces occupied by the protagonists in their respective eras and societies: how they are denied space within heterosexist culture, and how they create space within their relationships and communities of friends. Their gendered identities are a crucial portion of their spatial relations, as is their sexuality. The intersections of postmodern, psychoanalytic, butch/femme, and lesbian literary theory, along with historiography, demonstrate the purpose of women's studies, which is to integrate theories from various fields and figure out how to create a better world. Literature and history are particularly complementary, because reading a book about characters in a certain time period can lead one to historical study of that era, which is what led me to this thesis topic. Psychoanalytic, postmodern and butch/femme theories can tie everything together, by elucidating the spaces people occupy and their simultaneous and subsequent actions in both literary and historical texts. These theories can show us why Stephen Gordon and Jess Goldberg are created as margins of society and why, in an economy of scarcity, they have to fight very hard for space in which they can be agents. While Stephen Gordon fights for the right to be happy and live openly as an invert, Jess Goldberg literally fights to be. To point readers along the right paths during their journey through this text, it is important to define key terms.

Some of the important terms and concepts to define in the thesis will be lesbian, butch, femme, (congenital) invert, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, the economy of scarcity, an economy of plenty, and transgender; these terms will be defined in their appropriate places within the thesis. (The use of LGBT, as you have noticed, is a

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shorthand way of denoting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.) As psychoanalytic feminism, especially Teresa Brennan's idea of the economy of scarcity, is complex, it will be described in greater detail within this introduction.

The term lesbian is appropriate to wrangle with at this early juncture, since I label the protagonists of the novels lesbians and call the novels themselves lesbian novels. While it seems to many that the term "lesbian" should be uncontested, in that it denotes sexual attraction and activity between women, the meaning of lesbian has been widely disputed. For instance, Adrienne Rich, in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," states her belief in a lesbian continuum, in which women-identified-women who do not necessarily have any genital contact with other women can be called lesbian. On the other hand, Bonnie Zimmerman expresses her concern about a too-inclusive definition of lesbian which "risk[s] blurring the distinctions between lesbian relationships and nonlesbian female friendships, or between lesbian identity and female-centered identity" ("What" 38). Other ideas about lesbian identity can be found in the work of Anne Charles, as well as that of Susan Wolfe and Julia Penelope, to name a few. For the time being, my working definition of lesbian is a woman who sexually desires other women exclusively, although this definition will be tested in chapter four when I discuss Jess's transgendered identity and how this relates to her sexuality.

Transgender is another important and fluid term in this endeavor. In Lesbians Talk Transgender, Zachary I. Nataf provides a helpful way to think about this concept:

> Many transgendered people feel they are not the gender they were assigned and are not comfortable with their birth sex; beyond that, they feel varying degrees of identification and belonging to another gender category. Most often gender is

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> fluid and identity evolves. The achieved anatomy is a way of relieving the confusion and anxiety, and the body is a point of reference, not a nature. (45)

This construct also shifts depending upon whether or not people self-identify as transgender, or whether they identify, in the case of some lesbians for example, as butch rather than as transgender. This complex issue will be discussed in depth in chapter four.

Butch and femme are also problematic terms, although butch is most easily and often thought of as "masculine" lesbian gender expression and femme as "feminine" lesbian gender expression. There are butches with long hair and femmes with short hair, butches who cannot fix cars and femmes who can, and so on, but the whole system is based upon the eroticizing of gender differences between women. While many feminists have dismissed butch/femme relationships as replicas of patriarchal heterosexuality, butch/femme theorists such as Joan Nestle, editor of The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader, have articulated the differences between heterosexual relationships and butch/femme relationships and noted the radical possibility and positive aspects of butch/femme expression. For instance, Nestle points out that while in (mainly middle- and upper-class) heterosexual relationships women have traditionally been dependent on their husbands for financial support, femmes' incomes were vital in working class femme/butch relationships. Additionally, if the butch refused to downplay her sexuality and gender expression in public, thereby becoming unemployable, the femme was the sole breadwinner ("Femme" 142). Nestle also argues that butch/femme was disruptive because it tweaked the significance and actual representations of normative femininity and masculinity ("Flamboyance" 14). As Butler argues in Bodies That Matter, there are

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no originals, no essential ways of being, and there are no perfect replicas or citations of the concepts which we believe are originals. We believe in the originality or essentialist nature of these concepts because they are cited and reinforced so often. Butch/femme, by citing these originals in disruptive ways, offer a way in which the originals can be exposed as constructs. Once that happens, it becomes possible to break the homicidal cycle of reinforcing, or citing, those false original concepts at the expense of the lives of those who defy and expose those concepts.

Theoretical Constructs: Spatial Creations and Constrictions

It is precisely this concept of space and identity boundaries which I want to explore with the help of Brennan and Butler. While butch/femme identity challenges the fixity of male and female identity in heterosexist society, the very notions of this relational model rely to some extent on other fixed notions of identity. Diana Fuss, author of Essentially Speaking, examines essentialism and social constructionism throughout her text. Fuss defines essentialism "as a belief in true essence--that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing" (Fuss 2). Social constructionism, on the other hand, is the belief that humans have no ahistorical essence, but are created by society rather than by biology. People who oppose essentialism usually do so on the grounds that it locks us into innate, unchangeable patterns of behavior and ways of being. This hardly advances feminist or LGBT movement, since there is no point in spending massive amounts of energy trying to change something which is inherently not changeable. However, Fuss believes that essentialism is not

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inherently negative, rather that some people use it in a destructive manner; such uses are precisely what have given essentialism a bad name. She claims that "the radicality or conservatism of essentialism depends, to a significant degree, on *who* is utilizing it, *how* it is deployed, and *where* its effects are concentrated" (20). I believe that LGBTs can radically utilize essentialism, but not all do so at all times. The constructs of essentialism and social constructionism are important for this thesis, because the body itself is a battle zone within these competing frameworks; such battles are lived out on the bodies of Stephen Gordon and Jess Goldberg.

Essentialism is currently used by many people in the queer rights movement who hope to gain acceptance in mainstream society. This strategy is supposed to work when we can finally convince straight society that we cannot help having the sexuality which we possess or embody. In fact, many people say they would be straight if they had a choice, since life would be much easier. Such arguments make my heart ache, because they feed into the perception that it really is better to be straight. While I understand some of the pain which comes from being queer in a straight society, and while I want to be treated with respect and be happy in the knowledge that people are no longer trying to ensure my nonexistence, I want that to come about through affirmation of LGBT identity and something that we LGBTs would not change, even if we had the chance. These tensions run throughout both Hall's and Feinberg's texts. Both protagonists experience the anguish of being lesbian in heterosexist societies, and both feel like giving up at times. With all of the forces working against them, it is amazing that either fights as hard and as long as she does.

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While part of what enables the protagonists to continue fighting for their lives is their belief in some innate characteristic(s) within themselves, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist feminists argue that, in fact, the protagonists have no innate essences. Instead, theorists such as Butler and Brennan believe that people are socially constructed and "[insist] that essence is itself a historical construction" (Fuss 2). By challenging essentialism, they hope to find revolutionary ways to exist in the world, so that humans will not have to create objectified "others" in order to know who they themselves are. When there are no more subjects and objects, there will be no bodies on the margins--all bodies will matter. Therefore, heterosexuals will no longer construct boundaries for their subjectivities with LGBT bodies, whites will no longer use people of color as their margins, and men will no longer use women as their boundaries.

Psychoanalytic feminism and postmodern theory loom large in today's academic climate because they call so many seeming givens into question and are anti-essentialist. Because both of the novels I am studying are ones which expose, by the very lives of their protagonists, the portions of life which most heterosexuals take for granted, such as sex, gender, and sexuality, it seems fitting to use the aforementioned theories to study them.

Judith Butler and other postmodernists question every aspect of identity, wondering if there is anything fixed about any of us, and why it is so important to have a sense of security about our identities. Such security is certainly not reliable for those people who fall outside of normative categories. Yet, there is a real danger that those

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"others" will be erased if they choose to be revolutionary martyrs who take the first step and refuse to be placed in opposition to anyone else.

Butler explains this dilemma in terms of subjects and abjects, the latter of whom I refer to as others or objects. This "subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (Bodies 3). Therefore, if the abject, or other, refuses to be othered, then that body is refusing to do the subject-creating and subject-reinforcing work without which that subject cannot know who he or she is. People get unsettled and generally lash out when they feel vulnerable, and people feel quite vulnerable when supposedly fixed aspects of themselves are unmasked as in fact dependent on ongoing creation and reinforcement by others for their very survival. These concepts are crucial to my interpretation of Feinberg's and Hall's texts, and it is crucial to explain Brennan's theory as well, before jumping into a full analysis of the texts.

Teresa Brennan seeks to redeem Sigmund Freud in the study of what he called the riddle of femininity. As Brennan writes, "[f]emininity was a riddle because Freud could not explain why certain drives and affects were turned against the subject in a disabling way," and he also could not understand how this could happen within men (Interpretation x). Brennan claims that this riddle can be solved by looking at the energetic connections between people, and by scrapping the idea that we are all energetically discrete beings. For instance, femininity is associated with passivity and

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masculinity with activity. How then can masculine beings, which many presuppose as being men, be passive, and why do feminine beings turn against themselves?

Brennan argues that this conflict over activity and passivity begins in infancy at the first instance in which the infant realizes that s/he is a passive, not solely active, being. We are active in that we scream to be fed and clothed, but we realize our passivity during the first gap between screaming for what we want and getting it: someone has to give it to us.

Because we want to be active, not passive, we also have to repress our passivity by believing that we are energetically discrete. If we acknowledge that we share energies with others, then we must also acknowledge our passivity, our lack of complete autonomy. That repression enables "a human being [to] establish the barriers that maintain its sense of a distinct identity" (Interpretation x). This idea will be further explained in the following paragraphs, but first it is important to explain the notion of the economy of scarcity, in order to make sense of both concepts and to tie them together.

The most useful aspect of psychoanalytic theory for this research project is the idea that we are regulated by economies, within which our experiences are intertwined. We rely on an exchange of goods, services, ideas, and space in order to exist. Brennan believes that we create and live in an economy of scarcity in which energies and resources are finite, not infinite.

As such, our current economy is based on amassing as much as possible and taking up all the space that we can eke out; we often try to get the most that we can by putting in the least amount of effort, time, or financial resources possible. In this way,

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we shortchange ourselves and each other, and do extreme damage to everyone by pursuing, in the short term, selfish desires, with little or no regard for how our self-centered scrambling affects others and ourselves, both now and in the future.

Within this economy of scarcity, says Brennan, we deny our connections with others, because we live in what she calls "the ego's era" in which we think ahistorically and avoid making connections between events and ideas. Our egos have overtaken us and rendered us very territorial; they have convinced us that we are self-contained beings, when in fact we rely on others to mirror us, so that we may feel more confident about our existence and our places in the world. This complements Butler's idea that, in fact, subjects *must* have abjects in order to survive in their current state.

This mirroring is done in myriad ways; it is done between what many people believe to be complete opposites, such as men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, and so on. We create diametric opposites so that we may delude ourselves into thinking that we are unfragmented, complete human beings. As I mentioned previously, part of this fear of fragmentation is the fear of passivity in ourselves, and the exposure of ourselves as passive.

Even though we fear passivity, we also need it, because a world filled with active people would be completely chaotic and tyrannical; we would all be denying our passivity and doing everything in our power to do without receiving, or take without sharing. Unfortunately, we want to live in a perpetually active state; we punish people who remind us that we are passive as well as active, because they expose us as fragmented, needy beings. This carries over into adulthood, when we project the things about

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ourselves which we do not like onto the environment and onto people whom we perceive as different from ourselves.

We think the only way to survive is to exploit the environment and each other, since we believe that everyone else is doing so too. Within this economy, all of us want to be subjects; none of us wants to be objectified by others, but that is exactly what happens within an economy of scarcity. Brennan writes, "we are all of us at some moment objects," and we either have to get used to that, or change our entire way of relating to one another (History 186).

Brennan believes it would be possible to escape this oppressive and destructive economy, by "learn[ing] more about the workings of the original through tracing the inverted path of imitation" (History 196). She believes that because the path is "envious and fragmenting, we can deduce that the original is generous and cohering" (History 196). By retracing that path and obliterating our subject-object method of thinking, by refusing to project our negativity and passivity onto others and instead acknowledging and taking responsibility for our faults and weaknesses, we can create an economy of plenty.

A crucial part of this economy of plenty is what Brennan calls lived or facilitating attention (Interpretation). As opposed to fixed attention, which debilitates and freezes others in place, lived, energetic attention allows others to be mobile. It does not merely give them the freedom to use their agency; it *creates* them as agents. Therefore, in an economy in which living attention flows between people and fixed attention is a thing of the past, there will be no abjects/objects/others. This is an economy of plenty. Before

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we realize this economy, we must understand how the world is currently constructed, particularly how LGBTs are othered by heterosexual subjects.

Postmodern theorist Judith Butler writes about bodies on the margins of existence as abjects or others. Brennan would say that these people are the ones on whom subjects project their most negative traits. An example of this projection is a recent study which found that the most homophobic males were often those who were the least secure about their own sexuality ("A Thin Line" 17).

Some of those who are most often objectified are LGBTs. They are objectified, at least in part, because they remind heterosexual people both of their passivity and of their relatively shaky subject status as heterosexuals. A more colloquial explanation would be that dominant Judeo-Christian values focus on the heterosexual family as the bedrock of society, and LGBTs are considered threats to that sacred institution. A less often admitted, though no less pervasive, reason is that people thoroughly invested in patriarchy know that LGBTs, feminists, people of color, working-class people, have legitimate reasons for wanting to dismantle patriarchy; creating scapegoats on whom to blame patriarchal sins is a way to deflect attention and energy from the real culprits and from what actually needs to be done.

LGBTs are bodies which do not matter. Questions about what the body is and how it is constructed pervade Butler's works; they are extremely pertinent to this research because of the tension between the bodies and the protagonists' selves in both of the novels under examination. Believing that there is a split between one's self and one's body is problematic, according to Butler. She argues that we create ourselves and each

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other through citational processes in which we mirror each other and cite one another through our actions. Abjected or othered bodies inhabit the "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones" in order "to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (Bodies 3). These others *are* the boundaries. In order to stop doing this body work on othered beings, we must accept the instability of identity categories.

Unlike most people, Butler does not have a problem with thinking about categories as indefinable, because,

> it is precisely the *pleasure* produced by the instability of those categories which sustains the various erotic practices that make me a candidate for the category to begin with. To install myself within the terms of an identity category would be to turn against the sexuality that the category purports to describe; and this might be true for any identity category which seeks to control the very eroticism that it claims to describe and authorize, much less "liberate." ("Imitation" 14)

Butler is writing about the term lesbian in the above passage, but she herself acknowledges that the general concept can be applied to any categorization. She goes on to write, "[w]hat does it mean to *avow* a category that can only maintain its specificity and coherence by performing a prior set of *disavowals*?" ("Imitation" 16). Excellent question. To me, it means, at least in part, that no matter how lesbians may want to disrupt heterosexist patriarchy, no matter how transgendered people may want to disrupt traditional gender categories, claiming either of these identities only legitimates those systems and categories by being able to exist only in opposition to them.

However, many people would argue that the outsider status occupied by LGBTs and other others gives us a unique and powerful position from which to critique the institutions and practices which people on the inside take for granted and do not

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question. In fact, Butler is one such person: "it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized" (Bodies 4). These practices would be those surrounding lesbian and transgender existence, since they disrupt regulatory norms; however, we must fight the urge to create regulatory norms for lesbian and transgender identities.

This is an interesting dilemma both for lesbians and for transgendered people, because both categories are made up of people who wish to liberate themselves and others by disrupting the power regimes within which we all live. On the other hand, this form of difference making and legitimating is necessary in order to render lesbians and transgendered people visible, since the alternative would be to refuse categorical names, thereby making oneself nameless, in order to protest heterosexist patriarchy and traditional gender systems. This is a huge dilemma, since our culture is imbued with the belief that to name is to have power and to be nameless is to be invisible. We may be stuck with avowing through disavowals until someone develops a revolutionary way to rethink relations between beings, and effectively gets that information to society at large.

Conclusion

Brennan's and Butler's theories are on this revolutionary track; however, their writing is dense and difficult, so not many people outside of academia are likely to read and apply them to their lives. This is one way in which they are targets for criticism.

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Another is the timing of their theorizing. Julia Penelope and Susan Wolfe are quite critical of postmodern theorists:

> Just as women, Lesbians, gay men, and racial minorities rose to challenge their marginalization and to define themselves as subjects, the white male intelligentsia declared that subjectivity was a fiction. . . . the erasure by the powerful of subjectivity elides the possibility of our ever attaining subjecthood. (8)

Their concerns provide much food for thought. What if postmodern theory really was corrupted into a methodology which delegitimizes subjecthood, and thereby takes power away from groups such as lesbians and transgendered people who were just beginning to define themselves in such a way as to gain some measure of power and influence over the status quo? While Wolfe and Penelope have a legitimate concern, since subject status is important for people who have long been denied it, I believe that postmodern theorists are attempting to expose the fiction of subjecthood in order to move us into an economy of plenty, in which we believe ourselves to be interconnected, and we constantly cite and create ourselves and others in affirming ways. By sharing lived attention, we will create each other as fluid subjects who do not need rigid boundaries between ourselves and those around us. If we believe this, then people dedicated to social justice should be able to create a better world by moving positively within it, and by demonstrating to others that their positive participation can only help make the world a better place. Wolfe's and Penelope's concerns would no longer exist if we lived in an economy of plenty. It is precisely because we live in an economy of scarcity that people get nervous when their supposedly fixed identities are shown to be shakier than they would like them to be; it is precisely because we live in an economy of scarcity that we have problems with sexism,

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homophobia, and racism. As I mentioned earlier, within an economy of scarcity, heterosexuals use homosexuals to mark their subjective boundaries. Similarly, white people create marginalized people of color to reinforce the subjecthood of whites.

The novels studied in this thesis illustrate the ways in which regulatory norms can be both cited and disrupted by lesbians and transgenderists. Postmodern, psychoanalytic and butch/femme theories may help us unlock the further potential of The Well of Loneliness and Stone Butch Blues by showing us the power of othering, elucidating our quests for space, and emphasizing our need to utilize such knowledge to create an economy of plenty, in which we really can celebrate the awesome challenge posed by the twilight of "infinite possibility" (Feinberg, Stone 270). In the next chapter, I will briefly summarize the protagonists' lives in terms of how people create and subsequently treat them as "masculinely" gendered females. Crucial to their identity formation is the way in which they are mirrored by people and how early literal mirror scenes determine their othered status.

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CHAPTER 2

SPACE OCCUPIED BY STEPHEN AND JESS

Introduction

Both The Well of Loneliness and Stone Butch Blues were significant novels in their respective historical eras, the former because it depicts lesbians openly, and the latter because it pushes the boundaries of what it means to be lesbian, sexed, and gendered at the end of this century. Stephen Gordon's and Jess Goldberg's lives offer some intriguing comparisons and contrasts; both deal with gender boundary transgression in childhood, lesbian identity, gender presentation in adulthood, and the role of desire in adult relationships. As you will see throughout this thesis, the protagonists are often denied public space in which to be themselves and/or declare their affections for the women they love. This is significant, in that it is psychologically as well as physically damaging to be denied space in which to be oneself. It hurts relationships, which is clearly shown in The Well of Loneliness; in the case of Stone Butch Blues, again and again Jess is violently, physically sanctioned for trying to claim space as lesbian and transgendered. This chapter will show the different ways in which the texts were received in their respective time periods: how Hall's text contributed to the creation of "lesbian" as an identity category, the ways in which the protagonists are othered due to their gender presentations during childhood, and the ways in which desire operates in Stephen's and Jess's lives. Based upon this information, I will argue that the creation of Stephen and Jess relies on the ways in which they are mirrored by those who create them as other.

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Reception of the Texts

The Well of Loneliness is often scorned by lesbians who are proud of being lesbian and who therefore curse Stephen's decision to let Mary go off with Martin Hallam, a friend from Stephen's adolescence, at the end of the text. The book was criticized when it first came out in 1928, but not by inverts who wanted more positive depictions of themselves: "[it] was immediately denounced by the *Sunday Express* as an insidious moral poison and within six weeks it was being prosecuted for obscenity" (Ruehl 165). This text is not at all explicit in its sexual content. However, literacy rates among women and lower-class people were rising, and moralists at the time proclaimed that such people might read and be corrupted by it, thereby either becoming homosexuals themselves or becoming more tolerant of such behavior (Gilmore 612-613). As Leigh Gilmore writes, "depictions outside the heterosexual boundaries of matrimony and child-rearing are taken as dangerous and threatening" (611). The text was read as explicit and dangerous because it openly portrays lesbian life and women in non-maternal roles (Gilmore 611).

English courts ruled The Well an obscene book and it "was not published in England until 1959, when the [obscenity] act was 'radically amended by Parliament to require courts to let in evidence of a book's literary or other merit as a defense in obscenity cases'" (Gilmore 613). The novel was published in France and the United States well before 1959; contraband copies sold quite well in England, so there was clearly a market for it. Because it begged for compassion and understanding from heterosexuals for inverts, The Well so threatened heterosexual space that the magistrate

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who presided over the obscenity trial "refused to hear any of [the] fifty-seven witnesses in its favour" (Troubridge 93-4). The walls of the little space accorded inverts and women in general were being pushed back by Hall's text, which drew much of its inversion rationale from contemporary sexologists. In fact, Hall's novel created space for the publication of numerous lesbian texts; even though conservatives today still object to LGBT sexuality, lesbian novelists are no longer tried for obscenity just for writing positively about lesbians or about women in non-maternal roles.

Stone Butch Blues caused no uproar among the general public when it was published, largely because many lesbian novels have been published since The Well, and we are living in a more accepting time period. The Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 paved the way for a more "out of the closet" and "in your face" politics for LGBT people; it also helped spur LGBT writers to create LGBT-positive texts.

Today, many people are out of the closet and making the world a better place for LGBTs; Leslie Feinberg is one of these people. Her novel, while tragic in many ways, shows how much people have fought to get LGBT people to the place they are today. Jess Goldberg fought hard; some would say she capitulated, because she felt that the only way to survive with any sanity was to change her body and, for a time, pass as a man. Others would argue that her courage to be transgendered is revolutionary, because she disrupts our conceptions of sex and gender by having a "masculine"-looking body and voice while retaining her female genitals. It seems as though this text is precisely one about which many more people would get upset, since it radically unsettles notions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

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In her review of Stone Butch Blues, Marie Kuda writes, "[t]his book may be of no greater literary value than the pioneering novel The Well of Loneliness, but it could make a comparable impact" (Booklist 1409). I beg to differ with her on its literary merits, but she is on target in comparing this text to The Well, because both novels push the established boundaries of their times. The Well made lesbianism a more public issue, and Stone Butch Blues sparked conversations within the LGBT community about what that "T" means, and what its importance is for queer liberation. This journey towards open discussion of the intersections and diversions of sex, gender and sexuality was begun over one hundred years ago.

From Inverts to Lesbians

The work of 19th- and 20th-century sexologists, such as Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, focused on sexual inversion in a scientific way. Sonja Ruehl writes that "[Ellis] viewed [congenital inversion] as neither sin nor sickness: what was inborn could not be helped or passed on to others" (166). This view was not widely held; nonetheless, Ellis' claim that sexuality was biologically based gave Hall some ground on which to plead for acceptance from society at large. (In fact, Hall read Ellis's works, and was so taken by his ideas that she had him write a forward to The Well.) Ellis also asserted that, since sexuality was inborn, it was not transmissible. One would think, then, that society at large would have nothing to fear, since one's sexuality was an essential part of one's nature and, therefore, no one could be recruited into congenital inversion. However, Ellis also claimed that some people were true inverts, while others temporarily strayed

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into homosexual behavior (Ruehl 167-8), which left room for moralists to claim that it was possible to stop some people from becoming inverts.

Aside from these perceived advances in thinking about same-sex love and sex, the work of sexologists aided in the creation of a new category of people--lesbians (Ruehl 166-7). By default or definition, then, this also resulted in the creation of heterosexuals--people whose sexual attractions and actions were directed to people of the "opposite" sex. This boundary-making may be viewed both positively and negatively. On the one hand, people like to have identities in order to better understand themselves, and think that they better understand others. However, the creation of such boundaries and seeming oppositions also causes problems for those who fall on the "wrong" side of the boundary line. Judith Butler and other postmodernists question all biological arguments, saying instead that we are all constructed and constructing at all times; Butler's Bodies That Matter is all about how people come to be marginalized or seen as other.

As Butler explains the concept of othering: "[t]he abject designates . . . precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (Bodies 3). In other words, LGBTs, women, people of color, working-class people, are not just marginalized; they are margined. Furthermore, their very existence as these margins shores up the egos and very being of those who believe themselves subjects. While the "subjects" dehumanize marginal beings, they also thereby need them in order to know that they exist and are better than others. In the novels, this objectification comes initially

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in the form of children who taunt Stephen and Jess about their gender expression. As adults, they are sanctioned in more severe ways.

Teresa Brennan also provides a wonderful explanation for the harshness of marginalization and othering by those who objectify others:

> The aggressive imperialism involved in making the other into a slave, or object, will lead to spatial expansion (territorial imperialism). This is because the objectification of the other depends on establishing a spatial boundary by which the other and self are fixed. But this fixing of the other leads to the fear that the other will retaliate, which in turn leads to a feeling of spatial constriction. . . . With spatial constriction, one's boundaries are threatened, and the resultant fear increases the need to control the object. (History 8-9)

In other words, people project their own fears and objectification onto those they are already othering, thereby objectifying them further, because the subjects mistake their own aggression for that of the people they objectify.

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, while denial of space and the process of being othered are very damaging to individuals, they may also provide instances through which they may become stronger. The spaces occupied by Stephen Gordon and Jess Goldberg are defined and bounded very early in their lives. Stephen and Jess face many people who fear a loss of territory and privilege, and thus lash out in various ways.

Tomboys

The first othering of Stephen and the first denial of her space comes even before she is born; her father wishes so much for a son that he plans for one throughout his wife's pregnancy. When a girl is born, he persists in naming her Stephen. Hall

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immediately sets up Stephen's unnaturalness, of which her masculinity is the signifier, in her description of the birth: "and so it happened that on Christmas Eve, Anna Gordon was delivered of a daughter; a narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered little tadpole of a baby, that yelled and yelled for three hours without ceasing" (13). Stephen's christening follows after this scene almost immediately; the vicar insists that she be given multiple female names following her first name in order to mollify his fears that a girl with a male name was too unusual. We soon find out that Anna is less than thrilled at having a masculine child with a strong temper. In fact, Anna believes she is an "unnatural mother," because she frequently has feelings of loathing when she interacts with Stephen; she recognizes something unnatural in Stephen but is unable to pinpoint it (15).

Readers today would label this "unnaturalness" Stephen's butch lesbianism. Anna does not figure this out (or does not admit it to herself) until much later in the novel, but she knows that her daughter does not occupy her space in the socially dictated "normal" way. Stephen is a tomboy: she rides astride rather than sidesaddle, plays at being Lord Nelson, lifts weights, chivalrously helps her mother cross streets, and, at seven years of age, develops a tremendous crush on Collins, the maid. Esther Newton suggests that this crush on Collins arises because, "[a]s bold as Hall was, she could not treat mother/daughter eroticism directly in The Well; instead she turned it inside out," making Collins the stand-in for Anna within Stephen's Oedipal complex (571-572). Although she rerouted Stephen's eroticism away from an "unsuccessful" resolution of the Oedipal complex, Hall also left instances of discomfort between mother and daughter in the text.

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Stephen's relationship with her father is quite different. Stephen's father loves her wholeheartedly and is glad to have such a hearty child, who loves nature as he does and who proves herself someone to be reckoned with when it comes to horses. Just a few paragraphs after the first hint of Anna's discomfort, we read: "Sir Philip loved Stephen, he idolized her; it was almost as though he divined by instinct that his daughter was being secretly defrauded, was bearing some unmerited burden" (16). We also learn that he never talks to Anna about his fear that Stephen may have a cross to bear; this results in dire consequences for Stephen after Sir Philip's death, and in the "outing" of Stephen to her mother by the jealous husband of Stephen's first adult love.

Thus, Stephen's parents are set in opposition to one another; both know that their daughter is unique, but both approach that uniqueness in very different ways. As will become evident later on, Anna seems much less willing to change, while Sir Philip is anxious to figure out his daughter's status and thus help prepare her for what he suspects will be a difficult life. He wants to help create new space for his daughter, but he errs dreadfully in not discussing his reading of sexologists such as Havelock Ellis with his wife. By trying to protect her from what he thinks will be a great shock and disappointment, he sets up both Anna and Stephen for much greater heartbreak once he is no longer there to mend the wounds they have opened, and he reinforces the normative walls around them all.

The space which Stephen occupies concerns both parents and provides them the opportunity to redefine their conceptions of space and of the ways in which it is afforded or denied to various people. As we will see shortly, Anna is unable to accomplish this

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and love her daughter for who she is. Parental roles in spatial definitions and boundaries are important in both novels; unfortunately, Jess Goldberg's parents are less forgiving and accepting of her tomboy gender presentation than are Stephen's.

Jess Goldberg is born during a thunderstorm, and Dineh Native American women help her mother with the birth. Her entrance into the world is celebrated by the Dineh women, but Jess's mother immediately shuns her; rather than holding Jess, she says "Put the baby over there," in the bassinet (14); there is no reason given for why her mother did not want to hold her. Perhaps her parents wanted a boy and her mother was upset about delivering a girl. The choice of name for the baby is not normative (although Jess's parents are norm enforcers); I wonder if her parents, like Stephen Gordon's, hoping their first child would be a boy, chose the name Jess in advance and gave it to their first-born, even though she was not a boy.

Jess's name is a source of contention for her in school, and one of her grade school teachers asks, "What kind of a name is that? Is it short for Jessica?. . . . Jess. That's not a girl's name" (15). Rather than display this sort of ignorance in a private conference, Jess's teacher humiliates her in front of the entire class, thus offering the first instance in which Jess is othered in public, and the first instance in which traditional gender and sex norms are enforced. It is very clear to both Jess and her classmates that, by her very name, she is transgressing the boundaries of what it is to be male or female, masculine or feminine; she is trespassing on male space. While it might seem that a female teacher would be more interested in erasing the dividing line between male and female space, in actuality, she may be more strongly invested in that space than some men

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if her own sense of self is tied up in being "womaned" in direct opposition to those who are "manned."

Jess is ostracized by a gang of children in her neighborhood because she does not fit conventional gender norms for her era, and because she is Jewish. In one despicable instance, they capture her, tie her up, pull her pants off and ditch her in a neighbor's coal bin, where she is trapped for hours. After suffering all of this trauma, her father beats her instead of contacting the parents of the kids who did this to her and demanding that they be punished for abusing his daughter (18). He probably suspects that Jess will be queer all her life unless he can figure out a way to teach her otherwise; physical and verbal abuse are his methods for heterosexualizing and constricting her space.

Jess's mother reinforces heterosexuality and normative femininity when, after Jess punches one of her tormentors and sends him away crying, her mother says, "Sometimes it's better to let boys think they're stronger" (18). Understandably, Jess "figure[d] she was just plain crazy if she believed that" (18). Jess already knows that she has to fight, even though she may not yet realize that she will always live in contested territory--the tenuous land between normative "femininity" and disruptive "masculinity" in females. She is also in contested territory because she possesses some of the symbolic power held by heterosexual men, as does Stephen. In the next section, I will describe this symbolic power in reference to the "phallus" and illustrate the ways in which it plays a part in Stephen's scene in front of the mirror, as well as in her relationship with Anna. This site of conflict between Stephen and Anna is discussed in the next section.

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Mirror, Mirror

The first instance in which we read of Anna's discomfort with Stephen comes within the first two pages after Stephen's birth. Anna feels that there is something odd about Stephen; Anna knows that Stephen does not and will not fit into the gender norms set by heterosexual society, even though Anna never articulates this thought directly. Instead the reader is given glimpses of this through passages in which the way Stephen looks, stands, talks, and walks offends Anna's definitions of femininity and womanhood. Stephen is chipping away at the walls with which society has surrounded her; she is not satisfied with the space society has chosen for her. Anna and Stephen's neighbors, who also sanction her outlaw behavior, use "social force . . . [which is] the economic or psychophysical force shaping sexual identity at any given historical moment" in their attempt to regulate Stephen's behavior and keep her in line with feminine heterosexuality (Brennan, Freud 226).

Teresa de Lauretis writes about Stephen's masculinity and her relation to her mother in a very provocative, psychoanalytic way. She analyses a scene in which Stephen stands in front of a mirror and laments the straight lines and masculinity of her body, even though that is seemingly the type of body she would want. De Lauretis writes,

> Because it is not feminine, this body is inadequate as the object of desire, to be desired by the other, and thus inadequate to signify the female subject's desire in its feminine mode; however, because it is masculine but not male, it is also inadequate to signify or bear the subject's desire in the masculine mode. (Practice 212)

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This whole argument is predicated on the theory that the feminine is desired and the masculine being with a penis, as well as a symbolic phallus, is desiring. The above argument implies that one must be threatened with castration, or the loss of the penis, in order to be a desiring being (Practice 217). In other words, desiring contains an element of risk.

Butch lesbians are people without penises who are placed within the position of the desirer, rather than within the normative female role of the desired, and, as such, disrupt the seemingly congruous equation of the phallus with biological males. Thereby, lesbians can claim at least some of the power of the phallus, thus showing that this power is not solely the province of heterosexual (or homosexual) beings with penises. If de Lauretis is right about the element of risk, and I am right about butches occupying the desiring role, then this opens up a space in which one can argue the mobility of the phallus and the opportunity for biological females, such as butch lesbians, to possess it. However, not all lesbians want to claim the power of the phallus, since it has been used so egregiously against women. Butler writes about this in Bodies That Matter: "the 'shame' of the lesbian phallus presumes that it will come to represent the 'truth' of lesbian desire, a truth which will be figured as a falsehood, a vain imitation, or derivation from the heterosexual norm" (87). By reading more of Butler, we can discover how it is possible for lesbians to use the phallus in a positive way and thus not be ashamed of claiming it. For example, in the aforementioned text, Butler devotes an entire chapter to the phallus, and argues that it is possible not only to destabilize the phallus (in order to disrupt the dyad of who *has* the phallus and who *is* it), but also to move it around,

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thereby making it possible for women to possess the phallus. Butler uses the ideas of both Freud and Lacan to make her points:

> the displaceability of the phallus, its capacity to symbolize in relation to other body parts or other body-like things, opens the way for the lesbian phallus, an otherwise contradictory formulation. And here it should be clear that the lesbian phallus crosses the orders of having and being, it both wields the threat of castration (which is in that sense a mode of "being" the phallus, as women "are") and suffers from castration anxiety (and so is said "to have" the phallus, and to fear its loss). (84)

Within this construct, then, one can argue that Stephen does fear the loss of the phallus. However, Butler expressly states that she does not want people to think that her intent is to imply that lesbians are always and only defined by the phallus. Rather, she "[wants] to suggest that the phallus constitutes an ambivalent site of identification and desire that is significantly different from the scene of normative heterosexuality to which it is related" (Bodies 85). Furthermore, "[w]hen the phallus is lesbian, then it is and is not a masculinist figure of power; the signifier is significantly split, for it both recalls and displaces the masculinism by which it is impelled" (Bodies 89).

Even though the phallus has some significance here, de Lauretis writes that its presence is not absolutely necessary:

> the scene at the mirror in The Well . . . suggests that the phallus – as representative of the penis – is not an essential component of the female subject's body-image; what is essential is what the mother desires, and Stephen's narcissistic wound consists in not having a body such as the mother desires it. (241)

This shifts the former emphasis from having an actual penis to having a body that the mother desires; while this shift seems incremental, it is important, because it shows that even if Stephen does not have a penis and therefore lacks the type of body her mother

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desires, she still can have a positive female body-image and even poses some of the power of the phallus. She may be desired by another woman who rejoices in the fact that Stephen lacks a penis yet has the cocksureness of one who occupies the phallic position. In effect, this other woman capable of loving Stephen would be a femme, in that she would not be "a faulty woman, dispossessed of her body (like [Stephen]), but a woman embodied and self-possessed as a woman, as [Stephen] would want to be and can be only with her love" (249).

Although I find de Lauretis' reading compelling, and although this argument helps explain the desire/need for butch/femme relationships for some lesbians, it also reifies the notion that there are "real" women, e.g. "feminine" women, which leads us nowhere in expanding the boundaries of what it is to be a woman. As a result, Stephen is once again spatially cordoned off from the category woman. Cut off in this manner, her lesbian status is called into question, since, traditionally, one of the prerequisites for being lesbian is being a woman. Perhaps this is also (or just) about the Phallus and the traditional Lacanian view in which women are the phallus and men have it; since both Stephen and her mother *are* the phallus and neither of them *have* it, Stephen is inadequate as an object of desire for her mother. Butler would argue, however, that Stephen, as lesbian, both *has* and *is* the phallus, thereby disrupting the way in which the phallus has traditionally acted as symbol of masculine prerogative, as well as expanding the ways in which one can be a woman.

Jess has disruptive potential in relation to the phallus as well, and this can be seen in her own scene in front of the mirror. The defining moment of Jess's developing butch

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identity comes during an afternoon in which her parents are out of the house and she ventures into their room to try on one of her father's suits. She knows that she is treading on dangerous ground, but she also realizes that she must do this, because she feels it is an essential part of who she is. Butler argues that this "essential" or "natural" feeling and subsequent action upon it is, in fact, an object creation. Those for whom Jess is a boundary created her as this "lesbianed," "masculinely gendered" female in order to bound their own "normative" sexuality and gender.

This scene is vividly described, and one can feel the tension building. Since her father's shirts are starched and wrapped, the very act of Jess taking out a shirt and putting it on alerts the reader that punishment will follow. After putting on the shirt and tie, we read that Jess "put on the suit coat and looked in the mirror. A sound came from [her] throat, sort of a gasp. [She] liked the girl looking back at [her]" (20). She goes on:

> I couldn't find myself among the girls. I had never seen any adult woman who looked like I thought I would when I grew up. . . . I was always searching. For a moment in that mirror I saw the woman I was growing up to be staring back at me. She looked scared and sad. I wondered if I was brave enough to grow up and be her. (20-21)

Her parents catch her in the act, but delay punishment; when it comes, however, it is harsh: Jess is taken to a psychiatric ward and left there until she can become a traditionally feminine, heterosexual female. She does what she needs to in order to get out of the hospital, then soon after runs away from home and severs all contact with her family.

The definitive scene in which Jess puts on her father's suit parallels that in which Stephen examines herself in the mirror, in that each has an epiphany of sorts. Jess

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realizes who she is and is both elated and terrified; Stephen realizes more who she is not, because of her masculinity and lack of the phallus. As a butch, Jess wants to be the desiring body rather than the desired one. Of course, she wants to be desired by the femmes she likes, but as a stone butch her genitals are supposedly off limits to them, so it is a different form of being desired. One could argue that Jess has more than just the symbolic power of the phallus; she uses a dildo when making love. This is yet another transgression of gender, especially in the scene later in her life in which she makes love to a woman who thinks she's a man. So, then, is Jess, unlike Stephen, "[adequate] to signify or bear the subject's desire in the masculine mode" (Practice 212), or does she need to be biologically or surgically male in order to signify this? According to Butler, both women are able to signify masculine desire, since the phallus can be detached from males.

Mirroring is a crucial component of both Stephen's and Jess's romances, in that each is attracted to "feminine" women who reflect the images which Stephen and Jess want to project. By the same token, these "feminine" women's subjectivities are reflected by Stephen and Jess. Instead of a butch reflecting her femme partner in the way in which a man might reflect his female partner, in that he would know who he is as a man by knowing that she is a woman who is not like him, a butch knows that both she and her femme partner are women. Therefore, a butch cannot, unless she denies her own femaleness, create her femme partner as an object; this would also be difficult, since the butch herself is not in a subject position.

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If we take de Lauretis' proposal that the "female subject's body-image" is based on "what the mother desires and that Stephen's [or Jess's] narcissistic wound consists in not having a body such as the mother desires it," then Jess would be trying to make her body into what her mother desires (Practice 241). While it is difficult to completely dismiss such allegations in the scene in which Jess puts on her father's clothes, I do not think that Jess would care about whether she has the type of body which her mother desires. There is much less love lost between the two of them than between Stephen and Anna; while de Lauretis' theory may work for the latter, it breaks down when applied to Jess and her mother. Even though it is clear that Jess does not want to be her father, in that she hates the way he treats her, she wants something akin to what he represents: she wants to project a similar, but not identical, image; this creative labor of expanding the boundaries of femaleness is the first step toward eradicating the boundaries altogether and making an economy of plenty in which no one is an object. Jess transgressively cites masculinity with her female body, her tomboy childhood, and her adult butch lesbian identity. The space she wants is that of other he-shes whom she sees once or twice in childhood; she wants that space even though she knows the perils involved in occupying it.

Conclusion

While I argued the possibility of Stephen Gordon retaining a positive female body image even though she lacks a penis, it is unclear how possible it is for Jess to have a positive female body image. The fact that Jess later has breast reduction surgery and

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takes male hormones leads one to believe that, unlike Stephen, Jess does not have a positive female body image. However, Jess's body would signify a positive female body image in a world in which people had the freedom to alter their appearance to fit their own bodily conceptions without fear of violent sanction from others. Jess's positionality between femaleness and maleness signifies a positive body image for transgendered people.

For Jess, having a female body means wearing clothes which are uncomfortable for her and make rape easy. It also means letting boys think they are stronger, thereby perpetuating male domination. However, a female body also signals her desirability to femmes, even though her stone butch untouchability suggests her discomfort with her femaleness. Jess is expanding, even destroying, boundaries, as she is redefining the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality.

As we know from our own lives and from the textual information in this chapter, sexual identity and gender are extremely important in our culture. Clearly, Stephen Gordon and Jess Goldberg are objectified early on, due to their gender presentations, and both protagonists face spatial denials due to their lesbianism and gender presentation, although Jess suffers from more direct physical manifestations of such denials. As masculine lesbian objects, Stephen and Jess have to carve out spaces for themselves in terms of their desire as well as their gender; their erotic relationships with other women have a lot to do with their gender expression. The next chapter will explore that, along with the importance of mirroring, within the butch/femme relationships in Stephen's and Jess's lives.

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CHAPTER 3

BUTCH/FEMME ROLES, COMMUNITY, AND RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction

The previous chapter illustrated peoples' need to possess independent, fixed identities in order to know not only who they are, but how to act in the world. Stephen and Jess both realize their identities through literal mirrors, and this chapter shows how their identities are mirrored by the people around them, both in their romantic relationships and in their respective communities.

Since many feminists have claimed that butch/femme relationships are no more than heterosexist patriarchal replicas, it is important to examine the nature of the butch/femme relationships of the protagonists, in order to show how butch/femme relationships can be oppressive, radically revolutionary, or some combination of the two. By so doing, perhaps it will be possible not only to eradicate the perception that butch/femme relationships are always as patriarchally oppressive as oppressive heterosexual relationships, but also to show that butch/femme relationships helped create space for lesbian existence in the 1940s-60s.

Stephen Gordon and Jess Goldberg carve out space for themselves in the world through their social communities, their gender roles, and their relationships. There are times when both Jess and Stephen are demeaning to toward their lovers, but both women dote on their partners and care deeply for them. Possibly because of her class status and the time in which she lived, Stephen Gordon has more traditional ideas about "feminine" women's roles than does Jess. For instance, she is the one with money, she often thinks

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of Mary as a child, treats her with kid gloves rather than as an equal, and often perceives women, men, and inverts in very stereotypical ways. Jess, while somewhat denigrating of "femininity," has much more respect for her lovers, probably because their fight for survival is based on their more obvious lesbian statuses, and on the need for both of them to earn money.

As butches who come out before butch/femme pairings were attacked by some women in the feminist movement, neither Stephen nor Jess have qualms about being attracted to "feminine" women. Stephen lives in a time in which people think inverts are men's souls in female bodies, so "masculine" female inverts are *supposed* to be attracted to "feminine" women. Jess comes out into a bar community in which people had to be either butch or femme so that others would know how to relate to them; only later does the feminist movement begin to dictate which relationships are appropriate and which are not.

Many people--feminists included--have claimed that butches really want to be men, that, concurrently, femme lesbians who desire butches might as well go out and date a real man, and that butch/femme relationships are mirrors of oppressive heterosexist patriarchy (Nestle, "Flamboyance" 14). This is evident in Stone Butch Blues when members of a feminist group in which Theresa (Jess's lover) takes part admonish her for her butch/femme relationship, without stopping to think that their very behavior is oppressive. These women are unwilling to acknowledge that "masculinity" does not equal maleness, nor do "masculinity" or maleness equal oppression in all cases. As Leslie Feinberg writes, in Transgender Warriors, "I am not oppressing other people by the way

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I express my gender when I wear a tie" (102). In fact, Butler would argue that it is possible for lesbians to use this phallic appropriation and alternate citation in order to disrupt patriarchal rule in which heterosexual white male subjects objectify others in order to create and reinforce their own subjectivity.

Joan Nestle, editor of The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader, writes that butch/femme relationships are actually revolutionary pairings, because they cite gender in disruptive ways, and thereby are a way of redefining desire between women. There is also a middle ground, in which the relationships can have some vestiges of oppression even while they disrupt sex/gender/sexuality norms. Both The Well of Loneliness and Stone Butch Blues elucidate the ways in which butch/femme may be oppressive, revolutionary, or a combination of the two. In order to understand the interplay of these constructs, it is important first to place Stephen and Jess in their respective historical eras, so that we may see how their identities reinforce and/or disrupt their generation's sex/gender/sexuality ideas about women.

New Women and Lesbian Visibility

Stephen did not have a community of either women or inverts until she joined the London Ambulance Column and the Breakspeare ambulance unit in World War I, and Hall does not dwell at length on the importance of that community of women. She tells us that the women in the London Ambulance Column, some of whom were inverts, were needed for the war effort, so they were allowed to sign up for duty: "many a one who was even as Stephen, had crept out of her hole and come into the daylight, come into the

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daylight and faced her country" (271). This suggests that there were no open communities of inverts; they were not as marked by physical characteristics such as style of dress. Hall says that women who could be visually stereotyped as inverts were actually accepted by society during the war because their labor was needed: "They might look a bit odd, indeed some of them did, and yet in the streets they were seldom stared at" (271). During the war such women had more public space, but the end of the war signaled the end of employment for many women: "it became clear that neither the government, the unions nor the employers were willing or able to protect women's jobs, and/or increase their opportunities" (Roberts 57-58). Since lesbians were even less respected than heterosexual women, those who had been somewhat more open about their identity during the war probably went back to passing, if they were able.

This invisibility was also perpetuated because sexual and/or romantic relationships between women were generally termed romantic friendships in the 1800s and early 1900s. As Lillian Faderman points out in Surpassing the Love of Men, romantic friendships were viewed as a training ground for later heterosexual relationships. Such friendships did not fall out of societal favor until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when women became more educated and thus developed the potential to exist without a husband's paycheck. According to Esther Newton, even Radclyffe Hall's lawyer tried to explain away the lesbian relationships in The Well by redefining them as "normal friendship," even though Hall did not want him to do so (573). Try as he might, because of the sexologists and a growing awareness of inversion, or lesbianism, he could no longer hope to convince his audience of the innocence of close female relationships.

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Faderman writes that the power in romantic friendships became feared because "love between women, coupled with their emerging freedom, might conceivably bring about the overthrow of heterosexuality--which has meant not only sex between men and women but patriarchal culture, male dominance, and female subservience" (Surpassing 411). Teresa Brennan might say that there was a fear of a scarcity of heterosexual resources upon which to draw in order to perpetuate, not only humanity, but "patriarchal culture, male dominance, and female subservience." Obviously, people believed that there was not enough power or subjectivity to go around, and that too many men would have lost privilege and their very selves had women begun to claim their own power and freely chosen to live in arrangements which best suited them, be they homosexual, heterosexual or even asexual. Therefore, norms had to be cited to keep people in their appropriate gender and sex roles. As such, Stephen and Mary disrupt sex/gender/sexuality norms by being two women together in a sexual relationship, by Stephen's "masculine" gender presentation, and by Mary's "feminine" lesbian presentation and her desire for Stephen.

As long as women in romantic friendships were not taken seriously on a par with heterosexual relationships--and all of the legal and social privileges which attend them--women in such relationships were denied legitimate public space in which to openly express the sexual and lasting aspects of their relationships. Since visibility plays a crucial part in attaining public space, and since public space is often necessary in community creation, this denial kept the potentially political ramifications of such relationships in check. If few people knew of them, or if they knew but did not take them

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as seriously as heterosexual relationships, then society could go on denying this politically and emotionally crucial space to women who identified as romantic friends. This might explain why so many people with same-sex attractions felt that moving to the status of invert was a step up, since their relationships were recognized thereby as going deeper than friendship; thus, people realized that same-sex desire was lasting, and should not be expected to change over time. Indeed, Esther Newton writes, "Hall and many other feminists like her embraced, sometimes with ambivalence, the image of the mannish lesbian and the discourse of the sexologists about inversion primarily because they desperately wanted to break out of the asexual model of romantic friendship" (560). For them, transgressing gender boundaries was a way to gain visibility and to challenge the heterosexual order.

While Stephen and Mary did not have the butch/femme terminology during the time of their relationship, they were engaged in a relationship in which one partner was "masculine" and one "feminine." Esther Newton believes that Stephen's cross-dressing, one of the factors which defines her as butch in today's terms or as mannish in the 1920s, "stands for the New Woman's rebellion against the male order and, at the same time, for the lesbian's desperate struggle to be and express her true self" (570). Therefore, Stephen's appearance and that of other mannish lesbians was a way in which they could create space for themselves through clothing, which was a publicly recognizable lesbian signifier. Hall's intent is to make subjects of such women, rather than to objectify them as the sexologists and general public had done (Newton 571). Newton cautions those of

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us who might wish that Hall had not utilized the sexologists' views to such a great degree:

> For bourgeois women, there was no developed female sexual discourse; there were only male discourses--pornographic, literary, and medical--*about* female sexuality. To become avowedly sexual, the New Woman had to enter the male world, either as a heterosexual on male terms (a flapper) or as--or with--a lesbian in male body drag (a butch). (573)

Therefore, Stephen is butch; in order for Mary--as the femme within this erotic/political system--to be part of this disruption, she gets involved with Stephen, a butch. This challenge to compulsory heterosexuality, however, proves exhausting. Even though they have the support of other (mainly) upper-class inverts who meet at Valerie Seymour's salon, this is not enough to mend the wounds inflicted by heterosexist society. For example, Stephen's mother refuses to even acknowledge Mary's existence, and they are hurt by "friends" who end the friendship once they realize that Mary and Stephen are lovers. Jess Goldberg is more fortunate, in that the community she joins keeps her sane and happy, at least for a time.

Jess enters the working-class bar community in Buffalo during the 1960s while she is still in high school; she is accepted by and makes friends with butches, femmes and drag queens. The bar community was very important for Jess and for other lesbians coming out during the 1940s-1960s, because it was one of the few public spaces in which they could openly be themselves. As Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis write in Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community, the bars were "also more dangerous, bringing lesbians into conflict with a hostile society – the law, family, and work" (29). Though their safety and family relations were important,

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it was as important, if not more, to find lovers and friends who understood them and with whom they could be open and honest about themselves. In order for this to happen, they had to create or find some public space.

Jess's first bar community is Tifka's, which was 25% gay. From Butch Al, her first mentor, Jess learns "how we held our territory" when the straight clientele tried to enlarge their space (29). Butch Al also teaches Jess about police harassment and brutality, about relationships, and respect for friends and lovers. These lessons learned from Butch Al are common among the butches in Kennedy's and Davis's study: "Most tough butch narrators who entered the community after 1958 include descriptions of the women who were their role models as an integral part of their memories of early days in the bars" (80). The main lesson Al teaches Jess is how to toughen up, since Al knows that Jess will probably have as hard a life as Al has had. Jess recalls, "Al never said what was coming. It was never spelled out. But I got the feeling it was awful. I knew she was worried about my surviving it" (30). Al gives Jess a butch to baby butch sex talk, but since Al is so uncomfortable discussing the subject, Jess does not learn much from her. It is Jacqueline, Al's femme partner, who teaches her that she must be thoughtful and tender.

The bars could be fun places, even though, "[d]ue to the popularity of . . . *The Well* . . ., its depressing image of bars as seedy places where lesbians went to find solace for their individual afflictions has become embedded in the Western imagination" (Kennedy and Davis 29). Many of the women in the novel and in the actual historical community were courageous fighters; after all, they took the risk of being busted by the

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police and/or being discovered by family and employers who might have nothing to do with them after finding out. Butch/femme culture was a large part of claiming this social space for women in the 1950s and 1960s. Kennedy and Davis write, "[t]he distinguishing feature of twentieth-century working-class lesbian communities and what makes them such important contributors to lesbian history is their claiming of social space, the breaking of silence around lesbians" (373). As such, the following section on roles and relationships is crucial to understanding the importance of this spatial creation.

Roles and Relationships

Stephen Gordon's butchness is defined by her upper-class status, manner of dress, "masculine" gender presentation, and choice of femme partner Mary and the way Mary mirrors Stephen's gender presentation. Jess Goldberg's butchness is defined by her working-class status, her "masculine" gender presentation, her desire for femme partners and the ways in which they mirror her, and her delicate balance of toughness and tenderness. Their self-presentations and interactions with others, including their lovers, demonstrate the variation which exists within the category "butch," and the ways in which butch/femme identities can be oppressive, revolutionary, or some combination of the two. Since we live in a dualistic, binary-driven society, many people may think that Stephen's and Jess's partners must have diametrically opposite traits to those possessed by Stephen and Jess themselves.

Femme lesbian theorists strongly resist negative stereotyping of femmes and butches, and the negative stereotype of femmes as passive. Amber Hollibaugh, in "What

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We're Rollin' around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism," writes, "[f]emme is active, not passive," and she goes on to illustrate this point by explaining her own personal role in lovemaking with butch women (246). She writes, "[h]er need is female, but it's butch because I am asking her to expose her desire through the movement of her hands on my body and I'll respond. I want to give up power in response to her need" (247). Hollibaugh claims the active part by allowing her lover to do what she does; she acknowledges that there is power involved in the relationship, which is more than many feminists want to do, according to both Hollibaugh and her co-author, Cherríe Moraga. The point is, power is not always or by definition oppressive; it can be shared and used in varying ways by the persons involved, as long as there is trust and assurance that the power will not be wielded abusively. Additionally, "femininity" is not synonymous with passivity; furthermore, some measures of passivity within the ego is necessary to all of us, in order to avoid living in a completely chaotic world (as discussed in the introductory chapter).

This equation of femininity with passivity is discussed by Teresa Brennan in The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity. Brennan argues that, contrary to what Freud believed, femininity can be distinguished from passivity. This is done by examining "'who benefits?'" from the activity/passivity, masculinity/femininity dyads (Brennan, Interpretation 217). In general, it is the masculine subject who benefits from feminine passivity, in that the masculine subject projects its own passivity and negative traits onto a feminine subject in order to secure its own identity (Brennan, Interpretation 217 & 219). By contrast, the feminine subject

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> secures identity, but by a different route, and at a higher price. The feminine route is an inverted one. Attention is turned inwards via phantasy, in order to maintain one's own image. The price is that when attention is received from another, it overlays and fixes that image in place. It is immobilizing, because in a feminine state, one's the depository for the other's unwanted effects and inertia. (Interpretation 219)

The feminine subject, who may be biologically either female or male, is fixed into place when the masculine subject projects its negativity onto the feminine. As such, the masculine subject's place becomes fixed also, because it "[secures] a certain attention, an identity, from the deposed" (Brennan, Interpretation 219).

To some extent, this happens within butch/femme relationships when butches distance themselves from femmes by denying their own "femininity" or femaleness in an attempt to present themselves as tough, "masculine" subjects. Judith Butler wonders about this construct:

> if butchness requires a strict opposition to femmeness, is this a refusal of an identification or is this an identification with femmeness that has already been made, made and disavowed, a disavowed identification that sustains the butch, without which the butch qua butch cannot exist? (Bodies 115)

Is it possible for butches to define themselves in relation to femmes without completely denigrating femmes in the process? Within an economy of scarcity, this may be difficult, because butches would have to objectify femmes in order to secure their butch identity, but were we to be in an economy of plenty, we would realize that our energy is not self-contained and that we need others (not objectified others) in order to exist. In this way, the complementary aspects of butch/femme relationships become most important, since, in such relationships, both partners realize that their identities are closely linked to the "opposite" identities of their partners; as such, they become more aware of their need for

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one another. Also, since both parties are members of an oppressed group, they know the importance of creating safe spaces for each other and of avoiding denigrating each other. Therefore, butches and femmes may provide sites from which to challenge heterosexist patriarchal constructions of activity and passivity, creating instead a world in which people recognize both their passivity and their activity. We need both passivity and activity in order to create a livable world, since a world composed solely of active people would be completely chaotic and tyrannical, and no one would *be* in a passive world.

I think Hollibaugh would say there is a way both for femmes to be active and for activity and passivity to play off of one another in a positive way, since she says that the femme controls the projection of the butch's attentions back to the femme partner. In the case of Stephen and Mary, it is clearly Mary who instigates Stephen's attention toward her; one could argue then that Mary is the active participant in that particular situation, and that Stephen is passive. Regardless of the roles of activity and passivity, masculinity and femininity, the subject positions occupied by Stephen and Mary are disruptive of normative gender and sexuality constructs, and they are shifting. Stephen and Mary move along a continuum of activity and passivity.

Leigh Gilmore, in "Legalizing *The Well of Loneliness* and *Nightwood*," discusses the subject positions occupied by Stephen and the ways in which she conforms to and disrupts heterosexual norms. As she writes, "[l]esbian sexuality as Stephen Gordon experiences it represents a double inversion: she desires both the sexual object and the social status accorded to heterosexual men," and she claims that Stephen has both a lesbian and feminist subject position (609). This subject position is subversive due to the

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very fact that Stephen is a woman who desires other women. Does she desire them in the same way in which heterosexual men desire them? Yes and no. Yes, in that she desires women, and because sometimes Stephen's attitudes toward Mary are as anti-"femininity" as are some heterosexual men's. No, since Stephen is a woman, and her very bodily composition means that the ways in which she makes love with a woman are different from the ways in which men traditionally make love with them. There is then a disruptive potential here, although Stephen does not live out those disruptive possibilities to their full extent: she has a female lover, but their relationship is not egalitarian.

The two meet in March 1918, when they are serving in the Breakspeare Unit, a volunteer ambulance corps in France tied to the French Army Ambulance Corps. Mary Llewellyn is five foot five and has a petite frame and Stephen is tall and lanky, so they conform to most people's impressions of butch and femme whereby the butch is larger and more "masculine" and the femme is smaller and "feminine." Mary, however, defies gender stereotypes of "femininity" and petiteness through her bravery and intelligence during her time in the ambulance unit; she puts her life on the line as often as any of the other women in the unit, and this behavior disrupts the passive feminine subject position discussed by Brennan.

One might think that, as the butch, Stephen would be the instigator of their relationship, but it is Mary who has to convince Stephen that she wants to live with Stephen. Since Stephen knows the pain involved in being an invert, she feels that she has no right to drag Mary into a relationship which will be scorned by much of society. Nonetheless, Mary declares her love for Stephen: "All my life. . . . I've been waiting for

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you, and it's seemed such a dreadful long time, Stephen" (294). Even after they have begun sharing a home after the war, Stephen is still stupidly reticent about the relationship. Mary clearly loves Stephen and wants her sexually, yet they have separate bedrooms and Stephen stays away from Mary until Mary threatens to leave. Only in this somewhat melodramatic scene does Stephen finally admit to Mary that she loves her and that she believes Mary when she says she knows what such a declaration means (312-14). Had Mary not taken charge of the situation, their relationship would have gone nowhere. Clearly, Mary is both able to take care of herself and lead the way when Stephen hangs back; she is directing the projection of Stephen's feelings toward her.

After being shunned by some newly made friends when those "friends" discover what kind of relationship Stephen and Mary have, and after seeing the mistreatment of other lesbian friends, Mary becomes more jaded and loses much of her youthful happiness. This disturbs Stephen, and she tries to create a more "normal" life for Mary, without asking Mary if that is what she really wants. Once Martin Hallam, Stephen's best friend from her late adolescence, comes back into their lives and they begin to socialize with him, Mary softens again. Hall writes, "Reassured by the presence of Martin Hallam, re-established in pride and self-respect, [Mary] was able to contemplate the world without her erstwhile sense of isolation, was able for the moment to sheathe her sword, and this respite brought her a sense of well-being" (420). This is one of the points at which Hall either exhibits her own derogatory view of women or sarcastically injects such sentiments held by her contemporaries (or both) when she writes, "[Mary] discovered that at heart she was neither so courageous nor so defiant as she had

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imagined, that like many another woman before her, she was well content to feel herself protected; and gradually as the weeks went by, she began to forget her bitter resentment" (420). This secures Mary in the passive feminine subject position, since she is being protected and is fixed into place as Stephen's helpless lover, rather than as someone who can fight the homophobia of the outside world. With Mary fixed in this way, Stephen can be secure in her position as the one to fight for more space for the two of them.

Unfortunately, this does not happen. Instead, Stephen uses Mary's jealousy of Stephen's friendship with Valerie Seymour, the woman who hosts the Parisian invert salon gatherings, and plays upon this jealousy to bring about the end of their relationship. (The fact that Mary was jealous of Valerie should have made Stephen realize that Mary still cared.) Stephen's and Mary's relationship, then, is perhaps more susceptible to criticism as being patriarchally aligned than are Jess's relationships in Stone Butch Blues, since Stephen, as the one who really travels in public circles, inherits/makes the money, and "protects" Mary, has more power.

In "How to Recognize a Lesbian: the Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are," Lisa Walker writes,

> Stephen is contrasted with her femme lovers Angela Crossby [Stephen's first adult affair] and Mary Llewellyn, who are both 'pure women'--that is, not innately lesbian. . . . In the course of the novel, both women leave Stephen to take their 'rightful' places beside men, neither one having the strength, or finally the desire, to stay 'in the life.' (881)

This feeds into the stereotype of femmes really wanting men and not being strong enough to remain in contested lesbian territory. It is true that Angela Crossby, Stephen's first adult obsession, was not prepared to give up her heterosexual identity or the privileges

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which went along with it. However, I think it is wrong for Walker to compare Mary to Angela in the way she does. Mary truly loves Stephen, and Mary has a lot of strength. Stephen is the one who does not have the strength to ride out the changes in their relationship, whereas Mary becomes jaded by the homophobia directed at them. Mary seems to prefer being with a woman, whether or not that woman is Stephen, and had Stephen not been so pigheadedly bullying, Mary might have stayed. The dynamics of Jess Goldberg's relationships are quite different, due both to her different way of being butch and to her working-class status.

The definition of butch changed from the 1940s to the 1950s; Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy describe the 1950s butch as "a woman who dressed in working-class male clothes for as much of the time as she possibly could, and went to the bar every day. . . . She was also street-wise and fought back physically when provoked by straight society or by other lesbians; her presence anywhere meant potential 'trouble'" (68). In contrast, 1940s butches only went to the bars on weekends, and they never fought back physically when challenged either by straights or by other lesbians. Perhaps the atmosphere of the 1950s, with the Cold War, the Red Scare, and rampant McCarthyism, combined with some of the angst of young male characters in movies, caused butches to act tougher. This type of butch lesbian "aggressively created a lesbian life for which she set the standards" (Kennedy and Davis 68). Butches had to do this, since it was clear that straight society was not willingly going to give them any space:

> Tough bar lesbians recall physical conflict as part of gay women's constant battle for their own territory and their right to occupy it. . . . It was generally accepted

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> that straight men constantly invaded what they knew to be lesbian territory out of a sense of sexual competition. (Kennedy and Davis 90)

Jess and other butches and femmes in the novel fight bashers on the streets and in the bars. The lesbians who did this fighting knew its importance for the entire community: "Most narrators agree that they fought in their own defense, but beyond that, they were creating gay space for the safety of other lesbians as well as themselves" (Kennedy and Davis 91). It is clear that Jess realizes this: that the struggles fought by the older butches and femmes are for her sake as well as theirs.

Kennedy and Davis believe that working-class lesbians in the 1950s were very politically important in the context of LGB history and activism. Their love for other women was itself a political act during McCarthyism and the Red Scare of the 1950s, and they created space for themselves and other lesbians: "Through roles, lesbians began to carve out a public world of their own and developed unique forms for women's sexual love of women" (Kennedy and Davis 6). Since the butch role was the most obvious to straight society, femmes were usually only recognized as lesbian if they were with their butch lovers.

Jess fits into the tough butch category, in that she has a tough facade when she is out among straight society, but she remains tender toward other working-class butches, femmes and drag queens in the bars. She avoids fighting with other lesbians, because she knows that this would be a sign that the enemy--homophobic society--is winning, by succeeding in making lesbians fight each other rather than the system. As a butch factory worker, Jess is pegged as lesbian and deals with discrimination in the workplace. Outside

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work, she tries to avoid physical confrontations with bashers and the police, although she fights if she cannot avoid it.

Throughout the novel, Jess has many physical confrontations with people. Aside from the abuse mentioned in the last chapter, at sixteen she is beaten and raped by the police; she fights police and other gay bashers throughout the rest of her adulthood. These confrontations are obviously painful for Jess, and they demonstrate the brutality with which people will defend their privileged space. They also prove Brennan's theory that people who are taking up the most space and have social privilege fear that those they have oppressed will attack them; therefore, they strike first in order to try to stave off the perceived aggression of those they have oppressed.

Jess Goldberg's relationship with Theresa, and the femmes with whom we as readers come into contact throughout the novel, are testimonies to the disruptive ways in which femme/butch relationships can operate. In response to those who claim that butch/femme is only a patriarchal replica, Nestle says, "[t]he stone butch and the femme wife are as much acts of the imagination as they are of the flesh. Contrary to what they seem, they are refusals to accept imposed boundaries" (19). In other words, butch/femme roles can create more space for lesbians and give them more options for how to be in the world, as long as butch/femme is neither viewed as the only way to be in a lesbian relationship or as an irrevocably oppressive way to be in a lesbian relationship. The point is not merely to create more subject categories, since that would result in more boundary creation. Rather, we must

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> map out the interrelationships that connect, without simplistically uniting, a variety of dynamic and relational positionalities within the political field. Further, it will be crucial to find a way both to occupy such sites *and* to subject them to a democratizing contestation in which the exclusionary conditions of their production are perpetually reworked (even though they can never be fully overcome) in the direction of a more complex coalitional frame. (Butler, Bodies 114-115)

Not only must we find the connections between butch and femme, but between all people in order to create an economy of plenty in which we share energy and do not mark it off or contain it within rigid boundaries, the sum of which we now call our individual selves.

While butches have been particularly visible targets because of their gender nonconformance,

> femmes became the victims of a double dismissal: in the past they did not appear culturally different enough from heterosexual women to be seen as breaking gender taboos, and today they do not appear feminist enough, even in their historical context, to merit attention or respect for being ground-breaking women. ("Femme Question" 140)

Nestle illustrates the power of femmes, and the necessity of their work for their own survival and for the survival of their butch partners: "femmes used their appearance to secure jobs that would allow their butch lovers to dress and live the way they both wanted her to. Her femme appearance allowed her to cross over into enemy territory to make economic survival possible" ("Femme Question" 142). Clearly, femmes had (and have) power; indeed, they had it in ways that straight women in middle- and upper-class heterosexual relationships often did not. In addition, they defy the feminine stereotype of passivity, since they are actively engaging in the world through their work and their defiance of heterosexual gender norms. Through creative labor, femmes can help forge

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new paths into an economy of plenty by refusing their object status and by creating space for both themselves and their butch lovers.

Femmes are tough and willing to fight for themselves, as is the case when Theresa is fired from the factory in which she and Jess work: "The General Superintendent called her into his office to go over her six-month review. That's when he grabbed her breasts. . . . Theresa kicked him in the shin, yelled at him, and then kicked him in the other shin" (121). This woman knows how to defend herself and her pride; she certainly does not need a butch to do it for her.

Butch women knew that their femme lovers created space in which butches could safely project their identities, heal their wounds, and survive in a homophobic world. Theresa certainly did this for Jess. When they moved in together, "Theresa negotiated with the landlord. He lived in [another town], so we hoped he'd never actually see me," since he probably would not have knowingly rented to a lesbian couple (123). Through their relationship, Jess "learned to reduce the anxieties of life by paying bills on time, keeping receipts and promises, doing laundry before [she] ran out of underwear, picking up after [her]self. Most importantly, [she] learned to say [she was] sorry" (123). In this relationship, Jess and Theresa share power in many fundamental ways.

Femme women also had economic power within their relationships; since women were discriminated against, butch women generally did not often earn a wage that would allow their lovers not to work. This was not the case for Stephen and Mary, since Stephen was independently wealthy and earned money as a writer; in fact, Mary, rather than performing wage work, looked after the household. Mary enjoyed her work, but did

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not have enough to do, since they had servants. The picture is very different for the working-class lesbians in Stone Butch Blues. Both Theresa and Jess work, and they split home chores relatively evenly.

Joan Nestle laments, "[t]he irony of social change has made a radical, sexual, political statement of the 1950s appear today a reactionary, nonfeminist experience" ("Femme Question" 138). The "radical, sexual, political" aspect of butch/femme was precisely that butch and femme lesbian women constructed their sexuality very openly during an historical era in which women were not supposed to do so, in an era in which being queer was even less acceptable than it is today.

Conclusion

When discussing butch/femme, one returns to the idea that a butch lesbian either has a man's soul in a woman's body (sexologist view) or that butches must want to be men, since they are "masculine." However, we must remember that maleness and masculinity are as far from synonymous as are femaleness and femininity. Also, there are more ways of "doing gender" than most people in our society understand or will admit. Therefore, it may be best to focus on the ways in which butch/femme relationships disrupt heterosexist patriarchy and work to create a world in which myriad forms of lesbian gender expressions and relationships can exist peacefully and equally. Oppressive people will create oppressive relationships; there is no telling which relationships will be egalitarian and which will not solely based on the gender identification of those involved in the relationship.

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It is very clear in Stone Butch Blues that the femmes who desire Jess desire her as a butch woman, not as a man, and none of them leave her for men. In fact, it is when Jess herself decides to make her body more "male" that she loses perhaps the best relationship of her life. Theresa, her lover, does not want to be with a man; she is a femme lesbian who loves butch lesbians, not men. In Jess's case, then, her/his own transformation into a body which many claim that femme lesbians really want, the body of a "real man," drives her lover away and drastically decreases her chances for finding a lover who will accept her for who s/he is. Furthermore, s/he is cut off from lesbians who think that s/he sold out and from straight women who would freak out if they knew that the person hitting on them or dating them was a transgendered person.

The relationships discussed above are both unequal and egalitarian. Stephen's and Mary's relationship is arguably more oppressive than not because of Stephen's paternalism and her financial status. Because both Jess and Theresa must work to survive, and because Jess is less sexist than Stephen Gordon, their relationship is more egalitarian. Jess, Stephen, Theresa, and Mary also show how different people within the categories butch and femme can be. These differences can be based on class, historical era, and general personality differences. The important point to remember is that butch/femme can be disruptive insofar as it creates space for lesbians and demonstrates the ways in which reflections of normative gender and sexuality constructions can expose warps in normative mirrors. The next chapter explores the ways in which transgender exposes warps in mirrors by radically destabilizing our notions of what it means to be sexed, gendered, and sexualitied.

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CHAPTER 4

TRANSGENDERED NARRATIVES

Introduction

So far, this thesis has focused largely on gender as a fluid construct in which people present themselves variously and are created by one another, regardless of their biological sex, as well as on the ways in which butch/femme relationships can mirror and/or disruptively cite normative heterosexist society. As such, I have placed less emphasis on the actual body than on "masculine" and "feminine" gender expression within the context of an assumed biological sex. However, we will now turn more specifically to the body and its presentation in terms of transgender, a term which "originally designat[ed] an individual who lives full-time in the role of the 'opposite' gender, without sex reassignment surgery" (MacKenzie 2).

Most people think of the body as constant and immutable, even though sex can be surgically changed. However, Judith Butler argues that both the body and gender expression are citations of ideas rather than citations of biologically normative constructs (Bodies). You will recall, from chapters one and two, that Butler believes there is no essential nature in any of us; instead, certain norms become reiterated, or cited, so many times, that we come to believe they are real in and of themselves. Butler reminds us that everything is a reiteration of a construction. Similarly, Denise Riley, author of Am I That Name? writes, "[i]n a strong sense the body is a concept, and so is hardly intelligible, unless it is read in relation to whatever else supports it and surrounds it" (104). Bodies in general have only been intelligible and acceptable to straight society if they conform to

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so-called "traditional" gender norms; until recently, butch and femme bodies have been read as intelligible in relation to each other, and are only now being read independently of one another (Innes and Lloyd 10).

Both Stephen Gordon and Jess Goldberg are transgendered, since they both "traverse, bridge, or blur the boundary of the *gender expression* they were assigned at birth" (Transgender x). This definition of transgender is different than that given on the previous page; this exemplifies the fluidity of transgender and its potential to dismantle subject/object creation within an economy of scarcity. Both authors can be called transgendered, even though they expressed and labeled themselves differently; Hall had short hair, wore jackets and ties, and called herself John, while Feinberg has had two surgeries and self-identifies as transgender. Nonetheless, there are differences in the transgender identities of the protagonists, since Stephen never passes as a man, nor is she is sanctioned for her transgender behavior as is Jess. Jess is the only one of the two to take the step of passing as the "opposite" sex, at least for a time. In fact, Jess "does not come home . . . to one sex/gender or the other": s/he ends up in the highly contested middle ground (Prosser 501).

This chapter explores the societal tenuousness of Stephen and Jess in terms of their transgendered subjectivity, and the notion of transgender as a way in which to expose the fluidity of sexuality, gender, and sex categories. I focus on Jess Goldberg's transgender identity, because it radically threatens and disrupts normative heterosexuality and gender more than does Stephen Gordon's identity. Additionally, the ramifications of Jess's identity in terms of how we define lesbian, woman, and desire, will be closely

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examined. I will argue that transgendered bodies contain the potential to be examples for how to utilize creative labor and create an economy of plenty. Before immersing ourselves in these issues, it is crucial to give a brief history of transgender and illustrate the examples of spatial constrictions and freedoms faced by Stephen, a non-passing, transgendered person from a previous era.

Transgendered Lives

Similarly to the classification of homosexuals as inverts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the categories of transsexual and transgender began as medical categories. It was Havelock Ellis who first distinguished "between individuals who simply enjoy dressing as members of the "opposite" sex and individuals who desire to live as or become members of the "opposite" sex" (MacKenzie 38). In fact, before 1910, transgender identity was included within the invert classification. While this medical model may be helpful for people who know that the only way a homophobic and gender-phobic doctor will help them achieve sex-reassignment surgery, "classifying transsexualism as a medical problem has a similar effect [like the medicalization of homosexuality] of depicting all transgenderists as sick and in need of 'treatment'" (MacKenzie 21). Stone Butch Blues shows that it is society, not the individual, which is sick and in need of treatment; Jess Goldberg is horribly abused by society, and when s/he alters her/his body to fit an identity in which s/he believes s/he can feel more comfortable, the abuse continues. Were transgenderists the sick ones, their problems would be solved by cross-living, and they would face no more discrimination.

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The intelligibility of the bodies of Stephen Gordon and Jess Goldberg alters depending on whom they encounter at various points in their lives and how they reflect and are reflected. As was shown in chapter two, both Stephen's and Jess's bodies are unintelligible to at least one of their parents, and to their peers, in large part; their bodies are unintelligible to the straight world because they transgress the gender boundaries of their times and they only become intelligible once they find either lovers or community or both.

Stephen Gordon's gender presentation is less threatening than Jess's; this has a lot to do with class differences and the allowances for eccentricity frequently given the wealthy. She also exists in a time in which masculine dress, i.e. ties and jackets, are more acceptable for women to wear in public than they were in the 1950s and 1960s (Rolley 55). Although neighbors take notice and gossip about Stephen's "unladylike" way of riding, and about her utter gracelessness in dresses, and although her mother is always uncomfortable around Stephen, she is allowed to live the way she pleases. One of the servants pities Stephen for her "masculine" behavior, but another of the maids is quite amused by Stephen's role-playing. Indicative of her gender identity is Stephen's disdain of little girl clothes: "How she hated soft dresses and sashes, and ribbons, and small coral beads, and openwork stockings! Her legs felt so free and comfortable in breeches; she adored pockets too, and these were forbidden--at least really adequate pockets" (20). Stephen does more than hate the dolls she is given and the girl clothes she is forced to wear; she rebels against the entire heterosexual system in which girls must be soft and pliant while boys must be hard, strong, and free.

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Regardless of Stephen's class status, when she has an affair with the married Angela Crossby, Angela's husband, Ralph, illustrates a vehemently negative attitude toward Stephen's identity. He says to Angela:

> How's that freak getting on? . . . She's appalling; never saw such a girl in my life; comes swaggering round here with her legs in breeches. Why can't she ride like an ordinary woman? Good lord, it's enough to make any man see red; that sort of thing wants putting down at birth, I'd like to institute state legal chambers! (Hall 151)

Ralph sees Stephen as a masculine woman; she is intelligible to him as an invert, but he cannot comprehend why any woman would want to be as she is. In his diatribe, he cites both gender and sexuality norms. Judith Butler helps us unpack his anxiety, in terms of heterosexuality in particular, but her idea may also be applied to gender expression: "for heterosexuality to remain intact as a distinct social form, it requires an intelligible conception of homosexuality and also *requires* the prohibition of that conception in rendering it culturally unintelligible" (Gender Trouble 77). Therefore, Ralph knows that Stephen is homosexual; she is intelligible to him in that way, but she *must be* unintelligible to him in terms of her masculinity and her sexuality in order for Ralph's own boundaries to remain intact. If Ralph can understand those aspects of Stephen, then he must admit that the two of them are not so different as he wants to imagine. This refusal to understand helps Ralph normalize his own sexuality; clearly, he views his own sexuality as innate and normative and Stephen's as some sort of bizarre choice. In this way, he does not have to recognize that both their sexualities and gender expressions, like everyone else's, are to some degree constructed by various similarities and oppositions in the world.

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Stephen is unintelligible to people on the streets of London as well. When she goes there to purchase an expensive ring for Angela, in the hopes that Angela will leave Ralph and start a life with Stephen, people stare and laugh at her. One man says, "Look at that! What is it?" to which his companion replies, "My God! What indeed?" (Hall 165). Again, these people are citing their own normalcy by objectifying Stephen as an "it" rather than acknowledging her as a person, and Stephen is the one who has to develop psychological protections against such abuse. Stephen's gender presentation unsettles other peoples' sense of gender expression; she shows that not every woman expresses gender in the same way, thereby exposing the fact that there is room for disruptive citations of what it means to be a woman. Were more people to expose this, it might mean an eventual overthrow of the existing social hierarchy. Therefore, since "normally" gendered subjects would fear finding themselves in an oppressed minority instead of in the oppressive majority, and since they know how horribly they treat those whom they themselves oppress, they oppress transgendered persons, indeed all others, in brutal ways.

As I illustrated in previous chapters, Jess Goldberg faces many serious threats because of her butch lesbian identity. As a result, by the time she is twenty-one, she no longer feels that she can go on with her life as it is. She and Theresa, her lover at the time of Jess's decision, discuss Jess's desire to begin taking hormones. Theresa makes it very clear that she is a woman who loves women: "I don't want to be with a man, Jess. I won't do it" (151). This is hardly an easy decision for Jess; the disintegration of their relationship is extremely painful. Jess is at her wit's end: "God, Theresa, I'm so scared.

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I don't want to die and I don't know how to live. I'm really afraid" (151). Jess realizes that her object status makes her a target for homicidal subjects, and she knows that she will not survive as that margin. However, Jess is about to begin passing just when Theresa, as a femme, is fighting to be recognized as lesbian, so Theresa needs to end the relationship. Theresa's lesbian status will be hidden once again if her lover passes as a man. Clearly, Theresa wants to disrupt normative heterosexuality by showing her love for another woman; this is one example of her creative labor, and the price of this labor is her relationship with Jess.

The two split up and Jess is again out on her own, but she has the hope that the hormones will work well enough that she can pass without being detected; they do and she does. Getting a haircut is a breeze; s/he can go to a barber and get it cut as short as s/he wants to. Also, s/he says, "I could go to the bathroom whenever and wherever I needed to without pressure or shame. What an enormous relief" (173). This is a luxury for people who have previously violated societal gender codes and know that every trip to a public restroom means potential confrontation.

As always, Jess's feeling of safety is short-lived: "very quickly I discovered that passing didn't just mean slipping below the surface, it meant being buried alive. I was still me on the inside, trapped in there with all my wounds and fears. But I was no longer me on the outside" (173). Jess is not seen for who s/he really is; in fact, s/he is terrified that s/he will be totally outcast if s/he is seen for who s/he is. Judith Butler, in her essay on Nella Larsen's Passing, writes about the importance of being seen and recognized by

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others. She writes about a light-skinned African-American woman and her racist white husband:

> It is only on the condition of an association that conditions a naming that her color becomes legible. He cannot "see" her as black before that association, and he claims to her face with unrestrained racism that he would never associate with blacks. . . . if he were to associate with blacks, the boundaries of his own whiteness . . . would no longer be easily fixed. Paradoxically, his own racist passion *requires* that association; he cannot be white without blacks and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them. (Bodies 171)

Jess Goldberg's case is different from Nella Larsen's protagonist in many ways, but it is similar in that s/he too is passing, although instead of one person's reaction to her/his passing, all of society reacts to her. S/he is in a tenuous position because, although s/he wants to be seen, homophobic and transgenderphobic people, whose boundaries are threatened when they realize who s/he really is, lash out at her/him, because they feel that their own identities as heterosexual gender conformists are radically threatened by Jess's very existence. These subjects cannot feel secure about their subject status as heterosexual gender conformists and feel safe in that knowledge unless they create objectified, margined homosexuals and transgenderists.

At one point after s/he has begun passing, Jess meets and dates a "heterosexual" woman. This woman does not know that Jess is transgender, even after they have sex; Jess breaks it off after this woman, who thinks Jess is a heterosexual man, says some very homophobic things about a relative of hers. Even though Jess wants to be seen by this woman, s/he knows that the relationship would be over and the woman would hate her/him forever if she really knew who Jess was. This woman's heterosexual identity depends upon her objectification of homosexuals.

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Finding employment is much easier once Jess is seen as male, but her/his female coworkers distrust her/him because they think s/he is a man. S/he is also always afraid of discovery, and cannot even get a new driver's license, since s/he does not fit into either the male or female box on the application form. Jess does not forget all of the pain s/he endured before s/he began passing, and when s/he first gets called cute by a straight woman, s/he is incredibly angry: "All my life I'd been told everything about me was really twisted and sick. But if I was a man, I was 'cute.' Acceptance of me as a he felt like an ongoing indictment of me as a he-she" (178). Some people might use this incident to say, "See, even s/he admits that passing is succumbing to patriarchy." As Feinberg says in Transgender Warriors, however, *s/he* is not a product of oppression, *passing* is (89). Were people who identify as transgender not oppressed, they would not have to pass; they could be openly transgendered. In fact, once Jess stops taking hormones and her body reverts to a more female-looking form, s/he is no longer passing. S/he realizes that it is too important for her/him to be seen as who s/he is and suffer whatever consequences arise as a result. As Jay Prosser writes, "Ultimately, passing successfully reopens in Jess a painful split between inner and social identity and undoes the initial relief the hormones brought" (497). It is once s/he stops taking hormones and moves to New York City that Jess finds community in which s/he can be her-/him-self.

Ceasing her/his hormone shots is yet another monumental decision, and Jess says s/he made it because, "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. I wanted to be able to explain my life, how the world looked from behind my eyes" (224). This decision, like all others in

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her/his life, comes with a price. People begin to stare again because "they are outraged that [Jess] confuses them" (224). When Jess goes to a women's clinic to be treated for a vaginal infection, s/he is repeatedly insulted for invading "women's" space. Understandably, s/he wonders if s/he will ever again find an embracing community.

Community for Jess comes in the form of her/his neighbor Ruth, who lives across the hall in her/his apartment building. This sense of community does not come easily, however, since Ruth has been hurt many times and is barely willing to acknowledge someone else like her, much less allow that person's joys and sorrows into her emotional life. Once they begin to trust each other, though, they both discover new aspects of themselves and fall in love with each other.

It is this love which provides yet another example of how constricting societal conceptions of gender, sexuality, and desire can be. As I read this final portion of the book I was glad that Jess had found someone with whom s/he could share her/his deepest thoughts and feelings, and yet, as a lesbian, I resented the fact that Jess was drawn to a male-to-female transgenderist or transsexual. My reaction disturbs me, since I was judging who should love whom and what that should look like. Also, Ruth is a feminist and has had a difficult life as a woman. Even if she hadn't, who am I to judge her decision? Clearly, I am as policed and policing as everyone else, by heterosexist society and lesbian feminism; therefore, this section of the book was more challenging to me than was Jess's transgendered identification. However, this provided me with an opportunity to further expand my conceptions of gender, sexuality and desire; it gave me an opportunity to practice what I learned from Teresa Brennan's work about moving from

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an economy of scarcity into an economy of plenty. In an economy of plenty, I would not feel threatened by such a relationship; I would not have to be so watchful of gender and sexuality boundaries, as there would be no ongoing warfare between straights and LGBTs for resources as well as life itself. As it is, as a lesbian in an anti-lesbian world, I feel that I must help create more space for lesbians by creating more space for women. As long as my definition of "woman" is confined to those who were born biologically female, I am participating in an economy of scarcity, and policing the patriarchal boundaries of "woman" and "man," whereas I should be happy with the relationship, precisely because Jess and Ruth are creatively laboring to create selves without oppressively objectifying boundaries.

Intricately involved in this relationship are the constructs of desire and the ways in which Ruth and Jess disrupt those construct, even while reinforcing some of them. For example, Jess tells Ruth, "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" (274). This disrupts sexuality and gender identifications, yet it adheres to Jess's lifelong butch/femme gender identity. Accepting fluid definitions of lesbian and butch/femme identity can help us understand transgender identity in general, and Jess Goldberg's in particular.

Desire

I discussed some definitions of lesbian in the introduction to this thesis, and they range from definitions in which virtually all women can be classified as lesbian, to those

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which draw a line between lesbian sexual relationships and non-lesbian female friendships. Anne Charles, author of "Two Feminist Criticisms: A Necessary Conflict?" insists on the presence of an erotic component in the definition of lesbian feminism, so I would assume that she also includes the erotic element in her definition of lesbian (55). Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope, editors of Sexual Practice, Textual Theory, offer another view of lesbian subjectivity:

> we would contend that the basis of Lesbian subjectivity is [formed out of] needs and desires that inform the unconscious and conscious development of individual Lesbians, despite the patriarchal values and discourses that eradicate us or render us invisible. (3)

This definition contains nothing about erotic practices or woman-identification, which would seem to be crucial components of lesbian identification. However, it does acknowledge the possibilities for both innate and conscious choices in lesbian development, thus making their definition of lesbianism more open than that of some theorists or some lesbians. Their definition, while ambiguous, allows for individual variation, thereby destabilizing rigid, concrete definitions of lesbianism. They also acknowledge the resilience of the desires and needs of the lesbian subject who lives as she wants and needs to, even within the strictures of patriarchal culture. In fact, all lesbian lives are shaped by patriarchal culture; one could certainly argue that Jess Goldberg is shaped by it in a very obvious way, since s/he decides that her/his only chance of survival in this patriarchal world is to pass as a man.

So is Jess Goldberg, while passing and after, a lesbian? S/he acknowledges that her/his inside remained the same while her/his outside changed. This inside qualified as

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lesbian before the surgery and hormones. After all, s/he did not modify her genitals, and genitalia and sexual desire are crucial factors in defining one's sexuality. S/he had a double mastectomy, but women who have had cancerous breasts removed are still women, and their sexual desire and sexuality identification is not suspect. Since Jess is between the gendered realms of woman and man, does s/he even fit within Adrienne Rich's inclusive lesbian continuum?

Even though Jess is "masculine" and Ruth is "feminine," do they fit butch/femme categories at all if they are not seen as or do not identify as lesbian? Ruth's sexual identification is not clear. As far as the reader knows, s/he could be attracted to either women or men or both. S/he socializes with LGBT people, but that could be because s/he finds no straight people who accept her for who s/he is.

Perhaps the butch/femme aspect of the relationship between Jess and Ruth can be unpacked a bit by returning to Cherríe Moraga's and Amber Hollibaugh's essay, "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism." The two talk about their own experiences of being butch and femme, respectively, and what they think about these constructs. Moraga's definition of butch is especially interesting:

> To be butch, to me, is not to be a woman. The classic extreme-butch stereotype is the woman who sexually refuses another woman to touch her. It goes something like this: She doesn't want to feel her femaleness because she thinks of you as the "real" woman and if she makes love to *you*, she doesn't have to feel her own body as the object of desire. She can be a kind of "bodiless lover." So when you turn over and want to make love to her and make her feel physically like a woman, then what she is up against is *queer*. You are a woman making love to her. She feels queerer than anything in that. (248)

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I think Moraga means this in the sense that the butch, as desirer, is in the "male" or, more accurately, the phallic, role, while the femme takes the role of the desired. It is doubtful that Jess wants to feel her/his femaleness, at least in the way that heterosexual society views it. The danger in that position is evidenced by the rapes and other physical and emotional abuse inflicted upon Jess. It is hardly surprising then that Jess shuns traditional femaleness by taking hormones and having surgery.

Ruth fits into the femme category in Moraga's classification because s/he wants to be desired and to feel like a woman, although in a very disruptive citational way. In other words, Ruth wants to feel like a woman, but her very being exposes the fluidity of what "woman" can be; her male past and female present situate her very differently in the category woman than do the pasts and the presents of people born biologically "woman."

In terms of femme identity, Amber Hollibaugh writes, "I would argue that a good femme does not play to the part of you that hates yourself for feeling like a man, but to the part of you that knows you're a woman. Because it's absolutely critical to understand that femmes are women to women and dykes to men in the straight world" (249). For Ruth and Jess, they know less of what they are to one another than the world thinks it knows of them as queers, since they have no models for their relationship. Ruth and Jess can relate to each other in ways that reinforce the other's self-defined identity. Jess asks Ruth, "Do you know if I'm a man or a woman?," and Ruth replies, "No. . . . That's why I know so much about you" (254). This conversation testifies to the similarities of their experiences, as well as to Ruth's willingness to create space for them in which they can be themselves without being strictly defined.

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Although Jess finds community with Ruth, s/he has difficulty with someone from her former lesbian community. Near the end of the novel, s/he gathers with some lesbian friends from her/his bar days in a working-class Buffalo bar, and "[e]verybody looked at me, and then each other, when I walked in, but nobody stopped me" (282). S/he has a little space again, although her/his transgressive presence is noticed by all. During her/his conversation with her/his old friends, one of the butches points out Jess's in-between status and says she's glad she did not take hormones. Grant, the butch, says, "you're not a butch or a guy. You look like a guy" (283). She then tries to distance herself after Jess tells her she's looking at her own reflection. Grant says, "I ain't like you. I didn't do the change" (283). She is trying to clarify her identity by making Jess different from herself; she does not want to acknowledge the unsettling implications of how they mirror one another, and Jess has difficulty not doing the same to Grant, since s/he wants to distance herself from that prejudice.

Conclusion

As is evident by the lives of both protagonists, but especially that of Jess Goldberg, gender and sexuality are far more fluid than most people, even LGBTs, like to admit. Jess Goldberg's life as a passing transgendered, then openly transgendered, person, shows how difficult and violent a disruptive existence can be. Unintelligible bodies threaten cultural hegemonies and destabilize "normatively" assumed sexed and gendered identities, which is radically threatening to those who have never before considered that their identities are as constructed by society as are the identities of

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LGBTs. The following chapter connects the threads of this thesis by revisiting the spaces occupied by Stephen and Jess, and reviewing the ways in which they view themselves and are viewed by others. Jess Goldberg's life, in particular, shows us a practical application for both postmodern and psychoanalytic theories regarding the destructive effects of binary subject/object categories and fixed attention, and the ways in which her/his creative labor constructs a reality of shared energy and lived attention. As is evident from all the violence and discrimination Jess faces, such living is extremely difficult, but it is possible--and it unsettles our most basic assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality.

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CHAPTER 5

CHASING THE SPACE OF INFINITE POSSIBILITY

Introduction

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that both Jess Goldberg and Stephen Gordon occupy many different spaces, some of which are at least somewhat safe, and others of which are highly contested and, therefore, perilous. It is difficult to maneuver between the safe and unsafe spaces; getting through the unsafe ones can be incredibly dangerous. One might try to create a safe haven either by hiding or by desiring assimilation, in which case one tries to claim a naturalized category for oneself. Both protagonists do this to some extent, but Stephen seems more interested in assimilation. Jess is for a while, but her/his decision to end the hormone injections and instead be a person in-between genders in a very gender-dichotomous society is certainly anti-assimilationist. Claiming a naturalized category for LGBTs, as in the case of Stephen Gordon, is just as problematic as heterosexuals claiming their own sexuality as normative; it sets up rigid boundaries and makes it more difficult to disrupt those categories in peaceful ways. In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Judith Butler reminds us that there are no originals, no foundational norms upon which to base a life or a theory:

> And if the "I" is the effect of a certain repetition, one which produces the semblance of a continuity or coherence, then there is no "I" that precedes the gender that it is said to perform; the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that constitute and contest the coherence of that "I." (18)

By this she means that no imitation ever perfectly imitates or embodies the "I" which we think is originally there before we begin to imitate it. This is unsettling and, because of

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that, revolutionary; the fact that no imitation or repetition is ever perfect means there is room to disrupt the norms which govern our existence. This knowledge explains, in large part, why those who have the most invested in current norms fear so much, and therefore lash out when those norms are threatened; they know that their positions depend on the citation of those norms, in order to ensure their own survival. In the case of Stephen and Jess, their very existence, and their insistence on expressing themselves as "masculinely" gendered lesbians, frightens those heterosexuals around them who fear the disruptive power inherent in the very self-presentation and lives of Jess and Stephen.

I agree with Butler that gender is not innate, and I like her citation idea, but there are dangerous consequences when such an idea is incorrectly and/or maliciously applied. It is very easy for people in power to take arguments such as Butler's and use it against minorities, saying things like, "Well, since it isn't innate, they can change who they are and be just like us." Such people either do not consider or flatly deny that they must apply this measure to themselves as well, and realize that they are just as socially constructed as the people whom they are oppressing. They must understand that their subjectivity is, in fact, not their own; that subjectivity depends upon the bodies which subjects other. Were everyone to understand this, the positive revolutionary power of Butler's idea would be realized. As it is right now, however, Jess's belief in some sort of essential or natural gender and the clothes she wears are her armor in a very hostile world. The important thing to learn from Butler is that *all* gender is performative; she is not saying that LGBT people are the only people who performer their gender. She wants people to realize that nothing is inevitable or innate, and one way in which she does that

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is to point out that even our bodies and gendered presentations, which we believe are biological and therefore unchangeable, are in fact citations of what we believe ourselves to be. Brennan argues that, through deferral, "I" come to be in a place where "I" am not. In other words, I think I know what my subjectivity is and think that it comes from me, when I actually only know who I am by how others relate to me and reflect myself back to me. Therefore, I never own "my" subjectivity. My subjectivity is, in fact, in others. In this way, she wants to light a revolutionary path along which we can travel and realize that it is possible to live in a world without totalizing norms--to use both Feinberg's and Brennan's words, we could chase the space of infinite possibility and create an economy of plenty. Within an economy of plenty, the reality that "I" am always in a place where "I" am not would not be threatening, since we would all understand that we share energy; as such, we would live without the fear that others are trying to deny us the energy we need, not only to be an agent, but to survive. This recognition, by everyone, of the fact that not only are our energies intertwined, but also that we rely on each other to know who we are, would free us from fixed attention. This creative labor would allow everyone the infinite possibility to be without creating objectified, margined bodies.

The Personal is Political

Both Jess and Stephen lived openly as lesbians, to some degree, during times in which lesbian oppression was even more rampant than it is today. For this reason alone, both protagonists serve as role models for those of us involved in the struggle for LGBT liberation. Stephen Gordon, even though she pretended that she and Mary could hide the

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true nature of their relationship from others, trumpeted her sexuality through her gender expression, since it so contradicted the norms of the time. Jess Goldberg also followed her/his desires to express her/himself, including her/his gender, in the way it felt most honest to her/him. This included the double mastectomy and hormone injections, the latter for only a certain period of time, after which s/he decided that her/his real self was somewhere between or beyond the two dichotomized genders dictated by society.

These openly transgendered protagonists embody the "personal is political" feminist view (Nataf 26). Because their disruptive gendered presentations are so obvious, and because they threaten heterosexist society, their personal is extremely political. They also threaten those feminists who think that "masculinity" and oppression are synonymous. In Transgender Warriors, Leslie Feinberg responds to those who think that her gender presentation is oppressive to women:

> it was not until the rise of the movement for transgender liberation that I began to see the important distinction between the negative gender values attached to being masculine or feminine and my right to my own gender expression. I am subjugated by the values attached to gender expression. But I am not oppressing other people by the way I express my gender when I wear a tie. Nor are other people's clothing or makeup crushing my freedom. (102)

Much as butch lesbian sexuality was viewed as oppressive in the 1970s because of the equation of "masculinity" with biological males, "masculinely" transgendered people today are viewed as oppressive by some, also because they are considered "masculine." However, "masculine" does not equal oppressive, certainly not for people who are committed to LGBT as well as feminist liberation, and who are subverting the equation linking "masculinity" and "maleness" by their very lives. Masculinity can be detached

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from oppressiveness by realizing that objectifying others in any way perpetuates an economy of scarcity in which subjects must fix the attention of objects in order to feel their subjectivity. The liberation of anyone depends upon the liberation of everyone, and Jess embodies masculinity in a subversive way through her refusal to objectify women.

People should also beware of attacking transgendered people, rather than heterosexist people, for perpetuating oppression. As Zachary I. Nataf writes,

> Ironically, as a marginalised and disempowered group, transgendered people seem to have some inordinate power to uphold and maintain the gender system. This allows us to be blamed for gender; because we alert people to the fact that gender is not natural, gender somehow becomes the fault of transgendered people. (42)

Those of us involved in the LGBT liberation struggle as well as feminist movement should be especially careful about placing blame when we express our anger towards oppressive gender and sexuality norms in this culture. As Feinberg writes, "you can't read a person's overall consciousness by their gender expression" (Transgender 115). Attempts to read people in such a way reveal how much more work needs to be done in order to eradicate the extremely dualistic nature of our society. Many of us in both feminist and LGBT movement are guilty of this dualistic thinking in at least some form, because we are invested in protecting our identities and our groups in this divisive economy of scarcity. Were we living in an economy of plenty, in which everyone knew how to share space and not get extremely territorial or believe that I can only exist if you do not, we would probably be able to let down our guards more, or allow currently margined beings to exist freely, and interact with people without having to categorize them before we even open our mouths to speak with one another.

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The revolutionary potential of transgender, and of all forms of transgressing gender norms, "does not have to do with the proliferation of genders, as if a sheer increase in numbers would do the job, but rather with the exposure or the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals" (Bodies 237). The more we expose heterosexuality as a construction, the more we chip away at the belief that it is the only natural and moral way to exist in the world. One way to expose heterosexuality as a construction is by destabilizing the narrow gender norms upon which it is built, which is one reason why transgender movement is so important. People can destabilize heterosexual norms by warping their reflections, which is what butch and femme couples can do. While the normative gender roles are present, the corresponding normative sex and sexuality constructions are not, thereby exposing heterosexuality as a construction.

Teresa Brennan's task in both of her books is to show how we come to believe that we are energetically discrete beings and the subsequent damage such beliefs wreak upon us and the environment. By not acknowledging the shared energy between us, and by refusing so violently to recognize our own passivity, we project our negative traits onto others, then fear that those others will retaliate in a similar fashion, causing us to protect our space even more aggressively. For instance, if I have the power to take from you, and we are both fighting for what we believe are limited resources, lives, energies, then you have the power to take as well; therefore, I must make sure that I get what I need to survive, regardless of what you need. If "exploitation always involves energetic transfer," then, "where there is no energetic transfer that depletes one agency while

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enriching the other, there is no exploitation" and no threat of non-existence (History 185). Additionally, "the decision not to project a moment's aggression, not to impose a negative image on the other or in other ways manipulate for subjective advantage, these decisions resist and reverse moments of objectifying aggression" (History 188). So, for instance, butch and femme are liberating if the parties involved in such relationships refuse to objectify one another or define themselves in an energetically depleting opposition to one another. This liberation will be felt not only by the two people involved in the relationship, but by all those around them, since they too will be affected by seeing and feeling this sharing of energy.

While this conscious decision not to objectify others will be helpful in creating an economy of plenty, it will also be exhausting, because one must continually fight the traditional and much easier (in the short term) way of creating subjectivity by creating objectified others. In the long term, of course, we will all be better off if we stop objectifying and abusing others in order to create spaces in which we can be safe; no one is safe in a world in which people are objectified and violently sanctioned for opposing oppressive norms. Not even those in the most privileged positions are safe, because they fear that they will be objectified in the ways in which they have objectified others, so they react by oppressing others further. Therefore, the revolutionary potential of transgender and butch/femme lies in the possibility of people breaking down the walls of normative, dichotomous gender roles, as well as of compulsory heterosexuality, in order to show the fiction in both of those culturally created and dictated constructs.

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Judith Butler can help us here by showing why bodies seem so immutable and how bodies, such as transgender bodies, can open up disruptive spaces within our current culture:

> Bodies only become whole, i.e. totalities, by the idealizing and totalizing specular image which is sustained through time by the sexually marked name. To have a name is to be positioned within the Symbolic, the idealized domain of kinship, a set of relationships structured through sanction and taboo which is governed by the law of the father and the prohibition against incest. For Lacan, names, which emblematize and institute this paternal law, sustain the integrity of the body. What constitutes the integral body is not a natural boundary or organic telos, but the law of kinship that works through the name. In this sense, the paternal law produces versions of bodily integrity; the name, which installs gender and kinship, works as a politically invested and investing performative. To be named is thus to be inculcated into that law and to be formed, bodily, in accordance with that law. (Bodies 72)

Within this construct, the very names Stephen and Jess counteract the normative heterosexuality imposed by culture at large. Therefore, their transgender presentation is not surprising, since it coincides with this paternal law to the extent that their "masculine" names fit their gender identities. However, their names disrupt their biological bodily integrity, at least that bodily integrity as it is understood by society. Therefore, the tension between their accordance with the law in terms of their names and gender presentations and their discordance with the law in terms of their names and their actual bodies, places Stephen and Jess on the fringes of that paternal law, even while they reinforce it on the surface level of "looking" like paternal law-makers. Stephen and Jess disrupt this paternal law by their very existence; the people around them notice this, and, depending upon their own subject positions, those around Stephen and Jess either help

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them disrupt the heterosexual paternal law, or help society at large punish them for incorrectly citing that law.

Transgender has implications for expanding the current range of sexuality expression as well:

> As with butch/femme, the interplay or the juxtaposition of a lesbian identity with a not always culturally intelligible gendered body or a transgendered body produces an erotic tension in the destabilising of gender and identity terms, which generates complex and unpredictable dissonances and, potentially, an entire new spectrum of desire. (Nataf 48)

In accordance with this, Nataf believes that "[a]ny sex a lesbian has is lesbian sex, no matter who has what genitals or how they come to have them" (49). This is a very provocative statement, and I think this has a lot to do with self-identification. If a person identifies as both a woman and a lesbian and has sex with another person who so identifies, then it seems logical that those people are having lesbian sex. People who refute that are claiming the power to define the identities and sexual practices of others, thereby negating both the agency and the identity of those people.

Creating Lesbians

As is clear throughout this thesis, the definition of lesbian is continually evolving. Indeed, the word as we use it did not acquire its connotations of sexual or romantic relationships between women until the late nineteenth century. The definition will continue to evolve, as it should, since lesbian identity is no more fixed than any other identity. In the last century, women-identified women have been labeled or have self-

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identified with a wide variety of terms, including invert, butch, femme, lesbian feminist--to name only a few.

People continually create themselves by creating spaces in the world, and lesbians have done so in myriad ways throughout the course of the last century. The era of the New Woman in which Stephen Gordon lived brought about a new definition of women-loving-women. Some of these women grasped the opportunity to dress "masculinely" as a way of showing their lesbian or inverted identity, thereby having people realize that their relationships with other women were more than romantic friendships. The relationships were sexual, and these women did not intend to give up their relationships with other women in order to marry a man later in life. Stephen Gordon helped define this sort of New Woman, and Radclyffe Hall's portrayal of Stephen's life helped make inversion/lesbianism more public by bringing it into the consciousness of great numbers of people. Esther Newton writes, "[Stephen's] body is not and cannot be male; yet it is not traditionally female. Between genders and thus illegitimate, it represents every New Woman. . . . But Hall also uses a body between genders to symbolize the "inverted" sexuality Stephen can neither disavow nor satisfy" (569-70).

Stephen is caught in very contested territory, as both invert and transgendered person, and she faces sanctions as a result, but none as immediately physical as those faced by Jess Goldberg. By the time of 1960s America, most people knew about the existence of lesbians, and, although compulsory heterosexuality was still rigidly and brutally enforced, butches and femmes fought for their public space, because they knew that they could have space without denying space to heterosexuals. Jess Goldberg came

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of age in this era, and her life exemplifies the horror and violence perpetrated against lesbians who refused to conform to heterosexist society. As such, her life gives great historical insight into the lives of working-class, (mainly) white lesbians in Buffalo, New York during that time. Jess's life also gives us a remarkable glimpse of what it is to be transgendered in such a transgenderphobic and homophobic society, and s/he challenges our ideas of gender and biological sex.

Both novels are remarkable for their times, in that both sought to expand, if not eliminate, boundaries. Hall wrote openly about inversion and pleaded for acceptance from society at large. Feinberg shows us working-class butch/femme bar life as well as transgendered existence, in a time in which many feminists and lesbians equate "masculinity" with heterosexist maleness and thereby condemn both butch/femme lesbian sexuality and transgender.

Conclusion

As I set out to write this thesis, I thought about whether Stone Butch Blues could be read as a continuation of The Well of Loneliness. I think it can be read that way in some respects. Both protagonists have "masculine" gender presentations, and both have problems with at least one of their parents because of their gender and sexual orientation. I read Stone Butch Blues as a somewhat happier version of The Well of Loneliness, even though Stone Butch Blues has plenty of tragedy within it. It is a happier book because Jess, while incredibly ashamed of her body throughout much of the book, is not ashamed

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of her sexuality, and treats her lovers much better than Stephen treated Mary. Also, the ending of Stone Butch Blues is much more hopeful than The Well of Loneliness.

In the end, Stephen loses her war against society. As much as she tries to create some space for herself and Mary in their own home and in Valerie Seymour's salon, she is unable to bear the negative effects of homophobic society upon Mary. Rather than try to talk to Mary openly about it and devise some safeguards for themselves, Stephen hatches and carries out her plot to drive Mary away to Martin. The novel ends with Stephen beseeching God to create a world in which people like her and Mary may be accepted and live happily: "'God,' she gasped, 'we believe; we have told You we believe . . . We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!'" (437). Evidently, Stephen wants God to usher in an economy of plenty. As Bonnie Zimmerman writes in Safe Sea of Women, "for over forty years, *The Well of Loneliness* and Stephen Gordon virtually defined lesbianism" (7). This thesis has demonstrated how harmful that may have been, since Stephen gives up Mary and ends up alone, which is not the happiest or most compelling of endings. Even though there are many more lesbian texts now than in previous decades, Stone Butch Blues is one of the texts which currently has a large impact in terms of how we conceptualize lesbian and transgender during the decade of the 1990s, and I think it is a more positive point of reference than is The Well of Loneliness. Stone Butch Blues shows us the importance of butch/femme identity to many lesbians, both in the past and in the present, and it pushes our gender/sex boundary

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conceptions. Stone Butch Blues may help open up more space for discussions of sexuality and gender, and I think it is a very positive text in this context.

Through both quest heroes, Hall and Feinberg seek to "transform the stigma of difference into a celebration of otherness," although Feinberg does this far more successfully than does Hall (Zimmerman, Safe Sea 46). Rather than crying out to God for some positive recognition of the existence of inverts, as Stephen does, Jess realizes that s/he would not change her/his personal history if given the chance. S/he recalls the words of her/his labor union friend Duffy: "*Imagine a world worth living in, a world worth fighting for*. I closed my eyes and allowed my hopes to soar" (301). In Transgender Warriors, Leslie Feinberg remembers the struggles faced by lesbians in the 1960s:

> We battled for the right to be hired, walk down the street, be served in a restaurant, buy a carton of milk at a store, play softball or bowl. Defending our rights to live and love and work won us respect and affection from our straight co-workers and friends. Our battles helped fuel the later explosion of the lesbian and gay liberation movement. (8)

Jess Goldberg is living out this legacy at the end of Stone Butch Blues. S/he knows that there is much to fight for, both for her/him-self, and for the LGBT generations to follow, and, through her/his life, s/he shows us the difficulties and the necessity of creating an economy of plenty.

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