

Trans Utopianism and the Utopia of Transness in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*

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Theory can sometimes only find its synthesis in fiction. The debate within queer theory between the anti-social and the utopian has been dominating discourse for nearly a decade. Predating this debate but in many ways anticipating it, Leslie Feinberg understood the difficulty of envisioning and engendering a queer future. The entire concept of the future is problematic when considering the dominant notion of time is constructed in service of capitalism and heteronormativity. Thus, to theorize a queer future is to re-theorize time. Indeed, despite their many divergences, queer theorists seem to agree on the need to resist and reconceptualize what José Esteban Muñoz named “straight time” (Muñoz 25). Other difficulties face those brave enough to consider the future, such as how to survive the present, and what to do with the past. Feinberg’s groundbreaking 1993 novel *Stone Butch Blues*, widely regarded as the first novel by a transgender writer about a transgender protagonist, offers one set of answers to these questions. In this paper, I will attempt a reading of the first chapter of *Stone Butch Blues*, which is a letter written by the protagonist, Jess Goldberg, to a lost love, Theresa. This is not to say that the first chapter is the only -- or even most -- important part of the book; on the contrary, Feinberg’s novel is endlessly generative and as such, warrants focused attention to each word. Through this close-reading, I will show that there is a specifically trans utopianism to be found alongside the trauma in *Stone Butch Blues*, one that bravely hopes for a just and liberated future while refusing to turn away from its traumatic history. Trans utopianism is born from trans people, whose existence can be read as proof of the inadequacy and insolvency of gender and the broader systems of taxonomy that structure the present world, as well as the embodiment of a radically

different future. As an extension of Muñoz's queer utopianism, which itself is an extension of Marxist utopianism, trans utopianism has the potential to offer an intervention into a somewhat stagnated discourse of queer theory and -- in the spirit of utopia -- signal towards a future.

In order to argue that *Stone Butch Blues* furthers queer utopianism, it is necessary to look at the theory itself. In his seminal 2009 book *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues that "queerness is not yet here...queerness exists for us an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (Muñoz 1). Despite the connotations of utopia, this imagined future is not of some mythic world, but is instead produced from the quotidian material past. Using the terms of the Marxist utopian thinker Ernst Bloch, Muñoz advocates for a looking back on that which is "no-longer-conscious" to engender that which is "not-yet-here" (Muñoz 12). Working with an archive of queer artists such as Frank O'Hara and Eileen Myles, Muñoz finds utopia in their descriptions of quotidian moments of their queer lives. These are moments, he argues, when utopia has already been realized, which disproves the notion that it is an impractical or naïve fiction. These moments not only serve as the models for the future, but they themselves are the future, as queerness also warrants a radical reconceptualization of time: "Queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. Straight time is a self-naturalizing temporality. Straight time's 'presentness' needs to be phenomenologically questioned" (Muñoz 25). The goal of this questioning is to generate a new logic of time to open up space for queerness and queer subjects to exist, and ultimately to resist the present material conditions of oppression and the logic on which it is founded. Queer time collapses linear notions of past and future, instead using both to resist the tyranny of the current moment, what Muñoz refers to as the "here and now:" "This temporal calculus performed and utilized the past and future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the world of the here and now, a notion of nothing existing outside the

sphere of the current moment, a version of reality that naturalizes cultural logics such as heteronormativity and capitalism” (Muñoz 12). Queer utopianism, born from Marxist utopianism, is ultimately a discourse dedicated to restructuring time in the interest of queer liberation from the present, as well as the realization of the full potentiality of queerness in the future.

Because the need for a restructuring of time seems close to a given in the field of queer theory, it is important to look at it closer as a potential site of theoretical synthesis. To do so, and particularly in relation to *Stone Butch Blues*, it is necessary to invoke the work of another important queer theorist, Jack Halberstam, particularly his 2005 book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. Halberstam helps us better understand what is at stake in the conversation of queer time: “part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (Halberstam, *Queer Time and Place* 1-2). This function of queerness is particularly important to note when considering that the lived experience of so many queer people, including Jess in *Stone Butch Blues*, has been characterized as being “out of time” or “out of place.” Building off of Marxist thinkers such as David Harvey while simultaneously critiquing their negligence of gender, Halberstam thinks about how time is constructed not only in service of the ruling class, but also in service of heteropatriarchy, and perhaps most importantly, how these two are related. As that which opposes straight time, queer time is constructed both in opposition to “the logic of capital accumulation,” and “reproductive time” (Halberstam, *Queer Time and Place* 7; 10). Importantly, this is not opposition for its own sake; Halberstam argues that queer time is fundamentally “also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing”

(Halberstam, *Queer Time and Place* 2). Here Halberstam, who is more often aligned with the anti-social camp of queer theory, is identifying the potential for queer utopia. The embrace of queer time and space is future-looking in nature; it will enable entirely different lives -- ones not defined by exclusion -- for queer people.

At the center of any corrective or liberatory project is the idea of hope, which indeed Muñoz identifies as his critical methodology. The hope Muñoz describes, however, is far from the anesthetized hope invoked by mainstream liberal politics, or what Muñoz deems “today’s hamstrung gay agenda” (Muñoz 10). Instead, the hope of *Cruising Utopia* is a brave and radical politics; far from naïve, it is a deeply grounded acknowledgement that while utopian visions will almost inevitably be disappointed, it is necessary to continue to envision a queer future (Muñoz 9). Despite being published sixteen years before *Cruising Utopia*, *Stone Butch Blues* is a text entrenched in Muñoz’s brave methodology of hope. The story opens with a love letter that will likely never get read; its existence is a profound gesture of hope, one that bravely holds with it the pain which inspires it. By writing this letter, Jess is seeking refuge from a seemingly inescapable present moment by remembering a past. The letter begins: “I’m lying on my bed tonight missing you, my eyes all swollen, hot tears running down by face” (Feinberg 1). Jess writes this letter in a moment of pain, looking to the memory of Theresa to comfort them.¹ Here, Feinberg places Jess squarely in the territory of queer time. Significantly, the past Jess remembers in this letter is far from utopic, dwelling for some time in memories of being sexually and physically brutalized: “They’d handcuff a brother’s wrists to his ankles or chain his face against the bars. They made us watch. Sometimes we’d catch the eyes of the terrorized victim, or the soon-to-be, caught in the vise of torture” (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 4). Even in their temporal “escape” from the present Jess cannot, or will not, escape their trauma. By writing the

letter, Jess is signaling towards a utopic future in which Theresa may receive it, while also bravely anticipating the disappointment of this future: “Maybe someday, passing through this big city, you will stop and read it. Maybe you won’t” (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 6). But by centering their experiences of trauma in the letter, Jess is refusing to imagine an ahistorical utopia, or a future disconnected from the trauma of queer history.

Mostly remarked upon for its scenes of extreme trauma, *Stone Butch Blues* may seem like a strange choice of texts in which to explore utopia. As Jess shows us in their letter, however, in order to hope for a future, one must linger for a while in the pain of the past. In this sense, a turning away from the future is actually a necessary step towards its realization. To help theorize the value of looking backwards towards pain, shame and trauma, it is necessary to invoke the work of Heather Love, specifically her 2007 book, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Love’s thesis is centered around what Jess teaches us in her letter: despite the impetus to do so, one cannot leave the feelings of the past in a past time. Indeed, the past cannot be separate from the present and future. In addition to hindering one’s own ability to move towards a future, forgetting is actually impossible. The past is “something dissonant, beyond our control, and capable of touching us in the present” (Love 9-10). Further attesting to the myth of straight time, Love asserts that the feelings of the past will refuse to stay safely in the temporal past. This is not an idea simply created through queer theory’s resistance to straight time, it is also widely supported by the work of trauma theorists. Cathy Caruth’s concept of the “belated address” of trauma claims that by definition, trauma is an event too painful to even fully experience in the moment of occurrence, and as such it will inevitably return to be relived in the psyches of the victims (Caruth 4). Thus, trauma is literally unhinged from linear time and instead exists in queer time alongside utopia – indeed, the two are inextricable.

If, as I have argued, utopianism is a brave and grounded politics, part of what makes it brave is it requires the hard work of engaging with the material ugliness of the past, and processing this trauma. In this sense – despite its reputation -- queer utopianism is profoundly realistic about the difficulty inherent in its realization. When Jess says, “Hard to remember that it was illegal then for two women or two men to sway to music together,” the difficulty in remembering this fact is not so much about its contrast to the present, but instead it is the remembering itself that is difficult (Feinberg *Stone Butch Blues* 2). Remembering is hard, Jess teaches us, but necessary. As readers will come to understand, violence and injustice have structured Jess’s life – these experiences continue to affect them in the present, and will be carried into their future. This scene is reminiscent of Love’s argument that “Modern homosexual identity is formed out of and in relation to the experience of social damage. Paying attention to what was difficult in the past may tell us how far we have come, but that is not all it will tell us; it also makes visible the damage that we live with in the present” (Love 29). Dancing with a person of the same sex may not be illegal at the moment of Jess’s letter, but it also symbolizes a reality that is very much not in the past; systemic homophobia and transphobia continue to structure queer life and experience. As long as this is the case, we, along with Jess, cannot afford the easier option of forgetting.

Wanting to forget pain is understandable, but doing so will only service a normative status quo far from the promises of queer utopia. Like Muñoz, Love’s project is also primarily interested in resisting what Muñoz calls the “broken down present,” and with it, the encroachment of neoliberalism into queer discourse and politics that has produced today’s homonormative gay agenda (Muñoz 30). Love locates her resistance in backward feelings: “Backward feelings serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate

continuities between the bad gay past and the present; and they show us the inadequacy of queer narratives of progress” (Love 27). These mainstream progress narratives and those invested in queer assimilation adamantly look forward as a way of fighting the stigma attached to queers as backwards. In doing so, however, they declare that bad feelings of the past are not productive to a better future. Queer assimilationism is a politics invested in the erasure of queer history. In direct opposition to this erasure, Love proclaims, “I insist on the importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury. Resisting the call of gay normalization means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all of the dead” (Love 30). Queer progress narratives position remembering as a hindrance to a better future. One finds a direct channel into Muñoz’s utopianism when Love argues to the contrary: “It is crucial to find ways of creating and sustaining political hope. But hope that is achieved at the expense of the past cannot serve the future” (Love 29). Only a hope grounded in history can produce a liberated future.

Thus, looking forward necessitates first looking back. Love begins *Feeling Backwards* with: “A central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence...For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it” (Love 1). Jess’s letter to Theresa directly responds to this challenge. In the first paragraph Jess says, “Tonight I walked down streets looking for you in every woman’s face, as I have each night of this lonely exile” (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 1). The readers do not yet know how long Jess’s lonely exile has been, but we understand that Jess has been looking backwards for some time. While one motivation for writing the letter is to retreat from a current moment in memories of the past, another is possibly to put an end to this experience of looking for Theresa every night. Towards the end of the letter, they write “I can’t think about you anymore, the pain is swallowing me up. I

have to put your memory away, like a precious sepia photograph” (Feinberg *Stone Butch Blues* 6). Here, Jess is saying on a literal level that they have to stop writing this letter, but they also may mean that they have to stop thinking about Theresa in general, before the pain swallows them up. In Love’s words, Jess has engaged with the past without letting it destroy them. Writing this letter has been the act of putting Theresa’s memory away. The letter provided Jess the space to write their own narrative, and in doing so, Jess has processed some of their trauma. They have done the hard work of engaging, and now they may be allowed to move into the future.

Love’s work reclaims the importance of queerness’ ugly history and unpopular feelings, and most importantly, those who embody them. As a working-class trans /genderqueer person, Jess is securely positioned amongst the “most vulnerable and least presentable” (Love 30). As such, they personally feel the profound alienating effects of homonormative politics. In the beginning of their letter, Jess describes a date they went on with someone they were set up with because they were both “into politics.” “Well, we sat in a coffee shop and she talked about Democratic politics and seminars and photography and problems with her co-op and how she’s so opposed to rent control. Small wonder – Daddy is a real-estate developer” (Feinberg 1). Even before knowing much about Jess’s own class status or the politics they are “into,” we can gather from their tone that Jess does not share these bourgeois, “Democratic” politics. The profound distance between Jess and their date is only intensified: “Then she finally said how she hates this society for what it’s done to ‘women like me’ who hate themselves so much they have to look and act like men” (Feinberg 1). Here, Feinberg is making clear the ideological consistency between housing policies that marginalize working-class people, and gay politics that marginalize gender nonconforming people, particularly butch women or other trans-masculine people. This scene echoes what Muñoz identifies as the stakes of queer utopianism when he says: “Seeing queerness

as horizon rescues and emboldens concepts such as freedom that have been withered by the touch of neoliberal thought and gay assimilationist politics” (Muñoz 32). By opening the novel with such a strong indictment of this political agenda, Feinberg firmly aligns himselfⁱⁱ with Muñoz, and lays the foundation for the explicitly radical, utopian politics of *Stone Butch Blues*.

Having established the potential for utopianism to be read within *Stone Butch Blues*, the next part of this essay will attempt to establish what is specifically trans about this utopianism, and indeed what is utopian about transness itself. To address the latter specifically, I will use Catarina Nirta’s 2018 book *Marginal Bodies, Trans Utopias*. The newness of this text, as well as the fact that Nirta is so far the only person to publish a book on trans utopianism, points to the potential burgeoning of trans-utopianism as a theoretical framework. Nirta’s book explores in depth Halberstam’s assertion that “the transgender body function in relation to time and space as a rich site for fantasies of futurity and anachronism” (Halberstam, *Queer Time and Place* 15). Here, the trans body functions as a vehicle for locating utopia both in the past and future. As such, it is also a site of potent resistance to that which structures the realities of the present. Nirta identifies the concept of “transgender to be the most powerful example of the failure of gender the way it is traditionally understood. Not only is it at odds with clear-cut ideals of male and female, but it is in possession of a corporeality that dramatically challenges such essentialism” (Nirta 173). Transgender bodies and identities lay bare the myths of gender under which we operate. In doing so, they also function as a corrective to the current system of gender. By existing, trans people both challenge the logic of the present world and imagine a different one. Their existence forces one “to imagine what might be of people’s lived experience and relations if gender imprinting divisions did not hold such social and political supremacy” (Nirta 173). Transness is an embodiment of utopian resistance to the present and hope toward a future.

Alternative, nonnormative, and marginal masculinities, or masculinities that present on bodies which were not assigned male at birth, are a site of utopic potentiality. These masculinities are proof of the possibility of another world of masculine gender presentation, one in which it is divorced from the structural power (violence) of manhood within patriarchy. Like other marginalized people, people who inhabit such masculinities are in fact subject to the extreme violence of patriarchal power, the experience of which *Stone Butch Blues* documents in painful detail. Throughout the novel, Jess and the other butches are punished, shamed, and ridiculed for their “imitation” of men. Significantly, this behavior comes from both inside and outside of queer communities, as is made apparent when Jess’s date implies that Jess looks and acts “like a man” as a result of internalized misogyny and homophobia. As we have seen, however, within trauma is utopic potentiality. The embodied trauma of being masculine but not male is often referred to as “gender dysphoria,” the effects of which Halberstam argues can “produce new and fully functional masculinities” in his book *Female Masculinity* (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 119). These are the “kinds of masculinity that seem most informative about gender relations and most generative of social change” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 3). Jess inhabits one such masculinity.

In addition to Halberstam, Judith Butler can help us to theorize the powerful challenge masculinities like Jess’s can pose to gender, power, and gendered power. In her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Butler explores the ways in which homosexual “imitation” of heterosexual norms actually functions to expose their fundamental falseness. “The parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs within non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original...The more the ‘act’ is expropriated, the more the heterosexual claim to originality is exposed as illusory” (Butler 23).

Thus, imitation destabilizes and disempowers that which it imitates. Though Butler's logic is centered around nonnormative sexualities, Halberstam extends it into the realm of nonnormative genders. The "imitation" that Jess is ridiculed for simultaneously deconstructs a violent, hegemonic gender and constructs new possibilities. Non-maleⁱⁱⁱ masculinities can fundamentally challenge dominant masculinity, male-supremacy, and binary gender: the entire logic of patriarchy. This destabilization engenders a different future with more space for queer bodies, identities, and lives. Non-male masculinities, then, are another powerful locus of utopia.

In their letter, Jess describes the experience of inhabiting a traumatic non-male masculinity that still courageously hopes towards a future. They remember the moment when they knew that Theresa understood how they "felt in life," which they characterize as: "Choking on anger, feeling so powerless, unable to protect myself or those I loved most, yet fighting back again and again, unwilling to give up" (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 5). Despite having a similar gender presentation to cis men, Jess describes their experience of life in stark contrast to the tropes of hegemonic masculinity. Two of the most defining features of patriarchal manhood are being powerful and able to protect yourself and those you love. Assigned female at birth, Jess is not the beneficiary of male privilege and power despite their masculinity. In simplistic terms, Jess is not the perpetrator of the violence of male-supremacy, but indeed one of its victims. If the first half describes their trauma, however, the second half of this quote signals their hope: "fighting back again and again, unwilling to give up" (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 5). Here they are not just fighting back against the individuals who hurt them ("drunken gangs of sailors, Klan-type thugs, sociopaths and cops"), but against the system of gendered power (cis-heteropatriarchy) that subjugates their masculinity, and the identities of women and all queer people (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 3). Fighting back – being unwilling to give up despite the poor odds and the pain

and disappointment of not winning – is performing the brave hope of utopianism. This scene makes true Nirta’s argument that “the term marginal has become synonymous with potent. Bodies that do not succumb...Bodies infinitely minor in the normative and hegemonic logics of politics, yet immensely political for their ability to choose alternative and more creative ways of being” (Nirta 176). In fighting back, in refusing to succumb, they are declaring their power. They are fighting back both to protect themselves and just in doing so, they are creating a more just future.

It is worth considering why those with nonnormative genders are subject to the brutal violence depicted in *Stone Butch Blues*. As already noted, nonnormative bodies implicitly, if not explicitly, challenge the dominant order. In the essay "Queering Class: Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*," in which Cat Moses offers one of the most generative and rigorous readings of *Stone Butch Blues* currently available, the social psychology at the source of the violence Jess endures is laid bare: “Jess must endure almost daily violence and brutality because her expression of gender brings into full view the mechanisms that create gender, and with those mechanisms in plain view, the naturalness of gender is brought into question” (Moses 78). Jess’s existence points to the wrongness of the dominant conception of gender. Gender is one of the most powerful organizing structures of society: it divides labor, dictates behavior, and assigns value. Challenging the rightness or naturalness of gender, then, is seen as a dangerous threat, especially in the eyes of those to whom it gives the most power: cis straight men. People react violently to Jess because on some level, if Jess is “right,” then they are “wrong.” They decide then, that Jess is wrong, and must be punished. Another product of the homonormative gay agenda is the rhetoric of transness as a condition of occupying the “wrong body.” This is presumably meant to create sympathy for trans people, but is in fact deeply harmful. It

rhetorically marginalizes trans bodies, using them as the exception that proves the rule of the correctness of the existing system of gender, and the broader dominant order which it shapes. A much more radical, and indeed utopic, assertion would be that trans bodies are as right as any other bodies, and the current sex/gender system is wrong. As Moses articulates, this is the position of *Stone Butch Blues*: “Feinberg’s novel is the first work of fiction about a transgendered person to interrogate the notion that if one is uncomfortable with one’s assigned gender identity, there is something wrong with the one experiencing the discomfort rather than with the cultural institutions doing the assigning” (Moses 75). Thus, this position demands a dismantling of such institutions, and the building of an entirely new conception of gender. Halberstam points us in the direction of this future when he says: “We might do well to work on other formulations of gender and body, right body, and right gender to provide...queer cross-identifying children, with futures and bodies that seem habitable” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 171). Working on such future formulations is the foundation of the trans utopianism I argue is embedded in *Stone Butch Blues*.

Within the small canon of critical work on *Stone Butch Blues*, there is a lot of attention paid to Jess’s “real gender.” Feinberg complicates the normal linear trans narrative of assigned gender to preferred gender, by making Jess medically transition with surgery and hormones and then eventually stop hormone treatment. In an attempt to sidestep this discussion, which largely just reiterates the problematic impulse to locate if someone is “a boy or a girl,” I will argue that this is not only impossible to locate (because gender is socially constructed), it is also missing the larger point Feinberg is making about the interrelatedness of class and gender through Jess’s complicated transition story. In their letter, Jess alludes to the source of this debate, the moment they medically transition to pass as a man when they say: “The plants closed. Something we

never could have imagined. That's when I began passing as a man" (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 6). Some critics, such as Jay Prosser, who has an otherwise nuanced readings of the novel, makes the intensely reductive claim that Jess is really a woman who transitions out of economic, rather than some "more real," internally located, necessity (Prosser 182). Even as he argues that Jess does not transition out of "psychic necessity," Prosser admits: "Complicating Jess's own social rationale for her transition, then, Feinberg reveals that through transition Jess becomes reconciled to her body. Jess takes great pleasure in the physical changes she undergoes, hormones and surgery creating a body more appropriately hers" (Prosser 182; 183). While pointing to this complication, his use of female pronouns here still indicates his fundamental belief of Jess as a woman. Perhaps what Prosser is missing is that in complicating Jess's transition narrative, Feinberg's is complicating the notion that "real gender" is psychic rather than social, and indeed the notion that the two are separable.

In addition to being a transgender novel, *Stone Butch Blues* is a working-class novel; it is a story of Jess developing both a gender and class consciousness. Within the novel, the two are inextricably linked, and more than that, they define each other. Moses argues that "all the butches experience gender trouble most acutely (and chronically) as a problem rooted in class and economics" (Moses 85). This is not to say that the butches who transition are not "really trans," however, but instead that there are many different reasons to be and ways of being trans, all of which are real. Even Moses, however, who spends much of her essay outlining the ways in which gender is largely a product of material conditions makes the disingenuous claim that "[t]he only time Jess feels trapped in the wrong body, then, is when she is passing as a man" (Moses 91). On the contrary, there are many points in the novel where Jess articulates how much happier they are with their altered body. At the beginning of chapter 15, Jess describes in detail the joy

they find in the changes hormones have made to their body, and excitedly anticipates top surgery, saying: “It had been so long since I’d been at home in my body” (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 201). Moses does provide us with an answer of why Jess may feel trapped while passing, however, and it has very little to do with their body: “Jess cannot obtain identification documents that match her appearance: with the ‘f.’ box checked on her driver’s license, even a routine traffic stop by police could result in discovery and punishment. She feels as constrained by her new body and identity as she did in her former one” (Moses 87). It is especially important to note the end of this quote: Jess has always been trapped. If their actual body was ever the source of this unfreedom, however, it was pre-transition, when they felt less comfortable in their appearance. I agree with Moses that Jess is equally trapped as a trans man as they are as a butch woman, but it is important to note that the source of their entrapment is different. As a butch woman, Jess felt trapped by their gender dysphoria and unemployability. As a man, Jess feels good in their body, but trapped in the larger social implications of passing as a man: the erasure of their visible queerness, and their estrangement from a queer community. Cis-normativity underscores the reading of Jess as woman who was forced to transition by the material conditions of being working-class. In fact, Jess is a trans-masculine person who was “forced” to stop hormones by their alienation from community.

This emphasis on community is consistent with the overall Marxist politics of the novel. Like Muñoz’s queer utopianism, the trans utopianism of *Stone Butch Blues* is firmly rooted in Marxist utopianism. Feinberg specifically outlines how the liberation of those oppressed by heteropatriarchy will only be realized through the socialization of private property in their political pamphlet entitled *Transgender Liberation: a Movement Whose Time Has Come*: “modern-day oppression of women was rooted in the cleavage of society into classes based on

private ownership of property...overturning private ownership in favor of socialized property would lay the basis of revolutionizing human relations” (Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation* 9). Moses echoes this argument in her reading of *Stone Butch Blues* when she says: “It is implied that Jess will achieve fulfillment only when the performance of gender and the expression of self coincide. The constraints of class are the primary obstacle to this desired intersection of ‘self and gender” (Moses 91). Jess will only be able to locate their “true gender” and live a truly liberated life when they exist outside of the material demands of capitalism. As part of a Marxist tradition, trans utopianism values the communal over the individual.

By ending hormone therapy, Jess chooses their ability to be in community over their own physical comfort. Even before readers know of Jess’s decision to stop taking testosterone or the reasoning behind it, their commitment to community is apparent in the novel’s opening letter. They explain why they continued going to the dyke bars despite the continued risk of extreme violence: “Besides, this was our community, the only one we belonged to, so we went every weekend” (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 2). Community is at the center of the utopia *Stone Butch Blues* hopes for and gestures towards. Jess stops taking testosterone because Jess learns that there are things they value more than their own body. In many ways, the novel is the story of Jess coming to this realization through a developing of class consciousness: “Jess’s understanding of herself as an individual agent wanes as the narrative progresses and she becomes aware of historic resistance struggles. *Stone Butch Blues* ultimately emphasizes the collective action and coalition-building as tactics of resistance” (Moses 93). Through their experience of labor organizing, Jess learns that collectivity empowers workers, who are exploited and oppressed by capital. The power imbalance between the working class and the ownership class is stark and their only hope for liberation is through collective struggle. Jess then has to learn to apply this

logic to gender, which leads them to their decision to stop hormone therapy: “Feinberg’s purpose in writing *Stone Butch Blues* was to explore the nature of power relations and limited possibilities for resistance outside of a supportive community, and to suggest the necessity of building an inclusive resistance” (Moses 78). Jess leaves the confines of passing as a man in order to rejoin queer community. Just as the working class can only move towards liberation through collectivity, the underclasses of gender have to build collective power. Most importantly, these two communities have to understand their oppression, and therefore their liberation, as connected. Jess embodies the intersection of these oppressions and their hopeful liberations.

Stone Butch Blues shows the many problems and challenges of both the labor movement and the gay liberation movement, but is bravely hopeful about the future of both. Like the ending of the novel, in which “Jess inserts the transgendered body into resistance strategy,” the ending of the opening letter points us towards utopia. (Moses 92). Jess remembers Theresa’s love as what helped them survive the trauma of their existence. They feel the pain of this love’s absence, and they question if Theresa will return: “I never could have survived this long if I’d never known your love. Yet still I ache with missing you and need you so. Only you could melt this stone. Are you ever coming back? The storm has passed now” (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 6). Theresa returning symbolizes the actualization of *Stone Butch Blue*’s vision of trans utopia. While hopeful, this utopia is also realistic. Once again we look at when Jess says, “Maybe someday, passing through this big city, you will stop and read it. Maybe you won’t” (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* 6). The utopianism Jess models for us lies in the willingness to remember their pain, and the unwillingness to stop hoping for a better future despite likely disappointment. Muñoz

tells us that the liberated future that is queerness is not yet here, but by believing in it, Jess moves us closer to its actualization.

ⁱ I will be using they/them pronouns for Jess Goldberg throughout the essay. Though this is somewhat anachronistic in that *Stone Butch Blues* predates the popular usage of a singular “they” for nonbinary people, I believe it is an appropriate choice because Jess uses both he/him and she/her at different points throughout the novel.

ⁱⁱ Like Jess, Feinberg also used many different gender pronouns throughout life. Feinberg’s life also mostly predated the relative rise in popularity of they/them as a singular pronoun. While it felt appropriate to retroactively apply “they” pronouns to a fictional character, it felt less appropriate to apply to a real person who never used those pronouns. Thus, I follow Jay Prosser (who I cite later in the paper) in using the gender-neutral pronouns that Feinberg was familiar with, “s/he” and “hir.”

ⁱⁱⁱ In the interest of being inclusive of trans-masculine non-binary people and trans men, I am proposing an update in Halberstam’s language from “female” to “non-male.”

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